

## HAPPY HOUR AT THE ABBRACCIO

The evening began on a somewhat surreal note as I joined the revelers in what I took to be the non-smoking room at Abbraccio. Unfamiliar with the venue as I was, having only dined there once previously before a roaring fire in the Siciliano Room, I was a trifle disoriented and not entirely soigné.

But I immediately warmed up as a lovely serving girl in lederhosen and a dirndl offered me a platter full of appetizers, Shrimp Caesar Garlic Wraps in Voodoo Sauce I believe she called them. Made me feel right at home. Didn't want to make a pig of myself so I only took three to eat on the premises and stuffed the other half dozen in my pockets to ingest at a later date.

I was loading my plate with canapés at the sumptuous buffet and trying to decide between the diet 7-Up and the Hooper's Ruby Port when an officious woman, short, with a rather pinched and officious look came up and introduced herself as Nora and wondered who the hell I was.

'Well, I replied modestly, 'I'm merely the neighborhood legend.'

She gave me a wicked, supercilious stare, which, if not the actual legendary evil eye, was a pretty reasonable facsimile.

'You know, um, Bender.'

An icy silence.

'The guy Cassidy makes such a big deal about.'

'Well, Mr. um Bender, I regret to inform you that this is a PRIVATE party for a select group from the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. Are you familiar with the UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA?'

'Why yes,' I responded, with an ingratiating grin. 'Yes of course. In fact, I am myself an alumnus of the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. MS. TESOL, 1991.'

I figured this would go a long way toward breaking the ice and thawing the frozen stalagmite which appeared to be lodged up her bum. I mean, the Olde School ties, fellow denizens of the groves of academe and what not, but she merely hissed and grunted and shoved off to welcome another partygoer and shoo out the skateboard kids who were doing wheelies off the buffet table.

At this point I began to have doubts. Was I in fact in the wrong pew? Something about her manner subtly indicated that my name, such as it is, hadn't rung any bells and that I just might have intruded by accident on a jolly get together which was NOT the one I had been expecting.

I hastily retired to the men's room, clutching my diet 7-Up and my canapés, looked in the mirror, drew out my comb and gave my hair the old Wolfowitz spit-polish treatment, gulped down several Valiums and a 'lude, and headed out to find the warm welcome which I HAD in fact been expecting.

The barroom was practically deserted, except for a despondent looking fellow with several days' worth of whiskers draped over the bar. Turned out of course to be Cassidy, who apparently had been whiling away the lonely hours with martinis and bar wine from the notorious ceramic barfing chicken. I wondered where all the mad throng was that I had heard about, and my tumultuous welcome, but as he turned and linked his blood-shot eyes with mine my heart leaped within me.

'Dude, he stammered.

'Dude,' I said. 'Sweet,' he countered.

'Sweet,' I affirmed.

We exchanged the secret UC Neighbors List handshake and he motioned me to the bar.

'Whash yer pleashure?' he slurred. He had quite obviously been drinking for several days.

I gestured with my diet 7-Up and queried, 'Where are the joyous throngs?'

He gestured expansively and knocked over a ceramic chicken which smashed to bits on the floor.

'Pashience,' he stuttered. 'They be here shoon. Have a lil drinkie.'

I seated myself decorously at the bar, being careful to leave an empty stool between us. I took a swig from my diet 7-Up and tried to avoid the bartender's glance.

'So,' I repeated. 'The joyous throngs -- you led me to believe there would be quite a party going on here. And where's yer little Banana Fishie?'

Several large glutinous tears dripped from his bloodshot eyes.

'Mah baby done left me,' he sobbed, and broke into a cracked tenor: 'Mah baybee done parked by Coonshkin Crik with someone else ... and I feel like homemade shit'

At that instant the barroom door swung open and the joyous throng burst in.

'Bartender, drinks for everybody in the house!' bellowed a large woman, a real estate agent of some sort by the looks of her.

'Gimme another martini,' said Cassidy, looking pleased. 'Only thish time staken, not shirred.'

