

Four Meals at the Toughest Strip Club in Los Angeles

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MONDAY

Carmen slams her rump down on the stage and says that the barbecue chicken pizza is her favorite. Sublime is playing overhead, a clear indicator that we're having this conversation in a strip club in Southern California. It's two in the afternoon in downtown Los Angeles, the midday sun oppressive on warehouses and garment factories loading docks bearing names of fruit vendors. This is Sam's Hofbrau, the last survivor of an old restaurant chain gone under, its neon sign retaining the brew-hefting German but now advertising TOPLESS and DANCERS and COCKTAILS. I'd wanted to check the place out after I'd heard the kind of gruesome LA story that drew me to the city in the first place: a late-night argument at the club a few months earlier ended with two men crushed against the exterior brick by a BMW driven by one Terrence Meeks. Legs were lost. This isn't just a strip club—it's a crime scene.

This crime scene happens to feature some nice lunch specials. It's an all-hours hangout for guys working construction. Both UPS and the LAPD have big centers nearby, and the boys in blue and brown are often around getting a burger and a beer before heading home. A DJ provides running commentary every afternoon, at times cajoling the men to put some money on the stage or to buy a lap dance, a steal at ten bucks. He also hawks the food. "If you're just here for the boobies, you are missing out on some serious *sabor*," he says. The specials are for \$5 for tacos, sliders, wings, the chicken salad, or a club sandwich. The menu features an extensive beer list and four wines.

The waitress says it's all right for me to hang my purse on the bars flanking her stand. "It's not busy," she says. "It'll get crazy at night, though." At night, it gets too packed with patrons to move down the aisles around the stage; one evening, a man stepped on her foot hard enough to tear her toenail right off. She doesn't work nights anymore. "There's too much drama," she says.

I order the tacos with a margarita, guacamole, and a beer. Sam's house margarita tastes like a particular variety of green gelatin served in hospitals, but the beer is icy cold. Food arrives all at once: thick, house-made corn chips with salsa, and a guacamole the consistency of toothpaste that begs for half a lime. The beef tacos feature nubs of meat tucked in with fresh onion and cilantro on two soft corn tortillas with a kicky verde sauce, the meat spilling out onto the Styrofoam plate. A third plate bears enough batter-dipped mozzarella sticks to construct a Lincoln Logs cabin; they are consumed greedily and fast while I watch the stage, the fried cheese and swinging asses and spandex stretched to its neon limit all mixing to create an

experience of decadence that I have never known.

One of the girls climbs to the top of the pole and pushes off the laser-light machine, turning a slow arc down. Carmen squats on the table in one of the booths with five hollering military boys as the chef walks by, hefting a sneeze guard over his head. He places it on a table set up near the door, where, earlier, the bouncer asked me twice on my arrival if I was carrying pepper spray. “The valet has it,” I said. “I would have to go get it from the valet.” The bouncer frowns and gives my companion a pat-down he’d have to pay ten bucks for inside. It’s pretty standard for the downtown strip club scene, which includes the full-nude Spearmint Rhino nearby, Déjà Vu across the street from the train station, and Exotic City, with current job openings listed on its website for both “nude dancer” and “club manager.” The dearth of metro stations combined with long stretches of road without so much as a lit storefront makes short work of any charm that might otherwise find downtown LA, a city center that largely powers down at sunset, ensuring that all but the most tenacious old stalwart strip clubs confine themselves to neighborhoods where people actually live.

“They don’t let us in the kitchen, they’re all, ‘Y’all don’t have hairnets,’” Carmen says later, suggesting I stay for the buffet. “This place used to be a family restaurant,” she says. “They’ve got a pizza oven back there, a deep-fryer, everything.” You can almost imagine this place as a family-friendly, if windowless, establishment; the roped-off booths are crowned with hurricane lamps that would fit in fine at any red-light-district Applebee’s, and a few men are sitting alone at four-top tables as if waiting for their wives and kids to return from the bathroom.

