

Cheers!

A toast to four great Boston bars by John Sedgwick

In "The Back Bay Polka" the Gershwins poked fun at Bostonians' tastes in liquid refreshment. "Think as your neighbors think," they sang, "make lemonade your drink." And it is true that since the days of the Puritans, Bostonians have traditionally eschewed hard liquor. The city's blue laws were once the strictest in the country; until recently they gave churches the right to prohibit liquor licenses for establishments within 500 feet of their doors. Boston's sidewalks still roll up earlier than those of most major cities, usually by 1 A.M. But nowadays its bars certainly raise their patrons' spirits. Even Hollywood has caught on: television's hit comedy show *Cheers* is set in a Boston tavern.

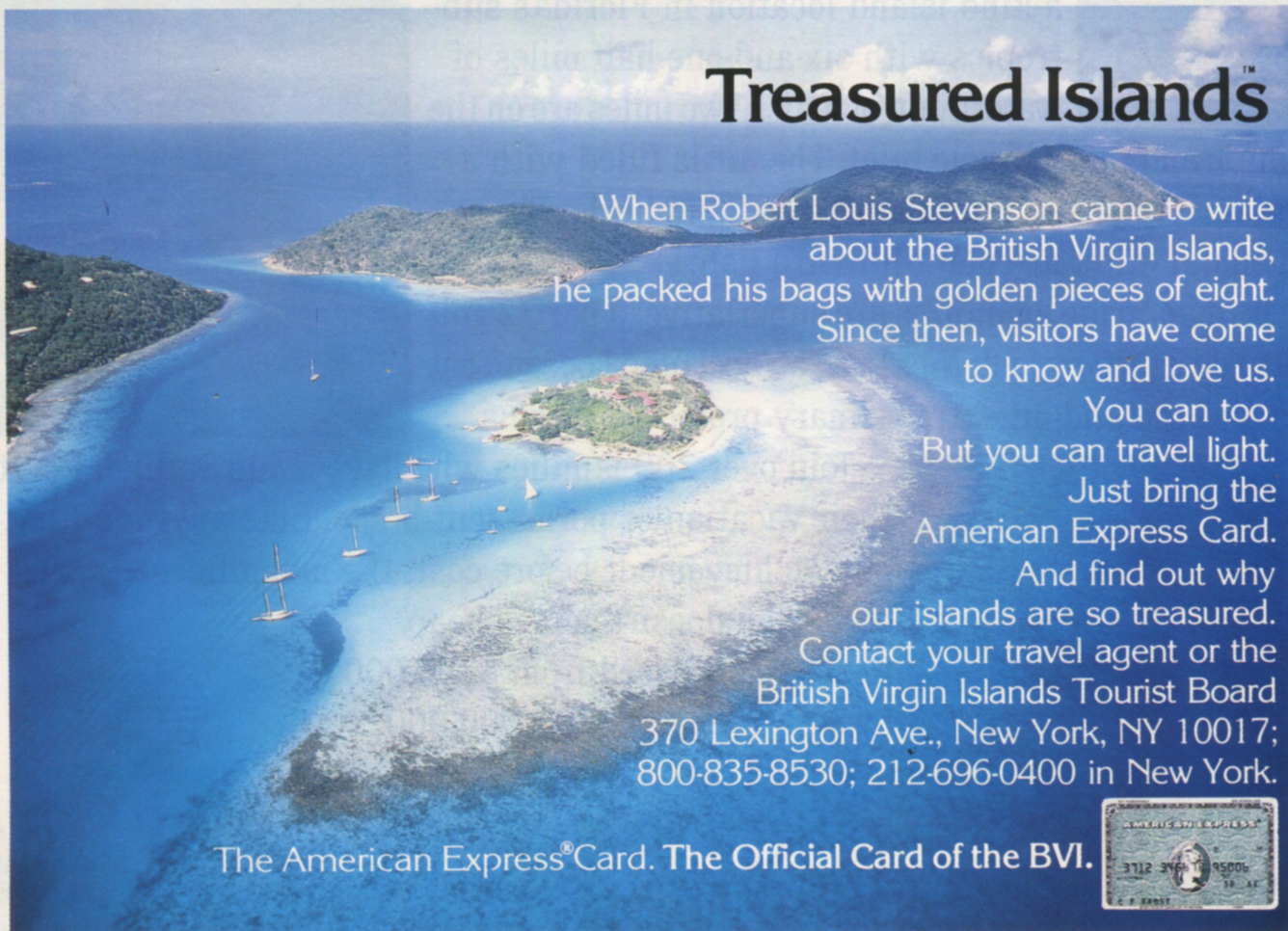
The *Cheers* crowd is a little rowdy for me. I prefer quieter retreats, where I'm lulled by soft voices, soothing jazz piano and the gentle clinking of ice cubes against crystal tumblers. After a wide and highly pleasurable survey, I can recommend the bars at four prime establishments: the Ritz-Carlton, the Bay Tower Room, the Copley Plaza and Allegro on Boylston.

