

Bar Hoppin' With Hops
The Keep On Hoppin' Tour
Hops MacBarley's Ongoing
Key West Bar Boondoggle

Bar 221:

Johnny Rockets

217 Duval Street

Friday, July 18, 7:00 PM

Yeungling (bottle) \$1.00 HH!!

America does *love* its cheeseburgers, right? If you asked 10 people if they liked cheeseburgers, a number of them would tell you that they do. If you asked 100 people, you'd get an affirmative response from a definite percentage. If you ask 1000, you need to get a life, dude.

Yeah, yeah, cheeeeseburrrgerrrrs. Though I fervently hope I am never in a situation where I am offered a "Last Meal", mine would be a big, fatty, juicy, bacon cheeseburger with a heap of hot skinny fries. Steak? Nahhh, not quite as slurpy good. Lasagna? Mmmmm, a good 'zag is a close second, but 'zag can be unpredictable; too much ricotta cheese and it drops out of the top 10. But a fresh-off-the-grill, medium-rare, half-pound of piping hot angus under a melted slab of cheddar... ohhhh, yeahhhh. Slap on some mayo, crunch down that leaf o' lettuce -- you can stick that tomato slice between your buttocks, warden -- and let me at my burger!

So, restaurants that feature the burger seem to have a good focus. If weakass versions of pseudo-beef at McD's and BK can sell by the billions, a goooooood burger should be an eatery's golden ticket.

For about a decade, a place called Cheeseburger Key West occupied this Duval Street address. It was Hop #173 as you surely recall. [Feel free to review your notes.] It closed down a little more than a year ago. A cheeseburger restaurant going out of business? Mind-boggling to a burger fiend like myself. I can't say I ate there very much, though. Just once, actually. Price was a tad high and quality was a tad low. I don't mind having a sub-par burger at fast-food prices, but if I'm paying over ten bucks, it better kick ass.

So, CKW closed, and what opened up next door? Yup, Burger Fi (#198), with a whole



slew of natural ingredients and impressive combinations of beef, buns, and you-name-it. They had the usual KW opening night rush and have done a tepid business since. Now, along comes Johnny Rockets, a freaking GIANT in the burger world. They have more than 300 franchises: in 30 states, 25 foreign countries, and 13 different cruise ship lines. They are, I know you're about to say it, ubiquitous. U-bi-qui-freaking-tous.



They overhauled CKW's former home and burst onto Duval in a flash of white paint, white uniforms, and white hats. Burger Fi musta been psyched.

Trouble is, as Hops sees it, if one burger place was doing just *ehhh-OK*, then how does splitting that market help either one? Half of *ehhh-OK* ain't too good.

So, with these two similar venues juxtaposed, what might help you choose? Yup, THE BAR. The best brew-quaffing options and experience might just tip the scale.

B-Fi, as you remember, had some issues on our visit there. It was a good-sized bar, but we went on just their second night in business and they had some bumps in their road that needed flattening -- not least of which was price.

Rocket's has one of the tiniest bars in K-Dub. The Smallest Bar (#73) might actually be bigger, but that is solely a bar, so this is no threat to its claim. This JR's bar sits where Cheeseburger Key West's bar *should* have sat. CKW did have a five-seater tucked back behind the building, but they also had this nook in the front, on the west wing, that would surely have lured more drinkers in IF they had ever opened the damn place up. I watched that nook for months, waiting for my chance to hop it, but it never happened. Sigh.

Until now!

Mr. Rocket must have looked at it like I do. It's a sweet people-watching spot, and, let's face it, not every likes to sit at a table and eat. There are bar-sitters like myself that will take the high stool over the low bench every time.



But food was not in the plan on this summer evening. B&J and I came here directly from Shameless, steadfastly passing right by The Lazy Gecko and its siren call. We were a focused trio.

We made a couple of quick observations as soon as we arrived. First, we'd be sitting in the shade! JR's is on the sunny side of Duval, so I kind of expected to be getting some hot pre-sunset rays. Turns out, though, that Shorty's, next door, blocks enough of those rays to keep the bar area in cool shade.

The second observation was the barkeep. He was tall but was a bit hunched over his task, so he didn't look that tall. His long white hair was tied into a long ponytail that



hung down to his shoulder blades. It didn't seem like he was having a very good evening; his expression was dour and his mood was sour, despite it being Happy Hour.

We settled onto three of the four red padded barstools -- soda fountain style, of course -- and waited patiently and pleasantly to be served. We gave our tender an affable greeting, asking him how he was doing and such. He had a bit of grunt in his replies, but by the time he came back to us with Brian's Coors Light

and my Yuengling, he had warmed up a good bit. We inquired about Happy Hour and he informed us, with something close to a smile, that it was: "Two dollars for the Coors Light, and one dollar for the Yuengling."

Ding ding ding ding ding!! ONE DOLLAR!!! ONE **DOLLARRRRRRR!!** Happy Hops, happy Hops, happy happy happy Hops.

Brian asked, "What time does HH go till?"

The keep gave us a wary look and said, "Six till close -- if I like you."

North Carolina was the barman's home, he said, and I think he said he had been here about a year. We asked him his name and said a bit slyly, "That depends on if you're law enforcement or not."

Jan assured him that we were not.

"Then my name's Mike."

What if we said we were?

"Clyde."

Mike-Clyde had to go attend to some server's orders then. I imagine that much of his night is taken up with frozen drinks, root beer floats, and desert-like concoctions. We



were a breeze: nothing is easier than a bottle of beer, unless you don't have an opener.

We took our time with our beers. Duval Street walked and rolled by. There were not a lot of people to watch. Tourists were off elsewhere touring whatever they tour in the summertime. Sunset was also imminent, so whatever visitors were in the Southernmost City this evening were probably down at Mallory, over at Fort Zack,

or enjoying HH in one of KW's 200+ bars. This bar was three-quarters full, but it felt like we had it to ourselves (which, in fact, we did).

I ordered up a second dollar-Gling, just on principle, grabbed a plastic cup, and we bid Clyde a good evening. I suppose we could have gotten some food to check out the famous burger, but, well, beer was our biznizz.

ADDENDUM: Autumn, 2015

If you never stopped by to check this place out, forget it, opportunity lost. Gotta admit I was only there once myself. Johnny R has closed. Bye-bye, thanks for playing.