

Whitey's Fox and Hounds Irish Pub in Brandon is the real deal

By Wade Tatangelo, Times Correspondent
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Irish bars are my favorite. There are many on the Gulf Coast. I know, because I have spent the bulk of the past decade professionally — and recreationally — drinking my way through Punta Gorda, Sarasota, Bradenton, Palmetto, St. Petersburg and pretty much every neighborhood of Tampa.

Many so-called Irish bars disgrace the title. Others get only certain aspects right about the Emerald Isle "public house" experience. Whitey's Fox and Hounds pretty much nails everything.

Let's start with the setting. It's a cozy, converted cottage that dates to the 1930s and feels transported from owner Tom White's motherland of County Mayo in Ireland. The little wooden bar has about 10 stools, small TVs and a low ceiling that hangs just above your head. Take a step up and you're in the adjoining dining room. Live music is occasionally performed there in a cramped corner.

Five authentic dartboards also provide entertainment. The darts cater to regulars and league players.

Fox has great ambience. The working-class crowd greets strangers with smiles. And then there's White, who is basically at the bar at all times. He's a big, strong, affable man with a red goatee who playfully busts people's chops while putting them at ease.

But for all of the establishment's charms, it's the Irish whiskey and beer selection that makes Fox and Hounds a treasure. The bar serves a staggering 20 Irish whiskeys and all seven Emerald Isle brews.

"I got the best Irish draft beer selection in the state of Florida," White said when I stopped in on a recent Thursday. "We're the only place that serves every beer brewed in Ireland."

Not only do they serve the best Irish beers, they serve 'em in genuine, 20-ounce imperial pints for a measly \$4. The anniversary edition Guinness 250 goes for \$3.50. If you're really hard up for cash and couldn't care less about the whole Irish experience, Pabst Blue Ribbon drafts sell for a dollar.

Sipping from a glass of Powers Gold Label Irish whiskey, I perused the menu and noticed raw oysters. White explained he started serving them recently after learning that it's a traditional Irish custom. For instance, the little sea critters are served at Sean's Bar, which dates to 900 A.D. and is listed as the oldest bar in the world in the *Guinness Book of World Records*.

I sucked down half a dozen (\$4.95). They tasted fresh and went great with a pint of Guinness. I moved on to my heaping Cottage Pie (\$6.95), a wonderfully simple concoction of Guinness-flavored beef, mashed potatoes and cheddar cheese covered in thick Guinness gravy.

A glass of whiskey, a beer, oysters and cottage pie left me feeling utterly sated. Irish pub experiences don't get much better. At least not on this side of the Atlantic.

What's your favorite drinking destination? Contact Barfly columnist Wade Tatangelo at wtatangelo@hotmail.com.

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