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A pair of spectacles

Super Bowl Fantasies at Barney's Beanery

By Dan O'Heron

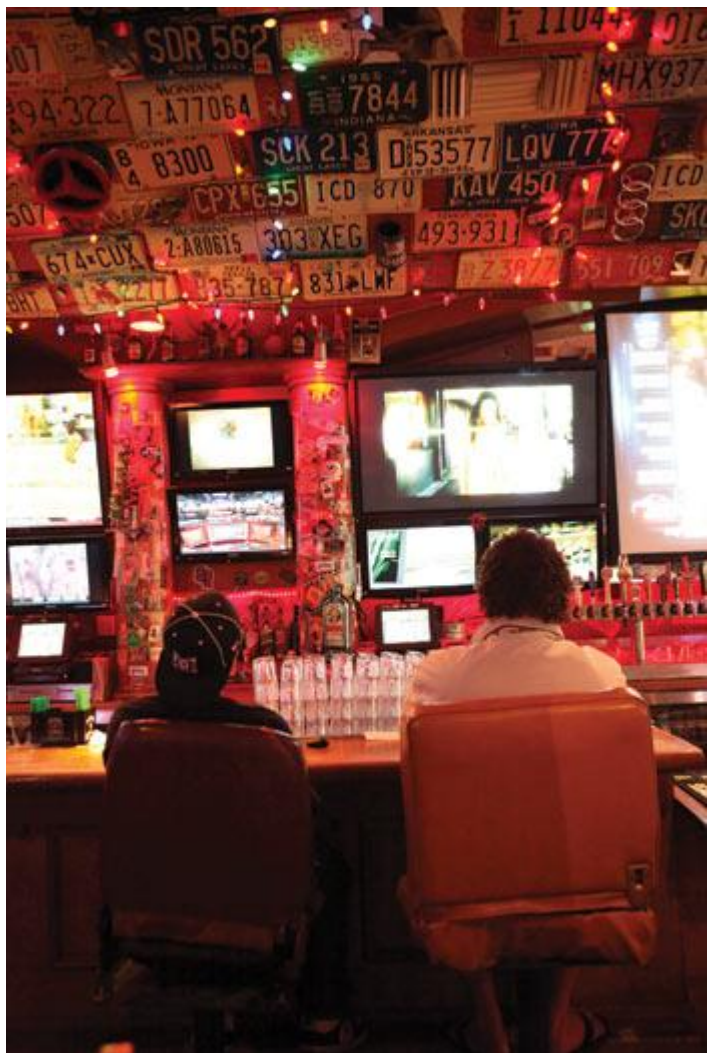
To feast on Super Bowl Sunday and all its trimmings — flyovers, marching bands, musical extravaganzas and wardrobe malfunctions like Janet Jackson's on the 2004 half-time show — I won't be going to Indianapolis. I'll be watching it all on TV in Old Pasadena at Barney's Beanery, a spectacle in and of itself.

While other places make Super Bowl assurances that "every effort is being made to please everybody," it's just an excuse to soothe those whose call for action must be listened to but need not, nor cannot, be satisfied. Only Barney's has enough space, food, drink and amusement to accommodate huge and excited assemblages of up to 800.

From its blaring eight-page tabloid menu, multitudes of fast-casual foodies can order enough Americana comfort foods to tuck them into the place for hours and days.

The menu offers 36 breakfast items (from \$4.50 to \$13), plus scores of sides and toppings, served all day. Beyond the bed and breakfast fare, and great for sharing, some 50 appetizers, snacks, pizzas and calzones from \$3 to \$18 are available.

Even more in this wallowing whereabouts for Super Bowl mobs, there are hundreds of burgers, sandwiches (my favorite is the sourdough chicken melt oozing with butter-soft Brie), hot dogs, soups, salads, chilies, steak, chicken, seafood, plus house and south-of-the-border specialties. Considering the generous size and quality of the portions, the prices are moderate.



Among new items ideally suited for sharing is the chili sampler. This is a "pod-pourri," if you will, of five simmering red bowls: Texas, turkey, veggie, fireman's and classic. You won't need a Scoville scale to measure raging heat, but each bowl is flavored with an assertive smokiness and sooty tang. I doubt

that the kitchen soaks chili peppers in salted water, as this technique would leech out much of the flavor.

The “Texas” style dish is all Texas but without the usual debris. More than Barney’s “classic,” I like the new “fireman’s” version — jalapeno, black beans and tri-tip. I was denied the new recipe but didn’t feel slighted. Legend has it that at the original Beanery on our Westside, Frank Sinatra kept asking for the “classic” recipe, and when no one raised a finger to help, Frank raised one of his and stormed out of the restaurant.

For the convenience of each person in a group, the \$11.50 five-bowled platter — along with chopped onions, grated cheese, salsa and sour cream — comes with curled crispers so that they can chip away with decorum. For an additional \$3.75, they can have five jalapeno corn muffins that are ideal for sopping up the delicious chilies down to bare porcelain.

After such a promising prelude, could any other new dish be as exciting? Yes. In fact, I refused to share my dense and meaty mushroom platter. For \$7.50, it’s a dandy assortment of Portobello and button rings. Sautéed in a garlic, herb and smoky rich Marsala wine sauce, they are bedded over slices of crusty and toasted French baguettes and topped with melty mozzarella. A softy, I did offer one slice of a new \$12.50 prosciutto and arugula white pizza to a close friend.

More to the point in celebrating — especially for an Irishman like me, who never eats on an empty stomach — Barney’s pours more than 200 beers from the world over and 15 different liquored-up cocktails. Though not especially big on wines, there’s enough to satisfy a sports bar crowd.

Besides fuel and feed, by design, in Barney’s seven meandering rooms on three floors, there are features that can fire up not just diehard sports fans, but also drag-alongs who don’t care as much for sport and drink.

At the entrance, a long bar gets most every patron giddy but here, I often feel shaken and rattled like noisemakers in a nursery. The bar’s backdrop is overloaded with TVs, each screening different shows. Recently at the NFL divisional championships, I almost became a Baltimore Raven lunatic trying to keep up with the game, other games, a music video and an advertisement for a stool softener.

For the Super Bowl, I’ll get a better seat in the adjoining dining room. With individual TV sets at each booth, I can see the game, hear the commentary and engage in audibly delicious quips with pals. Awhile back, while I was matching a sweet Negro Modella with a spicy Cajun shrimp cocktail, one chum changed channels from baseball to soccer. This prompted another to say that soccer would be more interesting “if each team had a designated seal to balance the ball on its nose.” Another added, “A Brazilian seal.”

After switching back to baseball, another buddy, who’d just ordered a foot-long hot dog, started ranting about “Ballpark Frank McCourt.”

Elsewhere, for customers who prefer participation sports, Barney’s basement offers trivia and karaoke; and fronting its mezzanine is a punching bag. On the second floor, there’s a classy pool room. Above it, a patio that was a venue for comedy nights until the performers became funnier than their material. Now you can just drink and enjoy yourself.

But for me, the Super Bowl is the holy day of obligation. Not to deify a mere football game, nor atone for heavy drinking and eating, but come Feb.5, my Sunday service will be held at Barney’s Beanery.