



The Judicial Palate

By Michael L. Sensor, Esquire



Back to that Same Old Place: Libby's Restaurant

*Well, come on
Baby, don't you wanna go?
Come on
Oh, baby don't you wanna go?
Back to that same old place
Sweet home Chicago...*

The Blues Brothers, played by Dan Aykroyd and the late John Belushi, performed this song to a packed house near the end of their eponymous 1980 film. Aykroyd and Belushi were no pikers, doing all of their songs themselves, performing authentic blues with vocal stand-ins. And, indeed, their version of the blues standard “Sweet Home Chicago” is just one of many versions of the original song by the great Mississippi Delta blues musician Robert Johnson.

Johnson left us only 24 recordings of blues songs before his untimely death at the age of 27...but all of those songs are still with us today, and have been covered and re-covered by scores of musicians, great and small. And, there's a strong connection between good old 12-bar blues songs like Johnson wrote, and good old solid food like ribs, hamburgers, catfish, crawdads, corn, and pulled pork. All of these things bring to mind the yearning for the comforts of home and family which old-style blues evokes—a state of mind.

Chicago, the northern terminus of the blues diaspora, is one of those states of mind. The Chicago Loop can be a gritty place, once one gets past the van der Rohe skyscrapers and Picasso sculptures. Intertwined by the ever-screaming El, the Loop is full of unreconstructed, unadorned commercial strips can still be found in Chicago, as they can in a dwindling number of industrial cities across the East. Creatively zoned mixtures of businesses, motels, flophouses, and hole-in-the-wall restaurants are a catalyst for interesting experiences.

In “The Blues Brothers”, Jake and Elwood embark on a quest to reunite their blues band, which had scattered to the winds after Jake was locked up for robbery. After an interlude for a blues song by the great John Lee Hooker, who just happens to be performing on the area, Jake and Elwood find their former saxophonist and guitarist in a small diner in the South Side of Chicago, which also happens to be run by Aretha Franklin. Jake orders four whole fried chickens, Elwood dry white toast, and music ensues.

Places like Aretha's restaurant can be found all over Chicago. Once when I was in Chicago on a six-hour layover between Amtrak trains, I wandered away from Union Station looking for something to eat and ended up in a tiny, greasy joint called Shark's, which offered any seafood you could think of, as long as it was fried: smelts, haddock, cod, trout, shrimp, clams, whiting. I ordered the “Value Box” for \$9.99. It was a value, all right, an incredible array of fried fish. When I left Shark's on my way to ride the El for a while, I noticed that right next to Shark's was a sign that could only be found in a place like Chicago: “HOTEL—MEN ONLY.” A true flophouse, right there in front of me.

Uncommercialized downtowns are a good thing because they make possible things like amusing flophouse hotel signs, fried fish joints, and movies about the blues. This is something that's been lost on many of the urban planners of the present day—ask the Times Square sandwich shop guys how they like their new digs in Jackson Heights, and Tottenville, for instance.

Wilmington, a Place to Be Somebody, still has that kind of unreconstructed, mixed-use downtown which is fading quickly. We're no Chicago or even Cleveland, but we have it. The area's a little nebulous, but the next time you're downtown, take a brief trip off of the Market Street Mall and get a close look at your surroundings, especially

the neighborhood bounded from Tatnall to Market Streets, and from 8th to 6th Streets. You may find that Wilmington's downtown is really a fascinating mix of abandoned and vacant storefronts, small businesses, a Greek Orthodox monastery (at 8th and Orange Streets), hair salons, and...now we get to the point...restaurants.

Libby's Restaurant, at 8th and Orange Streets, is just the kind of place I'm talking about; a lot like Aretha's restaurant in “The Blues Brothers.” This little diner, which the Powers That Be tried in vain to squeeze out through eminent domain some years ago, would be perfectly at home in the Loop, on the South Side, or the Strip District. Smallish, cash only, a few seats lined up at a counter, tables crammed in everywhere, paper checks, laminated menus.

This review really isn't about Libby's food. And that's because there's nothing special about the food—yet, that's precisely what makes Libby's a special place, and why I thought it was worthy of a review. Hamburgers, chopped steak specials, grilled cheese, All-Day Breakfast, omelets, toast, cheesesteaks—the food is wonderfully solid. I've never had a bad meal there, and I'm not sure they've ever made one. Sometimes, in a world of molecular infusions, tasting menus, and \$40 entrees, a weary diner needs something ordinary. Food, after all, is the staff of life, and you don't want to lean on a staff with all sorts of leaves and branches on it when you're trying to walk uphill.

“Like Mom used to make” might be a metaphor to use to describe Libby's, were it not trite and overused. So, perhaps a better analogy is found by turning to the lyrics of the song we started with a couple hundred words ago: “Back to that same old place... sweet home Chicago.”

Libby's Restaurant, 227 W. 8th Street, downtown Wilmington. (302) 655-4246. Breakfast all day. Cash only. ☺