



Power Drinking at Duke's

by Aram Bakshian, Jr.

Ordinarily, I detest "power bars." The minute a place earns a reputation as one it begins to attract flies. But I have this ungovernable lust for genuine, barrel-cured kosher dills, and Duke Zeibert's is one of the few Washington restaurants where you can get them.

I had lunched there many times before making it one of my regular watering holes, and had enjoyed the onion rolls and pickles as much as the main courses. Duke's specializes in hearty, New York deli-style *ancienne cuisine* of the chicken soup, Beef Stroganoff and stuffed cabbage variety, along with a sprinkling of tempting regional, seasonal specialties, such as soft-shell crabs, shad roe, and excellent Maryland crabcakes. It is good, simple—if not particularly memorable—fare, but abandon all hope of low cholesterol, ye who enter Duke's.

The solid, slightly passé menu and atmosphere have attracted Washington's old-line elite for nearly half a century. The walls are lined with pictures of Duke greeting presidents and sports greats, and trophies won by the Washington Redskins; the bar and restaurant are usually filled with an eclectic mix of sports writers, jocks, touts, legislators, lobbyists, lawyers, reporters, tax accountants, real estate barons, and media biggies, mostly of a certain vintage.

Duke's has become a kind of living museum, a geriatric power bar, an indoor, booze-fueled Jurassic Park filled with influential dinosaurs and the occasional newer model. Sometimes the generations meet, as on an evening last July when I

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looked out of the bar and into the reception area in response to a sudden trampling of feet and flashing of cameras.

There they were: Lard Butt and Piano Legs!

Accompanying President and Mrs. Clinton was an old acquaintance of mine, Republican Senate Leader Bob Dole. He was, sadly, without his charming wife Elizabeth, who heads the American Red Cross (better to have an expert at first aid handy when rivals meet). Former ambassador and longtime Democratic strategist Robert Strauss brought up the rear. (A Duke's regular, Strauss had brokered the oddly coupled dinner.) Stifling the impulse to chant "Three more years!" I turned my attention to my cocktail, a concoction of beef bouillon and vodka, the name of which nearly sums up my opinion of the Clinton administration to date: Bullshot.

But it was not the chance to see Bill smirk or hear Hillary's shrillery that had made a Duke's regular of me. It was the thought of those near-perfect pickles, nestled in their silver tub and wafting a delicate hint of garlic. Their memory and theirs alone was why I found myself making for the southwest corner of Connecticut Avenue and L Street on a fateful happy hour in 1989, ducking into Washington Square, the shimmering steel-and-crystal office-and-shopping complex in which Duke's occupies most of the second floor.

Washington being Washington, and Duke's being Duke's, I was sure I would bump into a few people I knew. Unfortunately, I was right in the worst possible way. Slumped at the end of the bar was a manic-depressive radio reporter whose prolonged stays in Haiti during the last days of "Baby Doc" Duvalier's regime—and his own attempts at self-embalming

through the medium of alcohol—had earned him the nickname "White Zombie." Luckily, W.Z. was engaged in heated debate with an over-painted PR woman, who was wearing a hat that looked like a manhole cover festooned with last week's salad bar remnants. Taking advantage of the cover it provided, I slipped around the corner of the bar, lit a cigar and ordered a bottle of Beck's Dark . . . only to be warned by the fellow seated next to me that I was drawing on his private stock. Any man willing to defend his favorite brand of beer to the death is my kind of guy; Bob Blumel, a widely traveled editor/publisher with a kaleidoscopic subject range, has since become a good friend.

So, too, have a number of the staff, one of the acid tests of a first-rate saloon. The senior bartender, Nick Wineriter, is an affable, intelligent master dispenser in his early forties. A man of many talents, he is an accomplished writer and photographer and, believe it or not, a member of the Secular Franciscan Order. Shortly before he was professed, Nick found himself wrestling with the seeming incongruity of being both a lay deacon and a bartender. He informed the spiritual assistant of the order, Father Stephen Sabbagh, of his reservations.

"I told him that I couldn't reconcile being a Franciscan and working in a bar. He asked me if I knew what St. Francis was. He told me St. Francis was a deacon. 'What is a deacon?' he asked. Father Stephen said that the word deacon comes from the Greek word *diakonos*, which means attendant. Restaurant workers are exactly that: attendants."

While I like the simile, its very ingenuity leads me to believe that Father Stephen is a trifle Jesuitical for a Franciscan. As for Nick, he finds further solace in a favorite passage from Alexandre de

Rouville's *Imitation of Mary*: "It is not the place nor the occupation that sanctifies a man; it is the man who must sanctify the place and the occupation."

Another star of the place is Duke's maître d', Al, an animated, gregarious Iranian who speaks flawless French and has a mischievous sense of humor. He heads a bustling staff of Farsis, Greeks, Chinese, and Latinos who, on a good evening, are as much a part of the banter and repartee as the customers.

Even some of the VIP guests are quite pleasant; I've enjoyed more than one lunch with cabinet members and publishing moguls at Duke Zeibert's. You also pick up the occasional interesting tidbit about the lifestyles of the rich and infamous (e.g., according to informed sources, talk show host Larry King is a lousy tipper).

