

Bar Hoppin' With Hops

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

Bar 218:

Kojin Noodle Bar

502 Southard Street

www.facebook.com/KojinKeyWest

Friday, July 4, 11:35 PM

Sierra Nevada (draft) \$5.50

Fresh from Mr. Z's, and probably smelling a little like grilled steak, we crossed the street to the very different atmosphere of Kojin's Noodle Bar. We had no interest in ordering any noodles, which made us atypical patrons, but the place has a nice, though small, high-seat bar that made it an obvious and overdue Hop.

As luck would have it, the three bar seats nearest the door were the last ones available. The barkeep was a short dude. He didn't seem too thrilled about our arrival. We didn't really think about what time it was. We had only recently met up, and we commonly do that during the happier hours, so all of us -- that would be B&J and I, of course -- were kind of in a nine o'clock frame of mind. When Jan promptly grabbed a menu to do her usual scout-out perusal, the barkeep took very sourly to us.

Brian and I ordered our beers and Jan got a glass of wine. Brian was being extra friendly (almost jolly) while we ordered, trying to defuse the keeper's negative waves, but it wasn't catching on. We chatted among ourselves for a couple of minutes, taking our time, making comments about items on the little menu that Jan had, and on the large menu board high up on the back wall of the restaurant, and the suit of armor on the upstairs level, or the large photo of some samurai on the wall behind us.



I noticed a dude in whites leaning against the doorway into the kitchen. His arms were folded, his gaze serious, and his right foot tapping slightly. Suddenly light dawned and I realized that he was the cook awaiting our *we-were-just-about-to-close-up-when-you-assholes-walked-in* order. I caught his eye and made a swipe across the neck gesture and pointed to the beer, letting him know that we would not be eating so he could go ahead and shut it all down. He flashed a quick hopeful smile and an *are-you-sure?* gesture. I nodded and said with a grin "just here for a beer." It was becoming a very common line this night.

People I know have spoken highly of the food here, but it didn't seem in



line with my simple, very American tastes. A dish that particularly caught my attention was the Cold Soba. Yeah, the name seemed a bit daunting to us barhoppers, though we thought it might be a good nightcap when you needed to erase your drunkenness for the drive home.

Cold Soba is more than just a name, however; it is: "baby octopus, bacon, chili, lime, mint, and peanuts." Man, who the hell first threw all that stuff together? *Yeah, hey, mint will go really good with baby octopus!* The killer, though, was bacon. I do love bacon. I can lean towards the mindset of *if it has bacon in it, I just might like it*. This dish, though, stretches that a bit too far. Baby octopus. Yum.

Baby octopus. Baby. Not an old adult octopus, who has lived long years of swishing around the ocean like a mop and ensnaring fish, fish, and more fish in a life that had surely gotten boring enough by now that he's willing to be somebody's meal. And not just a young octopus: some smartass punk of a 'pus, full of disdain for his elders, and who probably deserved to be boiled just to straighten his multi-cheek butt out.

No, this is – was – a ***baby*** octopus, plucked from the sea before it even knew how to use all of its suctiony appendages. Still in the thumb-sucking stage – with eight to choose from! – it was snatched away from its mother's

breast (do octopi have breasts? If so, how many?) and some beaming octopuserman cried out gleefully, "Cold Soba for you, rittle one!"

So, even with bacon, I'm not going there.

Once our intention to not eat was made plain, the barkeep totally lightened up. I should have recognized the ire. I brandished it many, many times over the years when closing time was imminent and suddenly fresh business walks in the door. You're in I-am-so-outa-here mode, and these jamokes expect to be welcomed with prime-time goods and service. Being the



consummate professional, of course, I always gave them the full shebang, but my grin was actually clenched teeth, and my get-them-in-and-get-them-out pace was, I hoped, perceived as "snappy service."

So, with that load off his mind, short barkeep dude became our best buddy, commenting on Brian's Red Sox cap and rolling out the baseball banter. Now, though, it was overkill: trying too hard to make up for his previous attitude so he might still salvage a big tip from us.

Yeah, I knew that approach too. We cut him a break and left our usual more-than-adequate gratuity.