

Bar Hoppin' With Hops

The Keep Calm and Hop On Tour
Hops MacBarley's Ongoing
Key West Bar Boondoggle

Bar #308:

The Flaming Buoy

424 Eaton Street

Friday 2/1/19, 8:35 PM

Honor Warrior IPA (bottle) \$5.38

This was a relocation Hop. The Flaming Buoy was an obscure find during the halcyon days of the *Second Century Tour* of 2013 (#164). It was in a 100-year-old (guessing), one-and-a-half-story house with a wraparound porch at the corner of Packer and Virginia, near the Firehouse Museum. Yeah, you remember. I had found it by chance and had spied the small bar through the window as I biked by. 'Twas an enjoyable Hop.



When I first got wind of the new location, I was quite surprised. What a leap from that esoteric, neighborhood location to the heart of downtown, just a few dozen strides from Duval, and another couple from the Tropic Cinema (#194). Dinner-and-a-movie, there ya go!



The old place had a quirky quaintness to it, or perhaps a quaint quirkiness — hard to tell the difference. This new permutation is modern and colorful, with eye-catching art and a smirky edge to it that I liked immediately.

And the bar is triple the size of the old FB, with very cushy backless stools. It's a right comfy place to sit and imbibe.

The dinner hour was waning, but the place was still quite full. I'm sure their

9:00 closing time ambushes quite a few people, especially on a weekend evening.

It had ambushed B&J and I a couple of weeks ago when we tried to Hop it at 9:10 and were politely but quite definitively turned away. Even our plaintive “we were



just looking to grab a quick drink” ploy availed us nothing. Sometimes it works. The staff understandably doesn’t want to commit to what might turn into appetizer, entree, and dessert, but the barkeep might consider two bottled beers and a glass o’ wine, view the already-brandished \$20 bill, figure that another fiver in his jar while he cleans up couldn’t hurt, and grant us special dispensation. But not this time. So it goes.

So, I made sure I got here in time *this* time. It would be a solo Hop, my stalwart co-hoppers having called off the jam after an aggressive Happy Hour. Almost every table was still occupied with diners, and all but a couple of the ten bar stools were taken. Most seemed to be on the wind-down side of their dining experience: Plates were not full, glasses were low. I walked the length of the bar and settled onto the very last seat.



The first thing I noticed was the weapon. It hung in a holster at the back corner of the backbar where it could be accessed easily by staff, but not by, well, me or my ilk. It was an odd-looking thing, showing traits of pistol, nightstick, and gunstock. Juxtaposed with a wood-block marionette, it seemed like it may have even been a joke or a prop. No need to find out, though.

The second thing to click was that the bar-tender had starred in a Hop before. Little Room Jazz Club was a brand new and very stylish bar when it was Hop #76, and a scruffy-faced, personable, and youngish chap name

Brian was on solo duty, serving the bar and the packed barroom. His performance and his sustained composure in vastly outnumbered circumstances had impressed me enough to remember it.

In the interim, I had seen him behind a few different bars around Key West — standard stuff in local F&B — and now here he was at yet another brand new and very stylish place. He was nowhere near as outnumbered this time, and his scruff look had developed into a full-grown, fairly bushy beard. It made him look older, but, then again, he was seven years older, so maybe it was not just the beard.



He slid me a menu so I could peruse the beer options, and I selected the Honor Warrior IPA, partly because I love IPAs, and partly as a nod to the Wounded Warrior Ride that had rolled through KW in recent weeks.

A bald man — and I mean a shiny-crowned, shaved bald man, not just one of those “thinning hair” guys — wearing a black-and-white, horizontally-



striped shirt, stood behind the bar, fastidiously wiping wine glasses with a cloth napkin. His appearance did not lend itself to blending in with a crowd, and I had a vague recollection that he might be Richard, the owner, whom I had seen in action on Hop 1-6-4.

His attention to detail in his glass polishing did seem more than a hired employee would be giving. That said, though, I always gave the wine glasses a good cleaning when time allowed on my shifts, especially in the bars with the overhead racks of hanging glasses. That rack style was a great space-saving innovation, but if you hung up freshly-washed, still-damp glasses, in the days when bars still allowed cigarettes, those things were magnets for dust and smoke. Those gray curls of carbon would waft up from ashtrays or from exhale plumes and be ensnared in the inverted cups. It was like an additive to the next drink to be poured in.

So, Richard was meticulous in his cleaning, verifying spotlessness by holding the gleaming glass up to the bright backbar lights. One glass, though, slipped from his grasp, fell onto the stainless-steel cooler top, and smashed



loudly. None of the three or four servers who were near that end of the bar made any comment. I thought, yup, he's the owner, all right; they'd be giving him a big bag o' shit if he wasn't. When Brian came over and promptly began to clean up the shards, I was certain.

After that excitement subsided, I gave the room a good lookaround. The art is pretty cool. Lots of color, especially orangey shades, with browns and black. I haven't talked about ceilings as much as I used to, but this one is black, and it has model aircraft hanging from it. They are not just airplanes, though; these were fighters from the rebel forces in a 1977 space fantasy movie called *Star Wars*. Maybe you've heard of it.



Then I noticed that the back-bar shelves were teeming with *Star Wars* stuff: Darth Vader helmet, stormtrooper helmet, rebel pilot helmet, various scale models of various other characters and objects. There was



even a beer-can-sized R2D2 standing on the bar. Brian told me that it needed a charge, but when powered up, it would roll around the bar, had lights that would flash, beeps that would beep, and it even would fall over.

A few minutes later, Richard seemed reasonably unoccupied at my end of the bar, so I asked him how the new location was working out, and if it had been hard it leave their old home. He chuckled some and said he loved the new place, and that, yes, he was a bit sad to leave the other behind after all that time, but he also added that it was nice to come into work "and not have to worry about fixing



floorboards and pipes and all that kind of thing” on a frequent basis. I wished him the best.

I did give the menu a look. Not surprisingly, there was not much that coincided with my tastes. Restaurants would not make a whole lot of money catering to my tastes. I guess that’s why most of the eateries that I do go to are inexpensive ones. The Chicken-and-Waffles item did ping my interest, and I put it on the maybe-someday list in the back of my head.

By now, I was the only patron left at the bar. The others had all eaten up, drank down, and moved on. The cushion stools stood in a tidy line under the clean, striped bar top. A few diners were still

finishing up. Not a bad gig for these servers, getting out before 10 on a Saturday night is pretty sweet in a tourist town like this. The band at Green Parrot wasn’t even on stage yet.

I knocked off the last swig of my Warrior and made ready to depart. This bar was closing, but much of K-Dub (including yours truly) was just getting started.