Carmen shuts down all attempts at conversation about rough nights at the club. I want to know if any of the guys from the BMW/brick-wall fracas have come back. She says they’re not allowed to talk about it. “It’s an ongoing investigation,” she explains. She surely won’t talk about Conrad Murray either—the doctor who prescribed propofol for Michael Jackson was drinking hard at the Hofbrau a few hours before he killed the King of Pop.

At four p.m., the chef wheels out steaming trays of meat and beans, hot dogs floating in their boiled water. I fish a dog out with tongs and go back to my stool by the bar to watch a girl named Cleo do pull-ups on the horizontal bar above the stage. Later, she tells me that the carne asada tacos are her favorite and I tell her that her nipples look like tiny thimbles.

The Los Angeles skin trade has to work its way through reams of blue laws. (The city’s recent Measure B required porn actors to wear condoms, and sent much of the industry packing to Nevada.) At clubs, the girls have to be covered up, top and bottom, if booze is sold, except in certain areas. Carmen points to center stage. “I can take my top off there,” she says, “but not on this pole here. And I have to wear two pairs of bottoms at all times.” She gives me her number. My companion offers one of the other girls a mozzarella stick, which she gladly accepts. “These are my favorite,” she says, licking her fingers and getting back to work.

TUESDAY

Happy hour means three-dollar Tecates and a bar crammed with clean-cut young men with their

backs to the stage. I text Carmen to ask her if she's working tonight. She writes back: *who is this*. When I say I'm the girl writing the food article, she says, *Oh hi and no I'm not*. I tell her that I want to buy her dinner sometime and she writes, *Awww thanks see u soon*. I have the immediate and distinct feeling that I will never see Carmen again.

The four girlfriends I've brought to the club for happy hour immediately set to kicking back whiskeys and beers and throwing bucks at the stage, but the girls on the clock are decidedly less comfortable. "I feel like I'm naked," one of them says, holding her purse protectively over her bikini. "You're beautiful," three of us say in unison. She likes the chicken wings and the pizza but, touching her flat belly, claims she needs to lose weight. "Jesus Christ," one of us says in argument.

This afternoon's free buffet is pasta and meatballs, featuring the kind of bloated spaghetti you might find at a college dorm or a nursing home. The bouncer says that if I'm writing about food, I shouldn't fuck around with the buffet. "Get the pizza," he says. "You can't beat free," I say. "That's why I'm standing here," he says, forking a meatball from his tray. He's taking a tour of the Capitol in DC next week. "Write your congressman," he says. "You'd be surprised."

Back at the table, the girls have ordered another round and the appetizer platter. It's a fried affair—zucchini, french fries, more cheese. The stuffed jalapeños bring a nice heat that pairs well with cold beer and Xanax. On stage, Priscilla in the red strappy tube dress is the most athletic but Desire does a hypnotic crab move that draws the table in. Singles are tucked prim into thongs and over bra straps. Cleo keeps her cash placed like pasties under her fishnet top. I change out at the bar and talk to another cocktail waitress. "I don't work nights," she says, shrugging. Happy hour is crazy enough.

My girlfriends tip the stage like they're up there themselves. Most of the other patrons are absorbed in the game on TV or happy to sit back and watch the slow rain of singles peeled off hidden stacks within our purses. Desire comes by and sits with us, squirming a little in jean cutoffs that cover little more than I could with my palm. She likes the barbecue chicken pizza as well—she says she'll share a slice—but her favorite is the barbecue chicken quesadilla, which she drenches in the club-made verde salsa. "I eat like a stoner," she laughs. I buy my friend her first lap dance and the two head for the corner.

On stage, it's Julie's birthday. The girls pull a chair up against the pole and eight of them commence to grinding and light spanking, sitting three to a lap and talking to the birthday girl, who smiles gamely and pats the various butts. One of the men throws a stack of money in the air and we all *Ooooh* over it like fireworks. The barbecue chicken pizza arrives in the form of a pepperoni pizza, but we don't send it back; everyone is being so kind.

