

Bar Hoppin' With Hops
The Second Century Tour
Hops MacBarley's 2013
Key West Bar Boondoggle

Bar #151:

951 Prime Steakhouse
951 Caroline Street
www.primekeywest.com
Friday, 19 July, 6:30 PM

Yeungling (draft) \$5.91

What is the correct name of this place? Everyone I know calls it 951 Prime. The sign over the door says Prime 951. The website, whichever way you Google it, says Prime Steakhouse. Looks like Prime is the name of the company, and the 951 is tacked on because ... well, the address? Good bet.



You have to walk through Dante's (#94) to get to Prime. There is no other way in. That's ridiculous. Passing through another restaurant, then up a tall flight of stairs, just to get here -- there's no way that that is good for business.

Ah, but it was not always thus, Gus. When 951 first arrived on the KW elite beef scene back in ought-five, it was part of the new Conch Harbor project, with a large and lush tropical garden on its Caroline Street frontage and a grand staircase leading up to the mezzanine level. There were a few businesses on that level -- including 951 Prime -- and it was a cool vantage point to overlook Dante's pool and the harbor beyond. Oh, yes, and the public rest rooms for Dante's are up here too. Kinda important on a few occasions.

And all was well until the big giant (are there any small giants?) came to town. West Marine, the boaters' superstore, bought up the corner lot, ripped up all the trees and shrubs, tore out the staircase, and replaced it all with a bland concrete building with large windows. That left no access to the mezzanine (and 951 Prime) from Caroline: no way in except through what is basically a competitor.

Now, I doubt many people have Prime's beef and atmosphere in mind (and budget) and then go, *Ehhhh that's too many stairs, let's grab a grouper*

sandwich at a picnic table here instead. But it could happen. Someone like me might suddenly realize, hey, less money spent on food means more money for beeeer. *Could* happen.

But not today. We were on a mission and we were locked in.

We were a threesome today: B&J&I. That's good. Keeps me within myself. Left alone, I might get into some phony baloney accent or attitude, with some off-the-cuff life story as convoluted as it would be stupid. I don't do that often; my own life story is convoluted and stupid enough as it is.



The outer facade of the mezzanine businesses -- and I'm not sure how many are still there -- is pretty bland: just grey painted concrete. 951 has a roofed entranceway, though, with a cool pair of wooden doors with portholes. They'd look a whole lot sharper on a weathered wooden building, but I guess they didn't have one handy.

There were a few chairs near the front door, with a few potted plants to, I guess, create a waiting area, or maybe a smoking area. Whichever it might be, there wasn't a need for either at this time.

It was hot and bright outside, and the cool air and dimmer light of the restaurant were welcome. I love a wooden room, and as wooden rooms go, this one was OK. The walls were Pomeranian Teak, and there were russet brown slat blinds shading the long row of windows on the far side. I love that look. So, of course, we faced *away* from it when we sat down to drink.

The bar was a blotchy-patterned Antipastian Marble, wine bottles hung at shallow angles on the walls, and the high bar seats were lightly cushioned with curved backs. A party of five sat near the blinds, awaiting their entrees. I envied their view.

There were far more staff than necessary, but we were a bit ahead of the traditional dinner wave for a high-priced restaurant. How much of a wave there would be, who knows?

The barkeep was a tall and taciturn Eastern European dude. Glib bartenders are good in sports bars and lively places, but sometimes the classy places like to man the bar with someone who is all ears and little tongue.

