



Bar Hoppin' With Hops

The Keep On Hoppin' Tour
Hops MacBarley's Ongoing
Key West Bar Boondoggle

Bar 217:

Mr. Z's

501 Southard Street

www.mrzskeywest.com

Friday, July 4, 11:15 PM

Yuengling (draft) \$3.00

Fourth of July, Guy! US of freakin' A, Ray! Red, white and blue on you, Lou! 'Tis a good day to be an American. Every day is, really, but, just like Thanksgiving is a day when he slow down and say "damn, I got me some cool shit goin' on. Thanks to thee, you Powers That Be,"

Independence Day is the one day when we are urged to revel in the fact that we live in one damn fine place. They even give us the day off from work so we have more time to think about it and drink about it. They shoot off multi-colored rockets and bombs to make us go, "Yeah, farkin' A, man!" and belt down some more beer and burgers. The country is definitely not perfect, but there's no place on Earth where Hops would rather live.

So, once again, there were some post fireworks Hoperations to be done. In 2013's Second Century Tour, we hit up Church Bar (#139), Rose Tattoo (#140), and KWest Liquors (#141), the first two of which did not live to see the anniversary of our visit. Tonight, the 500 block of Southard Street had our attention. And to find the first target, all you ever have to do is to follow your nose.

Mr. Z's serves the best cheesesteak in KW. You won't find much argument to that claim. They do it the right way: good sliced bovine, plopped on the classic steel-plate grill, dutifully chopped and flipped and sizzled, the draped with slices of American cheese -- or drizzled with globs of Cheez-Whiz -- till the juices are bubbling and the steak is crying Eat Me, you bitch! The aroma is whelming -- maybe even overwhelming -- and the exhaust fans blow it right out the window onto the sidewalk and street. The nighttime breezes through that concrete canyon of Southard Street often waft that tantalizing

scent down to the intersection with Duval, prompting many a late-night wanderer into a sudden craving. It's worked on me many times.

But, some would ask, does Mr. Z's count as a bar? Is it just a sandwich and pizza place that also serves beer? This very question was bandied about among the Hop Squad. I stilled the voices of dissent by stating, I remember one afternoon, just passing by, walking in and buying a beer there, and no food. End of argument.

But to fortify it, I resolved that this Independence Night Hop would be dedicated to the beverage and not the savory, sizzling, slices of steak.

I met up with B&J and we rallied to the Z. The sidewalk in front was empty. That was very unusual. The Z almost always has customers spilled outside, either waiting for their food to cook, or chowing down what they just bought, or just plain hanging out and being social. It's a rare night when this place is lacking for business.

Inside, Captain America was working. How appropriate. The head didn't match up all that much, being shaggy blond, but the bulked-up full body suit fit the bill. That suit was going to be hot as hell if the grill ever got rockin' this night.

Captain A took our order: 2 Yuenglings, please, and a cup of ice water.

And what to eat?

Just here for the beer, Cap'n.

Really?

Really.

Cool.



There were just two other people here when we arrived. They were seated at the side counter against the wall, engrossed in their cheesesteaks, wasting no time on conversation. We got to gaze around at the walls and take in the kitchen-ish atmosphere. The grill is right, almost in reach, and so is the oven. The taps, with the tall stacks of translucent plastic cups flanking them, stood just an arm's length away across the high stainless steel countertop. The most noteworthy decorations are the old, framed

newspaper front pages. Though most involve sports, the one that catches my eye the most is the report of the shooting of John Lennon. I'm sure all those papers would crumble to dust if you ever tries to remove them, so they'll be there as long as the Z remains.



The word must have gotten out, though, that we were here, because after only a minute or so, the place starting filling up at an almost-alarming rate.

The three of us had received our beers (and water) and slid down to the deep end of the service counter where we

would not be in the way. But Key West has a way of flipping things sometimes, and the buzzed brains that were stumbling in kept interpreting us as a line, and going beyond us to stand there, patiently waiting. Trouble was, weren't moving anywhere, so I had to keep turning around to each new waiter and let them know, "We're not in line, we're just here for a beer." They would then slither around us and work their way to the service spot while the newer arrivals would squirm through the crowd to take up their place in line, sigh, behind us.

It was weird, like an unbreakable pattern. And the stupidest part was that all they had to do was take two steps in, belly right up, and put in their order. But they kept streaming in behind us. Captain America seemed to be getting a boot out of it as he observed it.

After the second time, we thought it might be good if we relocated, but by then it was so crowded that we really couldn't easily find another good spot where the three of us could comfortably stand. Hence, we adopted a *Fukkem, we we're here first* attitude. We rarely lapse into thus type of inconsideration -- we're all quite considerate as a rule -- but, well, fukkem, we were here first.

But we didn't stay long, just here for a beer, after all. The aroma of all fat steak was driving my nutty, but I held to my resolve. We bottomed up, relinquished our coveted bar space, and squirmed our way out to the crowded sidewalk.