Sahara arrives and says that someone has bought us a table dance and so we clear away our beers and empty plates. I edge over to the side so she can stand on my chair to stand on the table, the structural integrity of which I doubt. Sahara wraps her legs around us one by one and says she doesn't leave the club until she makes \$200, excluding food, which she has to buy but tries not to on account of her ass being so big. She smells like Dream Angels body powder and I smell like an ambulatory pepperoni. My friend returns from her dance and waxes

eloquent about how Desire's labia made crescent shadows beneath the second thong under her cutoff shorts and how careful the woman was to keep covered until the end, when she popped half a nipple above her bra's cup, though whether the move was in playful defiance of the law or the result of an errant piece of wardrobe was not clear.

Another dancer sits down for a few minutes while we determine if any cash remains among the five of us. She says that she wasn't working that night back in March, but she worked the night after and the place was dead. "It gets pretty hood here at night," she says. "Mostly blacks against Mexicans." She tells me her work name and her real name, and suggests I go to the nearby Dames and Games—a topless sports-bar-and-grill franchise owned by the Spearmint Rhino— if I'm really interested in good food. It becomes clear that our singles are gone and we're all going to have to stumble blearily into the too-bright afternoon. "I'm gonna go get drunk as fuck and watch the Dodgers," says the dancer, gathering her purse. "I'll come back and dance if we win."

WEDNESDAY

I've memorized the route I take to the club, adding it, along with the library and my dentist, to the short list of places I can find without a map in Los Angeles. César at the bar informs me that PBR is three dollars; I order one for me and one for my boyfriend and throw another three dollars on the stage for the dancer pulling herself to the top of the pole. From the kitchen I order steak, medium-rare, and fries. It's early again, barely afternoon, and the tables are empty. Two guys are bellied up to the stage with their bottled beers. The girl from the stage comes by and thanks me effusively for the three bucks. It's hard up there with everyone watching, she says. Her name is Xiomara and she's been working at the Hofbrau since June. "My benefits should be kicking in any day now," she quips.

We get to talking. I order a pizza for her and a girl in an American-flag bikini. We both wrote for our high school newspapers. She's close to a business psychology degree and almost twenty-four and about to go on a road trip with her girlfriends. On stage, a woman breaks a nail and picks at it, frowning. "Don't be a hero," one of the patrons at the bar shouts at her, for reasons unclear. My companion loses interest and decamps to receive a dance from a punk vegan named Shiloh.

(Later, on the drive home, he catches me up: the vegan can order from the kitchen if she makes very specific requests of the chef; that she identifies as a goth, not a punk, but the goth makeup didn't go over so well with the black light; that when he started asking about the brawl in March, she referred to it as "the de-legging," as in, "We're not allowed to talk about the de-legging.")

The food arrives on its standard Styrofoam. The steak is a fist of gristle, unyielding to plastic cutlery; I finally hack off a slice and take a piece of the plate with it. The Mediterranean pizza is fine, featuring a pesto sauce and dotted with spinach and onions and also bell peppers for some reason. Xiomara picks off the vegetables and leaves them in a pile on her plate. She

orders a drink called the Adios Motherfucker, which includes vodka, rum, tequila, gin, Blue Curacao, sweet and sour mix, and 7-Up, and looks like something you'd find in a bottle of hand sanitizer. "It's all the rage in Paris," she says, taking a sip and offering me some.

Two songs pass. She's been taking pole classes and wants to become brave enough to turn upside down onstage. "The vegan is taking all of my boyfriend's money," I say. We get out our phones and trade pictures of our moms and cousins and her man, who works at Pinkberry and was pissed about the dancing job until he figured out that the money is good and it doesn't affect her otherwise. She tells me how table dances are usually \$20 but her game is to sit with the guys long enough to build a rapport and then claim she likes them so much, she's giving them a dance for free. "There's fifty bucks on the table every time," she says. "Every time." She's having her birthday party at the club and is going to bring in cupcakes and her best girlfriends and get fucked up and dance all night and will I come and of course I will come, yes.