The **Ritz Bar**, in the Ritz-Carlton, at Arlington and Newbury Streets, is one oasis to which you can confidently take your mother. Jack Lemmon brought his mother frequently; it is said that Mrs. Lemmon so enjoyed the atmosphere that she wished to have her ashes interred there. They weren't, but I can't think of

a nicer spot to take one's heavenly rest. The two small, cozy rooms at the Ritz Bar feel like adjoining sitting rooms, and their dark paneling hung with pictures of horses and dogs gives them pleasant English overtones.

The front room is arranged around a fireplace (a gas flame, unfortunately). Two heavily draped windows look out across Arlington Street to the Boston Public Garden, known for its swan boats and flower beds in summer.


On a recent visit, my wife and I sat in the side room at a small, round table equipped with an eccentric lamp that looked like an inverted fruit-cocktail bowl. We probably should have asked the tuxedoed waiter for a couple of the



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Ritz's famous martinis—three ounces of Booth's gin with just a dash of vermouth. (The secret, supposedly, is crushed ice.) Instead we stuck to wine, ordering a glass of Chardonnay and a Kir Royale, which came with a split of Laurent Perrier Champagne. We also enjoyed some delicious jumbo shrimp from the short bar menu.

Around us sat elegant ladies in satin gowns and gold earrings, gentlemen in double-breasted blazers and English shoes. They were the sort of people who, if they smoke, smoke really well—handling their cigarettes with great panache. You can get the feel of a bar by the conversations you hear there. Next to us, a middle-aged woman was discussing her family heirlooms. "My mother had a Steinway concert grand, and it was the *most* beautiful thing," she declared. "I think my father married her for it." Address: 15 Arlington St.; telephone 617-536-5700. Men are asked to wear jackets; drinks cost \$5.

The Ritz used to manage the **Bay Tower Room**, located atop a high rise, but the two places have little in common

nowadays. While the Ritz hugs its prized spot of earth in the Back Bay, the Bay Tower Room, on the 33rd floor, has vaulted practically to the heavens. Instead of dyed-in-the-wool Bostonians, its clientele is composed largely of out-of-towners. The group at the next table were obviously traveling through. "And you know," said one man, "we had a window seat all the way to Cincinnati!"

The Bay Tower attracts visitors, I expect, because of its superb view of Boston's waterfront. Guests look out on the granite Custom House Tower, down to thriving Quincy Market/Faneuil Hall and across the bay to Logan Airport. The planes look like Japanese lanterns as they descend slowly through the night air with their lights blazing.

While the airport commands everyone's attention, water provides the bar's prevailing motif. A model of a clipper ship is spotlighted near the stairs, and prints of various boats adorn the walls. The tables are granite, however, and the napkins paper.

The Bay Tower Room serves a limited selection of bar food—mushroom caps

stuffed with crabmeat, lobster salad with onion-and-basil vinaigrette. And the run-downs on foreign locales are free. "Galápagos was nothing," said one voice. "We went all that way, and we didn't see a thing." "I had much more fun in the Catskills than I did in St. Moritz," said another.