Duke Zeibert himself is also a celebrity of sorts. Although his son Randy runs most of the day to day operations, Duke is still very much part of the picture, cracking jokes with cronies and banishing boors from the premises. Now in his eighties, with a scraggly, tonsured mane of white hair, he sometimes shuffles in wearing a golf cap and toting a large shopping bag.

On one memorable evening, when Duke was looking a little more rumped than usual, I overheard an out-of-town guest—alas, as a capital landmark, the place gets its share of tourists—mutter knowingly to his wife, "They wouldn't allow bag people like that in here if Duke Zeibert was still running the place!"

I hope he will continue doing just that for many a year to come, for there is no other place quite like Duke's geriatric power bar in Washington. On top of everything else, it is only half a block away from another Great American Saloon, the Town and Country bar at the historic old Mayflower Hotel. Just the place for a nightcap (the last drink at Duke's is usually served by eleven), the bar at the Mayflower is presided over by Sam, Washington's—and perhaps the world's—only Cambodian-born magician/bartender. But Sam's career as a conjuring publican, and the charms of the Town and Country lounge, are the stuff of another story . . . □

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Running Time

by James Bowman

When I was a child, "The Fugitive" was my favorite grown-up television show. There was something particularly attractive and flattering to my boyish worldly wisdom about the idea not of the innocent convict but of the wanderer, the outsider, and the actor. Here was Kafka for Americans. Dr. Richard K. was a man wrongly accused of a crime who found himself not caught up in some Central European nightmare of military-judicial bureaucracy but turned loose in the great anonymous open spaces of America, where men have always gone to start their lives over again, to reinvent themselves.

Dr. Kimble, played by the late David Janssen, did that every week. In fact, if it wouldn't have been scandalously inappropriate in the televisual world of the 1960s, I'd have liked it better if he *had* been guilty of his wife's murder. We could have cut out all that silly stuff about the one-armed man and there would have been more subtlety, more ambiguity about our fondness for him. He would have been a man torn between wanting to do better in his new life and bound by justice to answer for the sins of his old one. There is something in all of us that wants the pursued to escape the pursuer, and that could have been exploited without making the pursued into a cliché of wrongly convicted innocence.

But even without such subtlety, Janssen's TV fugitive was an attractive, lonely figure. He harbored, like any Byronic hero, a guilty secret, but there was no time for self-pity. He lived by his wits from week to week, moving on from one new life to another. For all the imminent peril the law's pursuit was supposed to put him in, he was the freest man on

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television to me. He had been liberated by the threat of capture from those normal ties that hold most people to one life only. How odd, then, that the new film of *The Fugitive* cuts out all that interesting stuff and leaves in only the lurid murder mystery and the shadowy one-armed man; how very much odder that it has had such success at the box office. What in this generic thriller is there to get excited about?

Well, there is a great bus-train wreck that proves an appropriately drastic means of springing Harrison Ford (as the new version of Kimble) from incarceration. There's also the performance of Tommy Lee Jones as the pursuing Lt. Gerard who, when Barry Morse played him on TV, was rather a dull dog. Here he is the sort of cop who, if there were any justice in the world, would be immediately elevated to the directorship of the FBI. In fact, I'm not sure he's *not* the director of the FBI. He is ostensibly a federal marshal, but we haven't seen one like him since Wyatt Earp. His being so completely focused on apprehending his man is dramatically very powerful. I only wish that the film-makers could have been half so focused on Kimble instead of introducing a tedious conspiracy by a wicked, multinational pharmaceutical company to suppress information about the side-effects of one of its drugs.

You'd think that any self-respecting wicked pharmaceutical company could find a more direct and efficient way of silencing a whistle-blower than getting a one-armed man to murder his wife and then getting him sent to the chair for murder, but there it is. The bad guys must be motivated, and Hollywood cannot pass up a chance to sell its political worldview—according to which any villainy not originating with the CIA must

be the work of big corporate interests. In fact, the only thing better (i.e., worse) than a large corporation is a large foreign corporation. And add fifty bonus points if it is Japanese.

But don't get me going on *Rising Sun*. The film is beneath criticism for taking the superstition that the Japanese trade surplus with the U.S. arises from a diabolical sort of cleverness on the part of the Japanese, and encompassing within it a much more elemental prejudice against little yellow men with buck teeth and thick glasses. I would have thought that even a child looking at the problems of the adult world for the first time would want something more substantial.

But give Hollywood a rich—or a military/CIA—man and the wellsprings of human evil need be plumbed no deeper. John Woo's spectacularly choreographed but dramatically negligible *Hard Target*, for example, introduces a gang of rich villains with seemingly unlimited numbers of henchmen (as Roland smote the Saracens, so Jean-Claude Van Damme smites the capitalists), who make their money by providing homeless Vietnam veterans as human quarry for amateurish but even richer white hunters. No further explanation is needed. And, as this is a film about excess, Woo gilds the poison lily by making the chief bad guy's chief henchman a sadistic South African given to heavy-handed irony about his tender feelings and called, like the late prime minister of his homeland, Pik (Arnold Vosloo).

Where the rich are not scheming to murder doctors' wives or hunting down homeless people, they are as bloodless and feckless and pathetic as the effete Lord Craven (John Lynch) in *The Secret Garden*. But there are other reasons to hate *The Secret Garden*—most of them little and cuddly and unbearably cute. I only wish that my confidence in the good sense of America's children were robust