The girls go off to make some money and I get a box for the pizza. I order another beer and watch the scrolling sidebar on ESPN promising me trade news for teams I don't follow. On the stage, a dancer saunters over to the guys sitting nearby. One of them nudges his beer forward and she squats down to wrap her ass cheeks around the top of the bottle while he tucks a few dollars into her bikini. She stands back up and he toasts her before taking a long drink.

THURSDAY

Outside the club, a man wearing an ankle monitor is trying to tell the bouncer that some girl inside stole his phone. I'm ready to confront night at the club. It's Xiomara's birthday and I figure I know how to blend in better with the crowd.

At the end of the week I'd give anything to become one of the anonymous guys at the bar, free to have a beer and observe human jiggling and be gracious or cheap on varied whims and eat an entire plate of french fries.

I lead my two male friends to the bar. We edge past a dancer who is collecting fistfuls of cash from a roped-off table and stuffing it into a Ralphs bag, then past the stage, which features no fewer than eight women turning slow circles in their thin range of personal space. At the bar, one of the patrons asks me why I'm all covered up and I say, "Honey, I'm not working tonight," which is a lie. Two broad tables have been set aside and the birthday girl has decorated them with pink paper tablecloths and streamers and a big white-paper mailbox with a slot on top for birthday well-wishes in the form of money. I buy her an Adios Motherfucker and she wraps her legs around me. They are very cold.

I've promised my friends dinner but they're more interested in the cupcakes, which are from a place called Hansen's on Fairfax. Eventually they order burgers and a shrimp cocktail and another round of beer. We're sharing the birthday table with five regulars, all of whom are drinking beers and tipping anyone who gets on a table. Xiomara pulls herself up on the bars above us. She's wearing the requisite two pairs of bottoms and a bikini top and a fishnet body stocking that covers her from neck to ankles with a wide mesh. Another girl sits on my lap. "I saw you in the bathroom," she says. "You looked so squeezable." Her name is Trouble and

she has no thoughts on the food. “I love Trouble!” shouts one of the guys across the table. “You know how a Lamborghini pulls up beside you at the light, and you’re just like, ‘Damn’? That’s Trouble.” The DJ reminds patrons that both ATMs are in fine working order. (Incidentally, in 2010 the *LA Times* found that more than \$12,000 from the state’s Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program had been pulled—by the qualified heads of said needy families, we assume—out of strip-club ATMs across the state between 2007 and 2009. Some of the cash was pulled from these very finely working machines.)

The night goes sideways. Someone tucks a dollar into the bikini bottom of a girl kneeling to clean off one of the tables. A woman puts her hands on one of my friends and her male companion says either, “Excuse my wife,” or “Hey, that’s my wife,” the true phrase lost in the club music, which has gotten perceptibly louder. A man by the stage plunges his hands down a girl’s bikini bottoms and she rolls away, flipping him off. Women stretch the length of the table, they swing from the bars. The burgers arrive and the lettuce is crisp and the cheese melted over the tough patties. I can’t eat them fast enough despite the fact that everything is very difficult to swallow, and when a fat slug of blue cheese lands on the back of my hand I bow my head and suck it off. A man points at a girl on the table and yells over to me, “SMACK THAT ASS,” and I yell back, “I WILL SMACK IT WITH PERMISSION.”

Xiomara’s girlfriends ask me to watch their Adios Motherfuckers while they go to the bathroom and I’m left with the abandoned shrimp cocktail, the shrimp splayed open and overcooked, clustered meekly around a plastic ramekin of cocktail sauce. One of the old former regulars has been lecturing me on the merits of the downtown strip club scene, how the very charm of this place is in the distance you can put between yourself and your family, how the drive down Alameda gets your blood going even if you haven’t been there in years, even if the McDonald’s on the corner is new and the girls all look the same but are actually different from the girls years ago, completely different, those old girls gone on to better things or at least other things. “You get out of here and go back to normal life,” he says. “Go back to work. Or at least I do.”