But the voices became a quiet babble as my wife and I gazed out over the majestic expanse of Boston Harbor, once an important seaport, now an important airport. We drank in the view, then turned our attention to the glasses of Fumé Blanc brimming before us. Address: 60 State St.; 723-1666. Most drinks cost \$4.

I have to admit to a special fondness for the **Plaza Bar** at the Copley Plaza Hotel. My wife and I have spent many a happy evening in its leather seats listening to the inspired jazz piano of Dave McKenna. The bar itself suggests an English men's club somewhere in the British Empire at the turn of the century—India, perhaps, or Egypt. Fans twirl lazily beneath a high coffered ceiling, and louvered shutters close out the light

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BOSTON BARS (Continued)

in the windows facing Copley Square. A Chinese screen, two sculptured camels and an ebony elephant carry the patron, in spirit, to distant lands. One half-expects Sydney Greenstreet to saunter in, if not Bogart himself. In other moods, I think of it as the Doges' Palace, because of all the gold—in the ceiling, the draperies, the Oriental rug. And I think of Dave McKenna, a stern and impressive character with a feathery touch on the keyboard, as the doge himself.

On Friday and Saturday at the Plaza Bar, you have to choose between hearing McKenna and dining from an appetizing menu; McKenna doesn't start until nine, when the kitchen closes. But what is

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food compared to the food of love? We made do with a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon. (From Monday to Thursday, dinner is served till 10:15. The bar is closed Sunday.)

Hollywood people are known to visit here as they swing through Boston on publicity tours. Lauren Bacall, for example, dropped in not long ago. Because of McKenna's reputation, most of the customers are jazz fans and generally sophisticated. An English professor near our table was overheard explaining to a friend that she was "self-dramatized." We would have liked to hear more, but a birthday cake appeared for one of the patrons. All conversation stopped when McKenna segued neatly into "Happy Birthday," then played a few snappy improvisations on the theme. By the time we got back to the academic's conversation, she had moved on to Edmund Spenser. "His love poetry can be so vulgar," she said. "But isn't the *Faerie Queene* divine?" Address: Dartmouth and

St. James Sts., Copley Square; 267-5300. Men are required to wear jackets; drinks cost \$4.50, \$5.50 when McKenna plays.

Farther out the Back Bay from the Copley Plaza stands **Allegro on Boylston**, a yuppified watering hole of the Post-Modernist school. If the Copley Plaza represents another time and another country, Allegro is here and now. It began in the Sixties, when a radical women's collective started a restaurant in suburban Waltham. In 1986 the group opened a second Allegro, in two corner rooms downstairs in the Tennis and Racquet Club, a gorgeous Neoclassical athletic emporium at Boylston and Hereford Streets.

Allegro has a restaurant as well as a bar, but it can safely be taken as a statement of the establishment's priorities that the barroom is nearly as big as the dining room. Images—of snowflakes, leaves, stars—are projected onto the bar's turquoise diamond-shaped countertop and throughout the room. Otherwise, black is the prevailing color, and provocative black-and-white photographs are mounted on the walls.

At the bar, you can have the best of both—the restaurant's interesting menu and the bar's New Wave café-society atmosphere. We perched ourselves on the comfortable stools and asked the cheerful woman behind the bar for angel-hair pasta and pizza with feta cheese. That and a couple of glasses of Champagne made a lovely meal. Around us, young executives were comparing offices ("Yeah, but you can't see the Charles") and vacation spots ("I tell you, you can't beat Boca Raton for waterskiing"). It's a chummy place, but we were still surprised when a fellow waltzed in and invited the bartender to dinner. "Who else is coming?" she asked, uncertainly. "A girl from a New Hampshire toll booth," he said, "and some other people."

We ordered some Frangelico and steamed milk as we waited to hear her decision. After some thought, she said she'd go—but we had our doubts. Address: 939 Boylston St.; 236-0200. Drinks cost \$3.50.

As we wound down our latest survey of favorite watering holes, we were convinced of one thing. If the Gershwins were to write "The Back Bay Polka" nowadays, it would be one lively, sophisticated tune. ◀◀