

BED-STUY PUB CRAWL

A pub crawl in Bedford Stuyvesant??!! What, are we in England or something? Well, truth be told, your humble investigative reporters – Inquisigal and The Changeling – could think of no more humorous and slightly inaccurate title for our new feature on the Bed Stuy Blog. Unlike in many of London’s most populous drinking neighborhoods, bars in Bed-Stuy require much more effort to get to than a mere “crawl.” Try a cab ride, slightly labored bike ride, or a slow-moving trek on the number #44 bus.

But while the neighborhood’s bars are indeed few and far between, you’ve probably spied some old, slightly burned out, neon Budweiser signs flickering painfully in the twilight, or noticed an unmarked, black metal door that adults seem to stream through, without a clue as to what awaits on the other side. So, we’re going to do walk through those doors (if we can find them) and report back to all of you about just what kind of bar experience you can expect to have in some of the bars and lounges around the neighborhood.

The set up: Once a month, your cocktail-quaffing reporters will visit and anonymously sample the goods at one of Bed-Stuy’s drinking establishments.

The rules: Any bar or gathering spot that is known to attract solely a young hipster crowd or only blossoming gang bangers will not be reviewed by the Pub Crawl. Your two imbibing scribes – battleaxes of an age that no longer qualifies us as being “young” – are seeking places that might appeal to people of, shall we say, a more “experienced” life background.

The destination: The New Casablanca Bar & Lounge, corner of Macdonough Street and Malcolm X Blvd.

Time: Around 7PM, on a Thursday night

The conversation:

The Changeling: Uhm, Inquisigal, what’s up the font on the sign? That sign looks old. That font looks old. I’m suddenly finding myself wondering at what point in the lifespan of a business should one be forced to drop the word “New.” What have you gotten me into?

Inquisigal: The sign? That’s exactly what got me thinking this place had potential! We’ve got the 50’s-style font, requisite martini glass, and the faux stone pattern on the exterior of the building – which was on the cutting edge

of mid-1950's architecture. All of this, combined with the year-round Christmas lights in the curtained windows, made me think there was a holiday party started in 1957 at The New Casablanca that's still going on in there, full force.

The Changeling: Full Force. Yeah, this place reminds me of Full Force. You know, I saw them in concert with Cherelle and New Edition back in '85. Jheri curls and all.

Inquisigal: (raises her eyebrows) You ready to go in?

Inquisigal and The Changeling go around to the front entrance, on Malcolm X Blvd. It is a large, black door with metal grating, and appears to be locked.

The Changeling: Are you sure this place is open?

We stick our faces up against the front windows, and note there are indeed people inside the bar. We go back around to the side door, on Macdonough Street, which is a closed, exterior, metal grated door, backed up by another door that is open about six inches.

Inquisigal: Wow. Is this place a speakeasy?

The Changeling: Well, if it is, then what's the code word?

The Changeling grabs the doorknob, and gives it yank. Nothing happens.

Inquisigal: Ok, now what?

All of a sudden, someone from the inside opens the interior door. He unlocks the metal gate, and holds the door open as we step into the New Casablanca. We tentatively walk in, not quite knowing what to expect.

The Changeling: This place looks like a set on a Tarantino movie. Actually, it looks like the bar where Jackie Brown and Ordell Robie went to plan their caper. (Anything that reminds me of Quentin Tarantino (or his movies) is a good thing.) Hey, it's really RED in here! Like a per-hour hotel, everything has a reddish glow to it. HmMMM.

Inquisigal: Are you kidding? This place is great!! It kind of reminds me of Frank's Lounge in Fort Greene.

Inquisigal gestures to a section of the lounge, near the front of the establishment, that is sectioned off by a metal fence and raised about a foot

higher than the main bar area. It houses several Formica-topped tables and red vinyl covered chairs, and also includes a little couch area and coffee table. Inquisigal and The Changeling decide to take a seat at the left side of the bar. They take a moment to absorb their surrounding. The bar itself is long, and of the buffed wood variety, and seemingly well stocked with all manner of victuals. The ceiling and walls are decorated with mirrors, more Christmas lights, and lengths of silver garland.

The bar patrons consist of a gaggle of seniors sipping delicately on mixed cocktails, as well as a trio of middle aged men who seem to be already three sheets to the wind, but who don't seem obnoxious or even prone to being predatory toward us ladies saddling up next to them at the bar.

The Changeling: You know that bar that your dad built in the basement to entertain himself and all his army buddies? This is that bar.

At this moment, a thirty-something female bartender with a warm, welcoming smile comes up to us to take our order. For the sake of research, Inquisigal orders a mixed cocktail – a Coconut Rum Bay Breeze - and The Changeling orders a glass of wine. The Changeling was hoping for white wine, but they were out, so she settled on a happy medium of a rose.

