

Bar Hoppin' With Hops
The Second Century Tour
Hops MacBarley's 2013
Key West Bar Boondoggle

Bar #172:

Old Town Mexican Cafe
609 Duval Street
www.oldtownmexicancafe.com
Friday, 9 August, 6:30 PM

Dos Equis Amber Ale (bottle) \$4.84

Ahhh, another Friday evening of quality Key West Bar Hopping. Number 172. Dayumm, datsalotta bars.

B&J were on board once again for this one. Whenever we plan a rendezvous, we are usually spot-on with our arrivals. This was another such time: *Meet ya at 6:30 at the front gate*, I stroll in from the southeast, they saunter in from the northwest, and we meet right on time.

Duval Street always screws me up, and I don't mean alcoholically. Maybe it's the numbering. For one thing, the category of Spatial Relations was a kickass thing for me on those junior high Kuder Preference tests. In addition to that, I've always been into maps. Put those two together and my mind revels in tidy grids and orderly placements. North is always at the top, and South is at the bottom, right? Right? It's the way of the world. I don't know how Australians and Patagonians would feel about that, but joke 'em.

For some reason, though, *Lower Duval* (100 block, 200 block, etc.) got locked in my head as the *bottom* -- hence, the *south* end -- of the street. We should climb *up*, yes? High numbers are up higher, right??

So, it messes me up still -- even after a dozen years -- that Lower Duval is the upper end of the map. Not to mention that, when you get to that "northernmost" end of the street, you're facing almost due west to watch the spectacle at Sunset Pier. Arrrrgh. If that big ugly Southernmost Point buoy wasn't where it was, I'd never get it oriented correctly.



And, yes, the word is *oriented* not *orientated*. Anyone who uses the word *orientated* is being a dumbass. One *orients* oneself to one's surroundings. That process of orienting is called *orientation* (as in "freshman orientation" for high school). Somehow, some linguistic spazzes thought they had to make a verb out of *orientation* and came up with *orientate*. Dolt.

So, um, yeah.

Old Town Mexican Cafe, though, is right about in the middle. Almost all outdoors, its sidewalk frontage is a white wooden fence with a tall and elaborate framed gate. USA and Mexican flags hang on either side of the gate. The fence also runs the length of the restaurant along the shaded sidewalk alley that leads to Key Lime Square, where Lobo's (#136) and Onlywood (#135) await. It's a nice layout.

There was *also* a hostess and a sign, but we blew right past her and it. We were on a mission and we were righteous. We certainly did not need a hostess' help to go sit at the bar. She surely would not have bothered to take us there. Avoiding her completely streamlined the task of beelining to our barstools, and it kept her free to deal with people who did need her help.

But she was an astute and ambitious hostess. She was in the middle of doing something when we approached that hostess stand, so we just shrugged and kept right on going. We knew the way. Her back was turned as we wooshed by, but she caught a glimpse of us and vaulted into action. She hastened to intercept us, probably terrified that we would choose a table that would screw up the orderly balance of server assignments. When she did catch up to us, we gave her a big smile and assured her that we were bar bent and had no intentions of mucking up her system, nor tying up her attentions -- which was clearly now backfiring.

She smiled back, but her smile said, *What part of 'Wait To Be Seated' don't you understand?*



I gave her a friendly smirk and a tilt of the head that said, *If we're not Being Seated, then there's no need to Wait, is there?*



This was actually our second attempt at this Hop. Brian and Big Dog and I had come in here several days earlier after leaving The Twilight Bar (#166). It seemed that there would be some good balance in doing both Salsa Loca (#165) and OTMC in the same night.

We were denied, though, by children. Yup, little kiddies. Despite every damn table being unoccupied, a young Mom and Dad had decided to eat at the bar ... with their four kids. Boys and girls in the five-to-nine-year-old range occupied stools that should have been available to us. We stood there for a moment going *duhh* at the sight, all of us wanting to throw the penalty flag and tell the kiddies to take a hike. But we knew that we, well, couldn't. Yeah, we *could* have ordered beers and then

just stood there boozing and cussing behind the little nippers, but nahhhh, bad style there. So, we just took our beating like true champions and departed, leaving Mom and Dad to bring their children up right.

(Champions don't take beatings, do they? Oh well, roll with it.)

So, this was our return, and the reason for our urgency in getting to that little bar before some kindergarten field trip could beat us to it.

But we were not so hasty that we couldn't dig the atmosphere on our way through. It wasn't dusk yet, but OTMC is nestled in its own concrete canyon, stashed beside a retail store, whose structure blocks out the hot late-afternoon sun. Those shadows also make it feel more nighttime than it is.

Because of that, the tree lights were on. They have these cool tubes of little lights -- kinda like Christmas lights only in a long, clear, flexible plastic tube -- snaking all around the trunks and thick limbs of a couple of old and stately trees. They cast some "candlelight glow" around the fenced-in wooden deck

that is the dining area. The Speakeasy Rum Bar (#16 -- yeah, waaay back) had similar tubes, but theirs were more tightly wound, and around palm trunks -- not the same effect.

There were a lot of tables between the gate and the bar. The table tops were gray faux marble, the chairs were green plastic "back porch" style, and there were blue roll-ups on each table. I think there were cloth napkins. Cloth napkins with plastic chairs. Innnnteresting.

The bar itself is small and simple. It was under a large green awning. If it rained, the bar patrons and a fortunate few who had been assigned the less desirable "back tables" would be the only dry ones. There were six stools with red cushions and curved backs. Good bar seats. The front of the bar was a tight panel of thin bamboo stalks. Looked kinda like a fence. The bar rail was more bamboo, but it was made of sturdy, six-inch diameter chunks. A string of red lights shaped like peppers hung above us. Mexican style graphics decorated the back wall.



Three kinda punkish-looking dudes sat to our left. They were friendly punks, though, and politely proclaimed that the seats we coveted were "All ours."

Keeping the spirit -- as I had at Salsa Loca (#165) -- I went with the Mexican beer, Dos Equis. It cost \$4.84. WTF is up with that?? \$4.84? I reckon it's \$4.50 with 34 cents tax, but why not bump it up so that it's \$5.00 including tax? The bar staff is probably OK with it since most people would still drop a buck and say screw the small change. I wonder how many 16 cent tips they get.

Our barkeep was not interesting at first. She should have stayed that way. When one of the servers came over to our end of the bar to order drinks, the barkeep and she set about griping and bitching about this customer or that. I mean, what F&B employee *doesn't* do that, right? But **not** with customers in such clear earshot. And extra-not when there isn't even a TV to distract us away from it.

And it seemed like they were doing it to *be* entertaining, like they wanted us to hear it so we could enjoy a hearty laugh at our fellow guests' expense too. Weird.

We wondered what those two would say about us when *we* left. Our beers were done, so we decided to give them the chance.