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Last Call Closing In At the Shore

At Pickup Bars, Come-On Lines Are Well-Burnished by Now

By ROBERT STRAUSS

BAR ANTICIPATION, "where summer never ends" — or so the sign out front says — is spilling over with hundreds of tanned bodies of the young and the not-so-young, drinks in hand and eyes fixed on the crowd. This is, after all, open season at the New Jersey shore.

"We're together yet again," says Mary Frank, who claims to be 23 and from somewhere in central Jersey. Ms. Frank is hanging on to her gin and tonic in one hand and the shoulder of a well-muscled Rob Marion with the other.

"Yes, yet again," answers Mr. Marion, who says he has been coming to Bar Anticipation almost every Friday night since he reached the legal drinking age three years ago.

In truth, Mr. Marion and Ms. Frank met only a week earlier. But there are precious few weeks to any summer, and this season is rapidly fading.

A large part of young adulthood along the New Jersey shore revolves around places like Bar Anticipation — affectionately known as Bar A to its loyalists — the noisy, sweaty, anticipatory watering holes that dot the coast from Sandy Hook to Cape May. Marriages have surely been forged from alliances in such places, and others dissolved. But one thing is certain: summer lust is a shore staple at Bar Anticipation and scores of similar party and pickup places.

For every player there is a cellphone, and for every cellphone there is a sculptured body (some more so than others) covered with a strap T-shirt or a thong. The beer and liquor (and maybe more) flow freely, the pickup lines are never-ending. And sometimes they work. That's what the shore is for, or so they thinking goes, otherwise God would have made it a desert.

"E-A-G-L-E-S, Eagles!" goes a cheer above the rock-music soundtrack by a half-dozen large Philadelphia-area types. "Goooooo, Giants!" a similar crew roars back, and then they all laugh and raise their drinks to each other. Bar A bars none. Flags out front wave for the Giants, the Mets, the Phillies, and the Yankees. Belmar is just a smidgen north of central at the Jersey Shore, and playing favorites would not be good business.

"On a good summer day, you can get 3,000 people coming in and out of Bar Anticipation," said Stephen Tarkanish, president of S.T.A.R.S. Productions, a booking agency that has been getting bands into shore clubs since 1966. "There is no doubt that it sells more beer than any other shore bar. It is right off Route 35 and has an inside and an outside, with a great volleyball area. It may not be right on the beach, but it seems to have what people want."

Yet these days, being situated on the beach can be a threat to a bar's longevity. Two popular places in the northern part of the state will be closing, both victims of rising beachfront property values. The Tradewinds in Sea Bright plans to close its doors at summer's end after 30 years, and Joey Harrison's Surf Club in Ortley Beach may have one

more season after this — but both will eventually be the site of condominium development instead of beer-swilling rock 'n' roll.

"We're losing two great places," Mr. Tarkanish said. "But if you can get \$400,000 for a condo, what is rock 'n' roll worth?"

Well, it is worth something down at the Osprey Nightclub, a rambling, white stucco building with blue trim, a block from the beach in Manasquan, that has been packing in the central New Jersey Shore faithful for 58 summers.

"If someone dropped in from another planet and wanted to see the quintessential Jersey Shore bar, the Osprey would have to be it," Mr. Tarkanish said.

The Osprey, a barnlike place, has a staggering 10 bars inside, and while spotlight bands like the Bejnamins or the Nerds or Screaming Broccolli don't end up on MTV or VH-1, they fill the Osprey with enough young men and women every summer to keep the owners from turning it into yet another condo complex.

"My husband has an old Osprey T-shirt and one day someone saw him with it and offered him, I don't know, \$25 or something," said Jeanne DeYoung, the head of the Monmouth Country Tourism office. "It may be falling apart, but the Osprey is an important landmark. He'd never sell it."

Farther south, in Atlantic City, four casino hotels have opened beach bars in the last three summers in an effort to lure pleasure seekers down to a surf that has been largely abandoned in recent years.

Amid the newly chic martini bars and waning trend of frozen drinks with paper umbrellas, the biggest and best Jersey Shore bars remain the beer joints.

"I'm not proud," said Monty Jefferson, 26, a computer programmer from Hazlet who was at Jenkinson's, the sprawling club on the beach in Point Pleasant. "Beer is just fine with me."

The beer companies are big sponsors of special nights at some of the shore bars. At the Osprey, for instance, Sundays are mostly the Bud Band Showcase, where three to five bands looking for the chance to be the next shore staple start playing at 7 p.m.

"You're looking at the demographic from 21 to 27, the party and pickup crowd, and that is what the beer companies want to target down the shore," Mr. Tarkanish said. "That is what dominates the Jersey shore nightlife these days. It's a simple formula. Why Mess with it?"

One of the reasons beer is the winner these days, he explained, is because New Jersey lowered the blood-alcohol limit for driving under the influence, making hard liquor less tenable.

"That's a big weapon against the nightclub industry," he said. "Cops are all around the clubs. It just makes sense to be vigilant."

But that doesn't mean no one goes over the top. Some traditions never

die. For that eventuality, more and more, club owners have van services, taxis on call, and bartenders who try to keep drunks off the road.

In Atlantic City, the trend is to have them just sleep over.

"I'd say most of the clientele for the new beach bars are stay-overs," said Ken Condon, president of Bally's Atlantic City Hilton and Caesars Atlantic City, which all now have bars on the beach that are open and playing live music until about 2 a.m. on weekends.