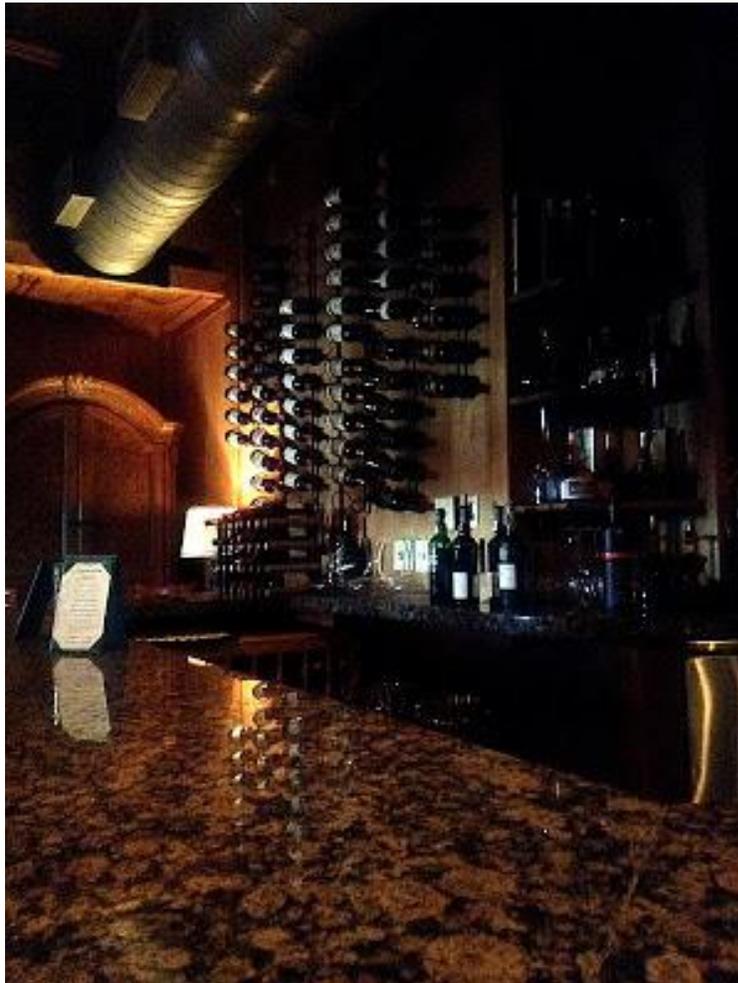
Eddie Dunn was a good example. Remember him? He tended at the Harp & Bard in the Boston suburbs during the years that I was barbacking my way through college. The H&B was a reasonably classy Irish bar and restaurant; we all had to wear the dressy black-and-white, including the bow tie. Some of the keeps would spin yarns over your Manhattan for you, but Eddie never said more than the minimum. If you asked him where he was from, he'd shrug and say, "nowhere special, you?" And then give you his full attention as you rolled along with your answers. People always seemed willing to dump their life stories on him.

I commented on that to him one night after work when we were all sitting at the bar having our drinks. Eddie always stayed behind the bar to pour for the rest of us while we railed on about the night's various assholes and shitheads. He smirked at my question and said cryptically, "I like to listen."

None of us were satisfied with that reply. Nobody but nobody likes to listen to all these customers. Some are fine -- all you people, for instance, would be *freakin' awesome* -- but there are too many out there who think that the barkeep is there just to listen to them vent about people that he doesn't know, or blow the solution to the world's problems out their drunken asses,

or snicker perverted phrases about what they'd like to do with that hot cocktail waitress over there. You like to *listen*? Really?

Eddie clinked a couple more cubes into his glass, followed by one last splash of Dewars. We waited for an explanation. It was a rare moment. He looked down the line at the seven or so of us seated at the bar, waiting for him to speak. He smirked a smirk that, I thought, was a little bit sinister, and said, "Better that I know more about you than you know about me." He drained his drink, nodded his *good night, gentlemen* nod, and headed out, leaving us all wondering just how much of a dossier he had compiled about each and



every one of us as we sat here every night, getting loaded and telling story after story. We never trusted the shifty bastard after that.

Moral of the story: Beware the quiet ones.

So I would have been justified to be a tad wary of tall and taciturn Tomas, our 951 keeper, but I kinda forgot to be.

The manager, a dark-haired, prime-of-life woman, was kind of hanging out by the end of the bar, easily overseeing what little there was to oversee. She was quite casual, but perhaps her presence was daunting Tomas and keeping him from rattling off dirty limericks in a squeaky voice. Perhaps not.

We asked her about the enter-through-Dante's thing. She said they get phone calls from people asking where they moved to, or if they were still open, or just plain *how the hell do I get in there?* She didn't seem like she really wanted to talk about it.

Jan, as usual, was checking out the menu. It had whole numbers without decimals. When a restaurant does that, you better break out some sturdy

plastic to cover your dinner check. They eschew the stupid .99 crap because the one-less-dollar illusion is meaningless at this point. Some people think it matters whether the burger is \$4.99 or \$5.50, but when the Prime Rib is \$48, well, who fucking cares about the cents.

The thing that flipped me out was that the prices for the beef -- as marvelous as I'm told it is -- did not include anything else! If you want asparagus, add \$7. Feel like a baked potato? (You don't look like one. Ha.) That will be another \$7, please. In the mood for some Truffled Macaroni & Smoked Gouda? Ching up \$8 more, Lenore. Soup \$8. Salad \$10. Dayummmm!

On busy nights, these servers can rake in some *bucks*. A party of four could easily run close to \$500 with drinks and desserts. A 20% tip off that is a c-note. Six parties in your four-to-eleven shift would pocket you some nice loot.

IF you could get that many people to find the place. So far on this night, they seemed to be more on *go-home-with-30-or-get-cut-early* pace.

We decided to cut *ourselves* early and get on with a little lighter hopping. The final 50 was underway!

Addendum:

There is a stairway now at the back corner of the West Marine building that leads up to the mezzanine from Caroline. I wouldn't be surprised if it was there when West Marine opened. If it was, nobody seemed to know about it. Whatever...