

Tongue in Cheek: Dining Out

There are many things that straight folks never have to think about. Like who's going to be top and who's going to be bottom. Or whether to put a rainbow decal or a Human Rights Campaign equal sign on the bumper of your car. Or how to behave when you're dining out.

This last issue is something that would never even cross the mind of our straight counterparts. If a guy is with a girl on a date, or a husband is with his wife, nary an eyebrow is raised in any restaurant they go into. They can hold hands, look googly-eyed at each other, and even (within the bounds of decorum) kiss affectionately, and the reaction will generally be "Oh, how sweet."

But put a gay couple on a date into a suburban Cracker Barrel restaurant, and you've got a whole different circumstance. There can be stares and, worse,

kevin isom

when you get home, do you feel like a war veteran with post-traumatic stress syndrome? At a minimum, I find that I'm on a heightened state of alert during such circumstances (alert level fuschia, tangerine, or the dreaded aubergine, depending on the severity of the situation - Tom Ridge would have been proud), even though I consciously try not to modulate my behavior beyond the

group, no one feels self-conscious about being different from the other diners. Some, like Atlanta's Big Gay Supper Club, take over an entire restaurant.

Part of the appeal of the dinner clubs is that they provide another alternative to gay bars for meeting others. And most people enjoy eating and conversation, both of which you can't really find in a bar. (Well, eating food, anyway.)

And older gays enjoy eating and conversation, too, as I discovered recently in Ft. Lauderdale, when I happened upon a restaurant called Chardee's Dinner Club. It's not exactly a dinner club like the ones I've already mentioned, though in a way I suppose it is. Chardee's is billed as Fort Lauderdale's oldest gay restaurant. I think they may have meant the clientele as well as the age of the business. When we walked in, it was like entering an episode of the Golden Boys. There were groups and couples and singles all around - nary a non-silver hair in the bunch. And it was charming. These were retired gays having a grand old time.

One night (we went more than once), there was a pianist-singer who kept the crowd dancing. I hadn't seen anyone do the jitterbug in ages, and these couples could really move. I'm even fairly certain I witnessed a couple doing the Charleston. They were having such fun, I suddenly felt really good about the idea of growing older and retiring someday. (But note: Will there be anyone in our age group who even knows how to do the jitterbug at retirement? It seems to me that disco dancing might feel a little out of place at Chardee's.) Another evening, there was karaoke at the bar, which started promptly at 9 PM. And not a song past 1964 was sung by anyone.

It was just another night at the dinner club. Dining out, gay style. ▼

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Put a gay couple on a date into a suburban Cracker Barrel restaurant, and you've got stares and physical safety issues.

physical safety issues. (You're still stuck on the gay guys on a date at Cracker Barrel, aren't you? Okay, to suspend your disbelief, let's make it an Applebees. There are gays in the suburbs or in smaller towns or rural areas, after all.)

No matter how out you consider yourself to be, don't you find that when you're in the suburbs, or on a road trip, or if you live in a smaller city or rural area - don't you find that you change your behavior? You're more like "buddies" instead of boyfriends or partners. Gal-pals, instead of spit-swapping, name-sharing lesbian womyn.

If you do, do you feel bad for doing it? If you don't,

norm for me. (My theory is, of course, that if I don't expose these straight suburbanites to gay couples, then who will!?)

Maybe it's that discomfort that has led in part to a spreading phenomenon in the gay community: the gay supper club. Around the country over the last several years, gay supper clubs have been springing up - from L.A. to Atlanta to Oklahoma City. These are organized groups of gay folks who meet at a restaurant and take the radically OUT step of ... having dinner together. Granted, they typically choose places a little more upscale than a Cracker Barrel, but there is safety in numbers, and when you're in a big

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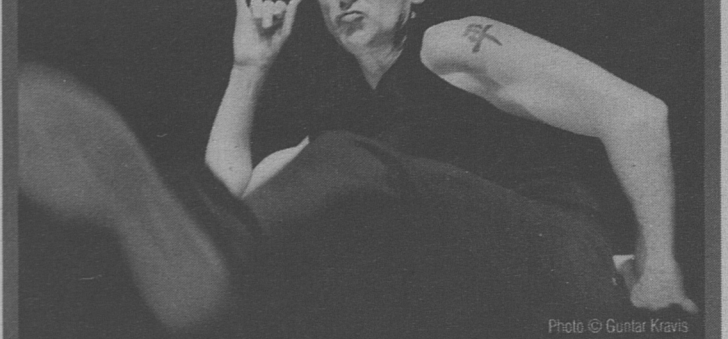


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(Philadelphia City Paper)

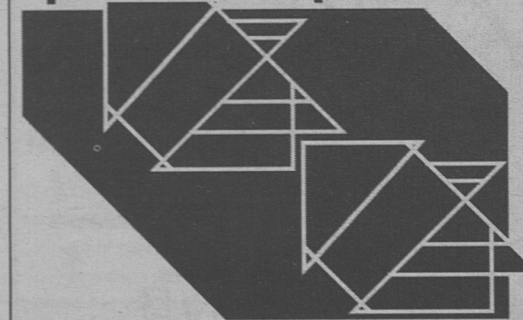
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