Bally's Bikini Beach Bar, which opened this summer, is the newest of the beachfront spots. The Hilton opened its spot first, in 2002, with Caesars and then Trump Plaza opening places last year.

Unlike most shore scenes, where clubgoers pick their bar for the night and stay there (maybe because of cover charges, maybe because of slim pickings), people flit between the beach bars, which are close by each other, or take a walk on the beach or Boardwalk for a while and then return. It has created a new critical mass of nightlife that Atlantic City has not seen in decades.

"I remember when the scene, the biggest thing at the Jersey shore, was the Club Harlem on Kentucky Avenue, said Jerry Blavat, a longtime Philadelphia deejay, who started coming to the shore as in the 1950's as a teenage "American Bandstand" dancer. "You met everyone you knew there. It was a place like no other."

These days, Mr. Blavat owns Memories, the busiest club in Margate, a town situated south of Atlantic City on Absecon Island. Memories caters primarily to an older crowd, which dances to oldies on Friday and Saturday nights.

Yet dancing, he lamented, has largely gone out of fashion at clubs down the shore.

"I don't know when it stopped, but generally, people don't go out and dance any more," Mr. Blavat said. "In Margate, you used to have the Gables, the Old Tavern, the Beacon Inn. People rocked and danced. Now you have restaurants, like Tomatoes and Stephen and Cookie's. Good restaurants, but not dance clubs."

Mr. Blavat said that in the late 1950's until the mid-1960's. Wildwood was the king of shore nightlife, where weekend night crawlers would seek out love and such while watching the best rock and pop entertainment available.

"Major artists — the Four Seasons, Chubby Checker, the Isley Brothers — would have a song they wanted to test and put an act together to go to Wildwood because the shore crowd would be there," he said. "The Rainbow, the Hurricane, the Beachcomber, the Riptide, the Martinique. All along Pacific Avenue, they would appear because Wildwood was where you honed your craft. Lovers would come from all over just to be there."

Now the scene in Wildwood is centered around New Jersey Avenue, at the northern end of the island. Mr. Tarkanish said the Beach House, at Spruce and New Jersey Avenues, is the hottest bar in that area of North Wildwood these days, but is buttressed by other places within walking distance like Moore's Inlet, the Anglesea Pub and Keenan's Irish Pub.

If there is a distinguishing mark separating clubs at the shore, it is that in the northern part of the state, there tend to be megabars, places that can hold hundreds of customers. For instance, Jenkinson's, Bar Anticipation, the Osprey and Joey Harrison's Surf Club as well as Joe Pop's in Ship Bottom, on Long Beach Island, are huge places set off by themselves, good for getting lost if the pickup line is too far off the mark.

In South Jersey, the places tend to be smaller and clustered in a party-area part of town. In addition to the North Wildwood cluster and the Atlantic City beach bars, there is a cache of clubs around 40th Street and Landis Avenue in Sea Isle City — the Springfield Inn, the Ocean Drive, the La Costa.

"We don't promote things that way, but we make people aware of the towns that tend to have nightlife," said Diane Wieland, the director of the Cape May County Tourism office. "We do remind them that Ocean City and Wildwood Crest are dry, but I guess people who are looking to hang out in a big Jersey shore bar know that." Unlike in the big-city nightclub scene, where chicness and of-the-moment rule, tradition and familiarity more often than not outweigh other factors down the shore.

"Maybe you want to meet a new woman, but you want to first be with your friends in a place where you know what is happening," said Harry Morris, 27, a financial consultant from Middletown, bellying up to a Budweiser at Bar Anticipation. "I think the familiarity makes meeting someone easier. If you strike out, you don't have to crawl out of the place in shame. You shrug your shoulders, go back to hanging with your friends and try again."

When a bar does fade in popularity, either by demise or by a newer and trendier place, it is viewed with sadness, not derision, much like an old baseball player losing his muscle after many seasons of stardom.

"The Tradewinds was a landmark, hosting everyone from Bruce Springsteen to the Nerds, and it is sad to see it go," Mr. Tarkanish said.

Take Fred's Tavern in Stone Harbor, he said, which has declined in popularity largely because of the upscale nature of the town.

"You go in their liquor store and you see \$400 bottles of wine," he said. "You don't need to have a rock bar when you can sell that."

For his part, Mr. Tarkanish said he spends most of his summer weekdays driving up and down the 127-mile-long New Jersey shore, evaluating the scene. So for seekers of surf, suds and something else, he has worked up a scouting report:

WEDNESDAY "The hottest Wednesday by far, is Joe Pop's with the Nerds," he said. The Nerds dress up in mismatched plaid and design shirts and shorts and heavy black glasses and play their sometimes twisted versions of old rock songs.

THURSDAY "I would have to go back to Jenkinson's for The Nerds," Mr. Tarkanish said. Jenkinson's is right on the beach where you can have anything from sushi to pizza right on the beautiful Jersey shore.

FRIDAY "The best Friday I would have to give to the Osprey in Manasquan. It is the perfect place to stop when you just drive down from work and want to unwind," he said.

SATURDAY "In the Summer, Saturday nights are a given anywhere, to the point where many places just dispense with bands," he said. "Go to your favorite spot."

SUNDAY "Undisputed, the band at the Idle Hour in Point Pleasant, is the strong Sunday spot," said Mr. Tarkanish, although he added that late Sunday afternoon is a great time at almost any shore bar, a time to reflect — and maybe re-strategize.

And on Monday?

"Everybody needs one day of rest," said Mr. Morris at Bar Anticipation. "Even fun needs a day off."

Photographs by Mary Godleski for the New York Times

