Food

The mid-winter feast

Juicy burgers and cheap beer: cold weather comfort food

It's not a speakeasy anymore, but Chumley's still serves homebrewed beer. Michael Schrader

By JOSHUA M. BERNSTEIN

Over the past several years, the unassuming Corner Bistro (331 W. Fourth St., (212) 242-9502) has risen to an almost mythical status as the late-night burger and beer destination. Strategize all you want, but there's never really a "good" time to go — late afternoon is as packed as early evening is as packed as late at night. Some hearty souls are willing to wait on line for 45 minutes just to have the $4 Bistro burger (arguably the best burger in New York) and a $2 mug of McSorley's. But as the temperatures dip again, it's worth revisiting all those other burger-and-beer places that offer just as unpretentious and warm an atmosphere — without the front door constantly opening and slamming shut as patrons enter, take one look at the super-long line, and leave, as happens at the Bistro every night.

McHale's
750 Eighth Ave. (corner of 46th Street)
(212) 997-8885
Hours: Mon.-Fri. noon-midnight, Sat.-Sun. 4 p.m.-midnight

"We go through more than 1,000 pounds of meat a week," says owner Jimmy McHale. "Everyone comes here for the burgers." This Theater District mainstay exists in a WWII time warp, with smoke-stained lamps brightening the wooden interior. McHale's offers a full Italian menu, but the sauerkraut and locals tend to stick to a time-honored favorite: the bacon cheeseburger ($8.75, with fries and fixings). The secret is simple: "We use fresh chopped meat and our portions are large," McHale says.

Most crowded: Right before and after Broadway shows.

Fanelli Café
94 Prince St. (corner of Mercer Street)
(212) 226-9412
Hours: Sun.- Wed. 10:30 a.m.-2 a.m., Thurs.-Sat. 10:30 a.m.-4 a.m.

In a neighborhood overrun by expensive diners and subterranean, celeb-friendly kitchens, Fanelli Café is a great big breath of smoke-filled air. "It's one of the last 'bar' bars left in the area," says a Fanelli's bartender named Delia. The factory-worker clientele that populated the place since its opening in 1847 has, of course, been replaced by artists, European tourists, and construction workers, but Fanelli's low-key employees still serve dependable fare at the area's most reasonable prices. Favorites include burgers ($7.75) and grilled salmon sandwiches ($10.25) washed down with pints of Stella Artois and Hefeweizen ($5).

Most crowded: Thursday through Sunday.

Puck Fair
298 Lafayette St. (just south of Houston Street)
(212) 431-1200
Hours: 11 a.m.-4 a.m.

Craving burgers and mash with your Guinness? Head to Puck Fair, where famished SoHo shoppers mingle with neighborhood cops. The upstairs of this Irish pub is a warmly lit main loft with exposed brick, wood beams and booths, while the basement is dark and dungeon-like. The menu mixes high- and low-brow fare, featuring both a pate and brie plate ($9) and Guinness-battered fish and chips ($13). Plus, you can attack a gastronomical monstrosity: a full Irish breakfast ($10, available all day). The service is fast, the food is hearty, and the wait staff knows their beer.

Most crowded: Friday nights.

Mug's Ale House
125 Bedford Ave. (Brooklyn, between N. 10th and N. 11th streets)
(718) 384-8494
Hours: Daily 2 p.m.-4 a.m.

Mug's Ale House predates all the Williamsburg hipsters, and it will be there long after they're gone. This roomy, high-ceilinged restaurant boasts an enormous selection of beers from around the world — with a $2 draft special every night. Hamburgers ($6), sesame chicken fingers ($6.50) and the usual nacho/wings/french fries are favorites, while a culinary adventurer can sample the ostrich burger ($6.50). "We're just a friendly bar with great beer and prices that can't be beat," says Todd Powers, Mug's bartender. He speaks the truth.

Most crowded: After 10 p.m. and during big televised sporting events.

Chumley's
86 Bedford St. (between Grove and Barrow streets)
(212) 675-4449
Hours: Sun.-Thurs. 5 p.m.-midnight, Fri.-Sat. 5 p.m.-2 a.m.

"I would put the Chumley burger up against the Bistro burger any day," says a brave Chumley's bartender named Jimmy. It may be a strong boast, but Chumley's is backed by age: this Greenwich Village haunt was once a Prohibition-era speakeasy. The unmarked entrance and worn wooden booths remain, though Chumley's now traffics in a legal trade of burgers and fries ($9.50), 11 homebrewed beers ($5 a pint) and lobsters (market price) with enough sides for a family of four. Framed book jackets on the walls and friendly bartenders keep tourists, the after-work crowd and locals company while they munch succulent hamburgers and mesclun salads with bruschetta ($7.50).

