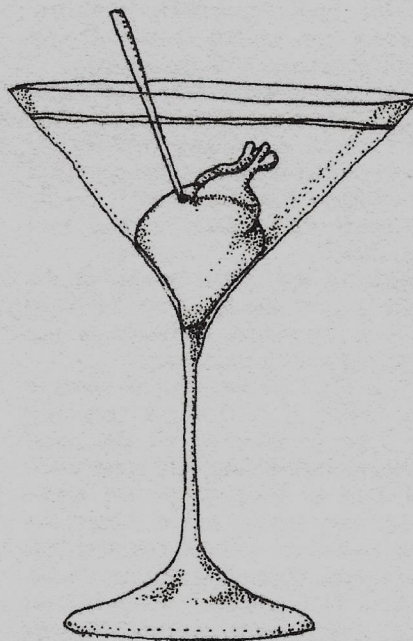


# A Gourmet Guide to Grungy Bars



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For a city its size, Philadelphia sports a fair number of bars—neighborhood bars, ethnic bars, downtown desperate-businessman bars—each type with its own special flavor. Some of them, Liquor Control Board code notwithstanding, restrict themselves exclusively to serving booze, others serve food only incidentally and casually, while still others really come on strong with tasty specialty food offerings, often long past normal meal-serving hours.

Walt's, on 2nd near Pemberton, falls into this latter category. As a matter of fact, around what is generally considered mealtime, it's deader than a dodo's doornail. Early in the evening the bar seems to be frequented by a group of unanimated beer guzzlers who joylessly knock back their brew, reflecting the dreary decor of the place.

About 10 p.m. everybody starts bustling around preparing for the anticipated influx of regulars who come in to do their toping and grab their late evening sustenance. Things really begin to liven up as they straggle in and greet each other.

Walt's tips off its featured offering before you ever get in the joint with a

huge crab displayed on an illuminated sign that dominates its Queen Village block. Inside, however, crab shares honors with clams, steamed, on the half-shell, fried, and in chowder. You can order platters or "à la carte" (which means food offerings come sans potatoes and cole slaw—but since the slaw is delicious and the potatoes old-fashioned french-fried-from-scratch type, they're worth getting with whatever you order).

Steamed crabs, hot, peppery and delicious (50¢ each), seem to be most in demand and deservedly so. Other favorites include generous servings of littleneck clams (\$2—about as high as any single item on Walt's menu) which come with plenty of *clarified* melted butter, a pretty classy touch for such a grungy bar. The fried seafood all tastes pretty much alike, except the shrimp, 18 small tasty ones to a platter order. Ignore the chowder—it's uninspired vegetable soup with a few clams wrung in. If tap beer, crabs and clams are what you crave, you can do them all here and not hurt in the pocket when you leave.

Then, if you want to make the ethnic circuit, try the **Cherokee**, a black bar at 61st and Haverford, specializ-

ing in soul food or plain old down-country cooking, call it what you will, depending on your orientation. Proprietor-chef Dennis Caldwell, a self-proclaimed cutter and burner, dubs the Cherokee "a tavern rather than a bar," and when pressed for an explanation he comes up with some pretty concise definitions. A tavern, he says, is a place where you can bring your mother or your sister (he didn't mention wife) and where discussion of religion and politics is taboo. Sex is okay as a topic, he concedes, as long as it's discussed in a conversational tone of voice. He even keeps a set of encyclopedias behind the bar for the express purpose of settling any points of difference which might arise among his customers.

Unlike Walt's, mealtimes are pretty conventional here, and if you're too late they may have run out of several of the daily specialties (which are really all they have on a given day, anyway, although the menu lists some other things). Dennis only cooks chitlins in the winter, and then only if they measure up to his exacting standards. Otherwise, though, a representative day might include ham and cabbage, ribs, pigs feet (only the



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front ones), fried chicken, collards, and a hearty bean soup. No single item is more than about \$2 and, if you dig the basic ingredients, the chef prepares and seasons them well and you'll be pleased with the results.

The decor—don't ask. Beer signs, New Year's decorations and, for some nutty reason, a swinging elephant are scattered around with a fine disregard for esthetics, but who cares? It's really the spirit that counts, or soul isn't your dish.

Still on the ethnic route, at the other end of the spectrum in many ways is the **South Philadelphia Bar and Grill** at 12th and Mercy.

This place devotes a whole room to the service of food where they dish up huge portions of all the usual southern Italian fare, and some unusual stuff to boot. Soups are super-good, tasty broths full of vegetables and pastas in various combinations and shapes, depending on your choice. (About \$1 a portion.) A bowl could make a meal unless you share. Mussels come in white sauce, but without any taste of wine or much garlic. The red sauces which cover almost everything else tend to be sweet, but the locals seem to lap it up with a gusto attested to by the size of their waistlines. If you go, order any of the pastas "al dente"; otherwise they come soggy, perhaps by disposition of the chef, or perhaps to discourage any influx of strangers, as the place seems to cater more to regulars than outlanders. Even the waitresses smile and joke with *them* but seem to stare into space when dealing with anyone else.

The brew is cold, the Chianti is limited and the food is hearty, plain and lots.

Moving along to another section of the city, this time to 23rd and Fairmount in a changing neighborhood, you'll find **McMenamin's**. This place, too, separates the eaters from the drinkers, with much more square footage devoted to the latter, and the former wedged into two tiny back rooms with assorted plastic tables and booths. Wander in through the bar, even if you're headed for the food, and note the marble and tile bar, a preserved relic that hints of a former grandeur.

These days, though, the habitués seems to be mainly rheumy-eyed old Irishmen. Mostly they pay more attention to the TV perched above the bar than to each other, reflecting little of the traditional Gaelic conviviality.

The dining rooms, so called, are spectacularly devoid of decoration,

save a framed bloc of tickets for the 1964 World Series (when the Phillies were in their heyday) and a benevolent religious statue.

There's a variety of food, presented on two menus, one for fish and one for meat. Ham and cabbage is featured on Thursday nights only, but during the rest of the week you can get clams on the half-shell (60¢), clam stew, fried oysters, chicken, turkey and the like, all pretty cheap (under \$2) and adequate for the price.

Don't ask for any "frills" such as tartar sauce, because they simply don't exist here, but the draft beer, both light and dark, is cold and fresh and comes in generous-sized glasses. If you happen to find yourself in this neighborhood, you could do worse.

If you should find yourself hungry and in the neighborhood of 13th & Federal, drop in on **Frank's Inferno**, a place that specializes in go-go dancers (if they show up) on Friday and

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Saturday nights and big portions of spaghetti (75¢) with almost any sauce you name (including crab) on Tuesday and Thursday. Any other night you can have platters (\$1.50) or sandwiches, or if you just want a nibble with your drink, a large order of small boiled shrimp on a paper plate costs \$1.

U.S. Marines favor this place, for some reason, and you're likely to find several of them clustered around one of the girls who seem to hang around a lot.

Bar prices are cheap, but if all you have is beer money, you should drop by **Bill's Peanut Bar**, at 17th and Lombard, and make your meal on the marvelous roasted peanuts that get heaped on your table as you sit down. If you're still hungry, brush the shells on the floor and help yourself to more nuts from the barrel against the wall. The crowd is a mixture of neighborhood types—blue collar and center city swinging singles.