There were tumultuous introductions all round as the gang put in their drink orders -- a Luminous Robot, an Armadillo Fettucine Grande with a lemon twist, a Swinging Lesbian Gin Patootie, several malt whiskeys and a few beers.

Then the bartender turned to me with his piercing gaze and said, 'OK buddy, order up. What'll it be?'

I had not come unprepared, and I ordered a Shirley Temple with a devil-may-care flourish. It came with more maraschino cherries than I had remembered, and the dash of Tabasco sauce was an innovative flourish, something more au courant than I had remembered from my drinking days, but nobody seemed to notice and I downed one quickly and asked for another, which I nursed rather more slowly.

Our gracious host, Rogerioio Escalante, put out several platters of delicacies and soon the party was 'wilding', as I believe the term is, at full tilt.

There were UC Villagers of all shapes and sizes, some whose names were familiar to me from their long wearisome tirades on the email discussion list. Lawyers, dentists, chimney repairmen, roofers, historical preservationists, all chattering merrily about the difficulty of finding good servants these days and complaining about the spam on AOL.

Presently Escalante ('call me 'Rogerioio') brought out the pièce de résistance, a new entree called simply and grandly 'Portobello Stacks.' Apparently Cassidy, a sometime vegan, had been bitching about the level of cholesterol in the famous Abbraccio brunches, and this was the elegant Abbraccio solution.

It was an actual 3-inch stack of Portobello mushrooms, about the size of medium pancakes, surrounded with delicate little scoops of mashed potatoes.

Being a Mennonite, accustomed to the coarse daily peasant fare of scrapple, turnips, roast beef, legumes, and scrapple, and unused to the elite style of gourmandise and savoir-faire which prevails over at the 'Italian Scallion', I cannot do justice to this dish in mere words. Suffice it to say that it melted on the tongue.

Several hours later as the gang was well liquored, and I myself was on my fourth Shirley Temple, we all staggered out onto the balcony, or 'Il Porchetto', where our genial host had arranged several tables so that we could watch the sunset over Calvary Methodist Church, which was odd because it was by now well past midnight, and I began to 'loosen up', that is to say, lose some of my instinctual Mennonite reserve and 'party down'.

I found myself suddenly sprawled in the lap of a well-endowed but congenial Samoan lady whom, as I apologized and righted myself, proved to be a travelling real estate speculator, just in town for a few months to buy up several dozen houses on the lucrative Philadelphia market.

Whether it was the potent effect of the Portobello shrooms kicking in, or, as I began to suspect, that the bartender had spiked my drink with Tequila, I became more and more effusive as the evening wore on, sharing stories with my island enchantress of my travels in the Pacific and listening raptly as she regaled me with tales of coming of age in Samoa and dancing the night away in the Tiki Tiki room.

There were so many other guests and so much noise that I could not meet each of the revelers personally and have the face to face chat that I had been longing for. Bruce Andersen was there in his Boy Scout drag with two young boys who kept darting under the table and lapping up the spilt martinis.

I was pleased to finally make the acquaintance of J. Cass, Esq., who came in late in a three piece suit and whom at first I mistook for a life insurance salesman. In fact, at times the porch seemed to be knee-deep in lawyers, for example the elegant Karen Allen, whom I understand is working undercover with the KGB these days. Or perhaps it was the State Department. Truthfully I found it increasingly difficult to keep people's identities straight as the night wore on and more and more guests arrived.

At dawn, most of the partygoers were sacked out under the tables, although Cassidy was still going strong and exhibiting his remarkable Melani Lamond impression, which consists primarily of talking incessantly at nonstop speed about those damn spam filters at AOL and the wisdom of nude bathing over at 'The Pool.' By dawn the sun was coming up and I myself was a spent force.

As I staggered across Baltimore Avenue I thought to myself, Golly that was keen. Have to do it again sometime, perhaps even on a weekly basis. Only next time I promise to limit myself to four drinkies, in the good old Penn tradition.

**--Ross Bender**