*We chatted a bit with the bartender, whom we learned is named Carolyn. She told us that the New Casablanca is owned by a woman named Esther, who happened to be sitting at the opposite end of the bar. Esther is 85 years old, and has owned and managed the bar since she was in her 30's. Carolyn told us that the bar is typically patronized by an older crowd (in this case, a **real** older crowd); but that on the weekends it tends to get a bit busier and younger people also come in. On Thursday nights, Esther serves complimentary soul food to all customers, starting at 10PM. The bar is open from late in the afternoon until anywhere between 1AM and later, solely depending on how many customers would like service in the wee hours.*

Once our drinks arrived, we took tentative sips, rolling the liquid over our tongues like the most discriminating of liquor and wine snobs. How did the drinks rate at the New Casablanca?

The Changeling: Inquisigal, I'm hard pressed to find a drink that I don't like. This rose is going down easy. I could probably drink about 5 of these, before I REALLY get to drinking, but for \$4 a mini bottle, the price is right. So far, me likey!

Inquisigal: Yeah, I have to agree. Not only IS the price right (\$4 for a mixed drink), but this is cold, tasty, and wow, am I finished already?

Inquisigal takes a loud slurp from her straw and motions for another, while her gaze fixes on a hulking, yet comfortingly familiar piece of ancient technology behind them.

Inquisigal: Whoa! There's a jukebox!!

Both Inquisigal and The Changeling put their glasses on the bar, and hone their focus on the music that is playing on the sound system.

The Changeling: Wait, is that Al Green?


The Changeling leaps up from her bar stool, grabs a hand full of quarters, and prances over to the jukebox to check out the selection and see how she wants to spend her coinage, while Inquisigal gets into a conversation with the afore-mentioned trio of male patrons about their previously-selected music.


The Changeling: Guess what I picked out on the jukebox? The Platters, Al Green, Marvin Gaye and Curtis Mayfield! That jukebox is all Motown, Staxx, soul and funk, that kinda stuff.


Inquisigal: Nice! Well Changeling, you didn't believe me when I predicted that this place had potential. But now that you've sampled the goods, what rating should we give to the New Casablanca?


The Changeling: Hmmmm, let's break it down.


Our rating system: A scale of 1 – 5 frothy mugs of beer, 5 being excellent.

Ambience:  Cheerful, welcoming, great music, and even though we aren't regulars, we feel comfortable and able to chat with the regulars. The people here are friendly, and ladies can feel comfortable and not preyed upon (at least on a Thursday after work).

Service:  Carolyn, our server, has been bartending at the NC for 6 years. She not only seems to be an able mixologist, she was happy to give us the scoop on the history and goings on at the New Casablanca.

Décor:  Both Inquisigal and The Changeling have a soft spot for places that look like they are from another time, so the scarlet-colored lounge that makes you reminisce about your dad's secret basement bar/porn den, coupled with birthday party decorations, Christmas lights, and silver garland all somehow come across as charming.

Selection:  Though the bar appeared well stocked, they did not have any white wine on hand on a night that is typically thought of as a going out night. The wine was served in mini bottles, so true wine aficionados may want to lower their expectations when ordering at the New Casablanca. They also did not carry Inquisigal's brand of coconut rum (Malibu), so the bartender substituted with another brand.

Location:  It's convenient for people who live in Stuyvesant Heights, and for others, it's a short, 3-block walk from the Utica Avenue A and C. For those on the north side of Bed-Stuy, however, it may be a bit of a trek. This corner of Malcolm X and Macdonough may feel desolate to those not familiar with this part of the neighborhood, but it is for the most part safe and close to other businesses such as Solomon's Porch, Bread Stuy, and the newly arriving Peaches.

Overall rating:  (4.1)

Inquisigal: Since I live in this part of the neighborhood, I can't be more thrilled that there's a decent, neighborhood bar only 4 blocks away from me. One of the things I like best about the New Casablanca is how it feels like you're at someone's house party – you can either roll in with friends and focus on hanging with your own posse, or you can mix and mingle with other patrons at the bar and chat about everything from music to the news of the day. I also like that it's low key – more a place for seasoned adults (35+) to stop into to enjoy cocktails or beer and catch up with friends or family, as opposed to a place you go to seek out a scene or to get wasted at. We need more bars like this in the neighborhood, and in NYC in general. I'll definitely go back.

The Changeling: Me too! I have to say that I was initially a bit put off by the exterior. I never would have guessed that such a cool place was just beyond that metal door. This is my new favorite bar on the "south side." I'm definitely heading over here to fuel up more often!