Most crowded: After 8 p.m.

Cedar Tavern
82 University Place (between 11th and 12th streets)
(212) 741-9754
Hours: Daily 8:30 a.m.- 4:00 a.m.

This Village institution is discovered every year by NYU freshmen thrilled to learn that Jack Kerouac hung out here. When the tin-ceiling pub re-opened the day after Sept. 11, grateful yet angry patrons said, "We needed you to be there for us," according to one of the Cedar's long-time bartenders. Suffice it to say that customers come as much for atmosphere as to eat. "We serve elevated bar food with portions that are big, not chunky," bartender Bernie says. Pork chops ($14), half-pound burgers ($6.75) and prime rib ($16.25 full, $11.25 English cut) are big sellers. And with a kitchen open until 3:30 a.m. on the weekends, Cedar Tavern welcomes late-night revelers searching for a bite before bed.

Most crowded: After 9 p.m. and on Fridays.

Hoping for a table — and a burger, and their trademark fries with a fork — at Greenwich Village's Corner Bistro? Don't hold your breath. Michael Schrader

Tavern on Jane
31 Eighth Ave. (corner of Jane Street)
(212) 675-2526
Hours: Mon.-Sun. noon-4 a.m. (Kitchen closes at 11:30 p.m.)

Tavern on Jane probably owes much of its business to Bistro spillover, located as it is across the street. But it's not merely a serviceable option. They have an eclectic menu that includes a grilled yellowfin tuna club ($10.95) and sautéed veal pillard with artichoke hearts ($15.95) along with a full complement of draft beers ($5/pint) and wines. Within reason, Tavern's chefs will prepare items — such as B.L.T. and grilled cheese sandwiches — not on the menu. This neighborhood spot features brick walls and a fireplace, plus crayons for scribbling on the paper tablecloth. Add a candlelit atmosphere and a crowd of artists and architects and you may forget whatsitname across the street. **Most crowded:** Friday nights.

And by the way — brunch is back!

By RACHEL SKLAR

There is never a shortage of excuses for overeating, especially at brunch. But there's definitely been one huge contributing factor to the surge in heaping portions of fattening, cholesterol-laden brunches people have been slamming down with glee: the frigid, frigid weather.

"We do a three-egg omelet — it's huge, with cheese and meat — and it's one of the most popular items," says Jay Savulich, an owner of Grange Hall in the West Village.

Around the corner at Inside (9 Jones St.), the fluffy ricotta pancakes are a Sunday sellout.

Chef Charleen Badman uses whole eggs for the unlikely favorite, but her secret is to separate the eggs and whip up the whites for extra-frothy, fluffy goodness. The egg-ricotta pancake with a sweetly caramelized pear topping — not to mention a hefty dollop of maple syrup — is incredibly rich and decadent.

"I only have one guy who asks for an egg-white omelette," she says.

This doesn't mean New York is no longer a mecca for the fit and firm. Sulit is a multiple-marathon runner and considers the meal an indispensable part of the training regimen. "While I was training, brunch was the one thing that could stay on my social schedule," says Sulit, who carbed up on the big breakfast at the Grey Dog (33 Carmine St.). "I see people there who just got out of Equinox, and they're chowing down without any shame."

Inside's fluffy ricotta pancakes. Steve Hirsch

The new Gramercy Park Hotel bar is cleaner, but less charismatic. Thomas Hooper

The well-worn, old-school bar at the Gramercy Park Hotel was, until very recently, a shambling, glamorous haunt, reminiscent of "The Shining." (In a good way.)

David Byrne, Matt Dillon and Sting were regulars, and the hotel itself was immortalized by Cameron Crowe as a locus of '70s rock and roll debauchery in his 2000 movie "Almost Famous."

By the mid to late '90s, the bar had become a hipster hangout, where skate-rats bumped up against elderly tipplers who looked like they were about to break out a game of canasta any minute.

The bar has just been given a thorough, almost disturbingly clean upgrade; the formerly ratty furniture has been replaced with plush new chairs and tables, and the mysterious, charmingly mediocre live piano player is no more. The grouchy old bartenders have been supplanted by young, cheerful cocktail waitresses who serve single-malt drinks with prices in the double digits.

But it's still worth a visit, especially considering that old habits die hard here: the drink of choice is still the old-fashioned, claims one young server named Nopipo: "I don't think I've ever had an order for one any place else I've worked."

— *Sara Stewart*

The Gramercy Park Hotel: 2 Lexington Ave. at 21st St. (212) 475-4320