

Boys' Night Out

A South Side Tour

Text and Photography: Michael Stotler

I love my family. I really do. It's just that every once in a while, it's time to leave the ladies and children at home, engage in some politically incorrect banter, and drink a few beers. With my group of friends, this typically involves attending a sporting event, drinking a beer or two, and then heading back home to the suburbs. It was time to shake things up a bit and enjoy some Milwaukee-style fun - the kind of fun not found in the generic "entertainment districts" promoted by the City.

Yes, it was time to venture to Milwaukee's South Side. Our little crew - Jimmy, Ricky, John, and yours truly - would head over the High Rise Bridge from downtown Milwaukee.

The first stop of the evening was **Koz's Mini Bowl** for a little friendly bowling competition. The bar area was nearly empty when we arrived just before 6:30 PM, and we counted ourselves lucky to get a lane immediately. Koz's Mini Bowl does take lane reservations, so you might be well-served to call ahead for a lane on a Friday or Saturday night. When we visited, all the lanes were reserved starting at 7 P.M., so we had to agree to be finished by then. This was perfect, as far as I was concerned.

Koz's Mini Bowl removes from the equation the things that people (including me) find objectionable about bowling. There are no stinky, weird rental shoes. There is no obligatory scavenger hunt for a ball with the right-sized finger holes.

Koz's Mini Bowl has four 16-foot lanes. The game is scored like regular bowling, but uses non-holed, grapefruit-sized bowling balls and miniature pins. Unlike modern bowling centers, there is no electronic scoring, and the pins are set by hand.



Even if you're not there to bowl, Koz's Mini Bowl serves up a large helping of real Milwaukee atmosphere. There's a pool table in the bar area and the most eclectic juke box I have seen in the Milwaukee area. And, hey, what's with the mounted lion behind the bar, anyway?

The bowling was fun and fast-paced. With a 16-foot lane, there's no agonizing wait between the ball's release from your hand and the satisfying sound of flying pins. Moreover, the short lanes mean practically no gutter balls.

There were two other parties bowling when we started. A family consisting of Mom, Dad and an eight year-old boy were to the left of us. A party of five 20-somethings were to our right. Strikes were met by cheers from everyone in the room, and there was often an



assortment of high-fives to boot. Jimmy engaged the room with his now-patented dances back to the scoring table following his strikes. It was a very a social atmosphere, despite being just 12 people in the room.

Jimmy won the bowling and made sure we all knew about his athletic achievement for the rest of the night. He especially enjoyed ribbing Ricky, who is the best bowler I know. John couldn't get over how much fun could be packed into such a small space. No doubt, things were off to a great start.

After the bowling, we tipped our pinsetter and paid for our bowling at the bar. We lingered for a quick beer, and watched the new crew of bowlers for a time. The bowling area was packed by the time we left, and the cheers even more boisterous. It was now time for dinner, and nothing says "dinner after bowling" like "pizza." While the South Side has a number of great pizza joints, our destination was **Maria's Pizza**. This establishment does not have a liquor license, but the boys didn't seem to mind the brief alcohol-free respite.

As the story goes, Maria Traxel, the original owner, was a diminutive woman who loved to cook. In 1957, she was determined to cobble enough money to open a small restaurant at 7th and Greenfield. She developed a thin crust pizza which overlaps the tray upon which it is served. She painted the walls red and covered them with religious paint-by-number oils made by husband, Walter, in order to hide the cracks in the walls. It was intended to be a temporary decorating solution for the fledgling restaurant.

In 1971, Maria opened a second restaurant at the current location on Forest Home Avenue. Maria was denied a liquor license, because there were already many bars and restaurants in the area. I would have never thought this would be a valid reason to deny a liquor license in Milwaukee of all places, but Maria and her daughters never re-applied.



Maria passed away in 1993 and the original restaurant was closed. Before her death, Maria made her daughters, Mickey and Bonnie Sue, promise that they would close the original restaurant so that they would be together in one place and look after each other. The paintings were moved to the Forest Home Avenue Restaurant, and the original restaurant never opened for business again following Maria's death. Sadly, Mickey has since passed away, but Bonnie Sue soldiers on in the family business.

When you arrive at Maria's Pizza, prepare yourself for a visual assault. The relatively calm exterior gives way to sensory overload on the inside. In addition to year-around Christmas lights and the religious paintings, Maria's Pizza is decorated for whatever holiday is coming next on the calendar. Bonnie Sue isn't hard to spot. Just look for a woman with blonde hair, a short red dress, and four-inch heels.

When we ordered, we figured one large and one small would do the trick for our party of four, so we ordered one large Maria's Special and one small pepperoni. Our waitress helpfully suggested that we up-size our small pizza for a large one for an additional \$1.50. We skeptically agreed.

