

WEEKEND IN NEW YORK SPORTS BARS

Where the Tailgate Party Spirit Rules

By SETH KUGEL

WHAT could be more dreadful than spending a crisp fall Sunday afternoon wandering through Central Park hand-in-hand with your beloved? Nothing, if you're a football fan, and your other beloved, the Philadelphia Eagles, are playing at precisely that time. Let's face it: where you'd really like to be is in front of an equally crisp high-definition television having a cheesesteak.

Shorty's on Ninth Avenue would be an excellent choice, with both screens and cheesesteaks worthy of Philly fans. Or if you're partial to the Redskins, head to Red Sky, a bar on East 29th Street that Skins fans have adopted this season. Patriots fans, crept out by the idea of spending game day around people who pronounce their r's, should head to the Hairly Monk, although you'd better get there during the "NFL Today" pregame show if you want a table.

It doesn't stop there. New York has an endless number of places to watch football, some even qualifying as potential tourist attractions for neutral fans, especially on Saturdays when college alumni groups take over and grown men and women revert to tailgating undergrads.

It is a strange sight, for example, to walk down quiet West 44th off Times Square on a Saturday afternoon when thunderous cheers shatter the calm. Ah, it's Nebraska scoring a touchdown. Step inside the Irish Rogue, and enter another, cornfed world, with more natural blonds anywhere else in New York outside the Swedish consulate.

Even nuttier is watching an Alabama game in the Mercury Bar on the East Side, where the walls are adorned with Crimson memorabilia and the waitresses dress — presumably, much to their chagrin — in Crimson Tide cheerleading outfits. "A little demeaning," said one, in a candid moment.

But if you can't find a spot full of crazy fans (or don't want to), there are plenty of places that show multiple games, often labeling the screens with who's playing. That's the case at the Mercury Bar on Sundays, when



CASEY KELBAUGH FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Alabama football fans at the Mercury Bar in Murray Hill.

WHERE TO GO AT GAME TIME

Shorty's, 576 Ninth Avenue (between 41st and 42nd), (212) 967-3055.

Red Sky, 47 East 29th Street, (212) 447-1820; www.redskynyc.com.

The Hairly Monk, 337 Third Avenue, (212) 532-2929; www.thehairlymonkny.com.

The Irish Rogue, 356 West 44th Street, (212) 445-0131; www.theirishrogue.com.

Mercury Bar, 493 Third Avenue, (212) 683-2645; www.mercurybar.com.

Dalton's, 611 Ninth Avenue, (212) 245-5511; www.daltonsnyc.com.

Village Pourhouse, 64 Third

Avenue (212) 979-2337; www.pourhousenyc.com.

Bounce, 1403 Second Avenue, (212) 535-2183; www.bouncenyc.com.

BB&R, 1720 Second Avenue, (212) 987-5555.

Tonic East, 411 Third Avenue, (212) 683-7090; www.toniccast.com.

Bar XII, 206 East 34th Street, (212) 545-9912; www.bar12.com.

40/40 Club, 6 West 25th Street, (212) 832-4040; www.the4040club.com.

ESPN Zone, 1472 Broadway, (212) 921-3776; www.espnzone.com.

the servers no longer have pom-poms. A calmer spot, especially if you're alone and want to catch a game around Times Square, is Dalton's, a dark-wood-and-pressed-tin bar with an impressive array of screens and a staff amenable to switch the one near you to your game unless things get crowded.

Most of these places have pretty typical burger-and-fries-and-wings menus, but there are some standouts. In the Village Pourhouse — where the screens are plentiful and easy to see and the crowd is big but not (too) uncivilized — the menu offers some

welcome changes. The grilled portobello mushroom sandwich, for instance, is tasty, and the side salad comes with ingredients you won't find at your typical tailgate — grapes and roasted shallot vinaigrette dressing, for example. Perhaps most importantly, the beer choices are vast, bridging the chasm between Bud Light and Belgian lambics with dozens of choices.

You don't even really need to choose your place in advance. There are two areas of Manhattan where men and women in N.F.L. jerseys are more a rule than an exception.

One is Second Avenue on the Upper East Side, where blocks in the 70s and 80s are packed with football fans, from Bounce on Second Avenue at 73rd Street, which has a slick atmosphere, great screens, and tables filled with fans in front of large Washington Monument-like towers of communal beer, to BB&R, where things are calmer, the bartenders friendlier, and the new menu includes excellent paninis. In between, there are places for all tastes: wander down the street and choose the one with your game on the bigger screen or your preferred stop on the calmed-down to beered-up atmosphere continuum.

The other epicenter of football, more convenient to tourists in Midtown, is Murray Hill. Alas, the much beloved but unlikely-named football emporium, the Park Avenue Country Club, has closed, meaning you're unlikely to find a bar obsessed enough to have a television in the bathroom. But little matter, along Third Avenue in the 30s you'll find plenty of choices. Three-level Tonic East is hard to beat for sheer number and quality of televisions. At Bar XII, you get a table speaker called the SoundDog, which allows you to choose the announcing team of your liking, a cool innovation that should be everywhere.

There is one place, alas, that sounds good on paper but should probably be avoided. The hip-hop star Jay-Z's 40/40 Club is billed as the city's ultimate sports bar, with plush private rooms full of pillowed lounging sofas and a cavernous main bar area filled with screens. But the rooms are cheesy, and the mostly tiny televisions in the main bar area have poor picture quality and are attached to poles that seem designed more for writhing strippers than for football.

Ron Berkowitz, a spokesman for the club, did not agree, saying the clarity of the club's TVs is "as good if not better than any other place in the city."

You're better off in the generic but dependable ESPN Zone in Times Square, or, for that matter, even sticking to the original wandering-in-Central Park plan and following the game on your cellphone via espn.com. ■

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