When the pizzas were delivered to the table, the first response was "How on Earth are we going to finish these?" Sitting before us were two free-form pizzas, each gracefully overflowing its own industrial cookie sheet. The boys started on the Maria's Special, while I went for the pepperoni.

The pizza is so thin, it's easier to grab two slices at a time, and fold them together like a sandwich. I supposed the "taco" treatment with a single piece would work, too, but why not just go right for two pieces? The bottoms of the pizzas were slightly burned from the oven and had a slight char. The ingredients were scattered shotgun fashion over the sauce and cheese. These were not designer, over-processed, California-style pizzas.



After a few minutes, Ricky looked up and asked, “Is anyone going to start on the pepperoni?” - failing to notice that I had already polished off the first row of squares. The pizza looked untouched. It was still nearly overflowing the cookie sheet, despite my efforts.

Much to everyone’s surprise, we downed both pizzas without much trouble. It was time to settle up the bill, pose for a quick picture with Bonnie Sue, and head out once again.

The next stop was **The Holler House** an old-time Milwaukee tavern, complete with ancient placards advertising food items and drinks, as well as political posters. The real draw is what’s past the bar and down the stairs.

The Holler House contains the two oldest sanctioned bowling lanes in the United States. The lanes are real wood, not the synthetic wood used at modern bowling centers. The lanes are dressed by hand, not machine. Like Koz’s Mini Bowl, the pins are set by hand.

According to an old, framed newspaper article near the stairs, The Holler House was founded on September 13, 1908 by “Iron Mike” Skowronski. There’s no surprise here, but he originally called the tavern “Skowronski’s.” After his son and daughter-in-law, Gene and Marcy, took over in 1952, it became “Gene and Marcy’s.” Around 1975, the name changed to “The Holler House” after a German woman with a limited English vocabulary was describing to her husband where she wanted to go for drinks after having witnessed a raucous political debate there the week before. Obviously, the debate involved a lot of hollering.

Marcy continues to own and operate The Holler House. When we were there, she was perched on a barstool at the far end of the bar, near the dart machine and not far from a number of bras hanging from piping near the ceiling. As the story goes, the tradition of bra hanging started when Marcy was drinking with her friends, and they started taking off their clothes. Women now autograph and hang their bras on their first visit. We didn’t get to witness any ceremonial bra hanging, much to Jimmy’s disappointment.

Our intent was to bowl a quick frame at The Holler House, but there was a couple’s league using the lanes when we arrived. You’ll want to call ahead to see what arrangements need to be made to get a lane if you want to bowl. Our group watched from the stairs. To tell you the truth, I found this to be more fun than actually having to do the bowling myself.

There are no chairs or tables in the bowling area, and the scores are handwritten on sheets hanging on the walls. Bowling trophies from a by-gone era rested on a shelf above the bowling alley. The participants looked like they were having fun, Milwaukee-style.

We finished our beers in the main bar area, and wandered around to inspect the posters and placards. This was a quick, one-beer stop on the tour, but well worth a look.

Our last stop for the evening was **Kochanski’s Concertina Beer Hall**, This place was formerly “Art’s Concertina Bar,” and I had not been back here since Art Altenburg sold the place to Andy Kochanski in October 2007. It’s a place to hear some live polka music, kick up your heels, and kick back for a beer. Now how many places can you do that in America?



There was no cover charge, and the band was already playing when we walked in the door. All of the tables in the back of the bar were filled, so we took the remaining stools near the band. I kind of missed not seeing Art behind the bar, but the place was just as Milwaukee cool as always.

After a while, a few couples graced the dance floor. They twirled around the floor near the bar to the Ompa beat. A group of young ladies did shots from glasses pressed into an old Nordic ski, prompting Ricky to joke, “Ladies, it’s all downhill from here.” The band leader dutifully repeated the line through the PA system.

Andy is a gracious host. He took time from his bartending duties to chat with our group for a while. He’s got a landmark on his hands, and I think he knows it. After a short while, it was time to call it a night. We had carpooled, and I needed to drop the boys off at their cars.



On the ride back to Koz’s Mini Bowl, the entire conversation turned to two topics. “When are we going to do this again?” “Where are we going next time?” We developed a quick list of candidates. The South Side is covered with quirky, historic gems to visit, and we’ll have to cover a few more on the next installment of Boys’ Night Out.

Featured Venues

Koz’s Mini Bowl
2078 S. 7th St., Milwaukee, 414-383-0560

Maria’s Pizza
5025 W. forest Home Ave, Milwaukee, 414-543-4606

The Holler House
2042 W. Lincoln Ave., Milwaukee, 414-647-9284

Kochanski’s Concertina Beer Hall
1920 S. 37th St., Milwaukee, 414-837-6552

