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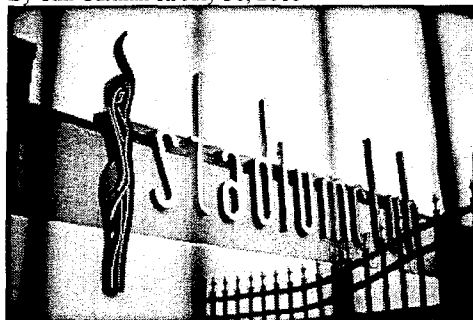
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YOUNG & HUNGRY ::::::::::::::::::::::::::::::

Stadium Club Combines Steaks, Strippers Naked women and an affordable strip steak, together at last

By Tim Carman on July 30, 2010



Pole Position: Stadium Club raises the bar for strip-club food.

Photo by Darrow Montgomery

When the attendant in the black jacket told me that valet parking would be \$20 at the **Stadium Club**, I was quickly reminded about the strange, otherworldly inflation of strip clubs: The closer you are to naked bodies, the farther prices wander from the costs of things in the fully clothed world.

A colleague in Houston once gave me a lesson in strip club economics after I had the temerity to tease him (OK, *mock* him) for shelling out \$20 for a lap dance. You have to remember that, in the late 1980s, \$20 was not crumbled-up pocket change that you tossed to the Starbucks barista for a pair of venti caramel Frappuccinos with extra whip. It was serious drinking money. My buddy looked me dead in the eye, his anger barely contained, and said something to the effect of, "Listen, you can't go to the goddamn 7-Eleven for a lap dance, so I decide what its value is."

That had to be the most honest sentence ever uttered in a strip club, and I'll never forget it.

I suspect flesh parlors from here to Tokyo know only too well that they follow their own warped rules of supply and demand. The supply of nudity is a scare commodity—at least compared to, say, dry cleaning services—but the demand apparently remains high, even with one-click access to varieties of hardcore porn that makes pole dancing seem as harmless as a senior high gym class. Which no doubt explains why the Stadium Club demands a twenty just for the privilege of parking your car within its gated lot, safe from the rascals who may wander this industrial, semi-desolate section of Northeast off Bladensburg Road.

Stripper Related Inflation, no doubt, also explains why the Stadium Club wants \$15 a head just to walk into the club (\$20 on the weekends). And why the champagne list starts at \$175 a bottle, for a Moët & Chandon Brut Imperial, and maxes out at \$1,700 for a Perrier-Jouët Fleur de Champagne rosé. And it surely explains why so many patrons are inclined to nurse a single beer while saving their dollars for garter adornments.

But here's the interesting thing about the new 14,000-square-foot Stadium Club: Access to its 42-seat steakhouse is free. Even better, the restaurant's 18-ounce New York strip steak, a center cut piece of USDA prime, is a relative bargain at \$45. So is its 9-ounce center cut of filet mignon for \$40. Sure, no one will mistake these prices for those at Ray's the Steaks or Ray's the Classics, particularly since the Stadium Club offers no complimentary sides with its entrees. But, at least for now, Michael Landrum does not surround his wet-aged steaks with a wet-dream's worth of female flesh.

The truth is, the Stadium Club's prices are comparable to those at D.C.'s loftiest steakhouses, places where the only jiggling involves the flesh around one's own waistline. Perhaps this fact alone isn't enough to entice you to step foot into a gentlemen's club, especially if you find the idea of slicing into dead animals while objectifying dancing ones rather distasteful. Morality, however, is relative. Strip club food isn't. Most of it isn't good enough for a second-rate diner still working through last week's Sysco orders.

The Stadium Club wants to redefine strip club eating. To that end, the owner has hired a former regional chef for Ruth's Chris, Andre Miller, who has created a sort of a small-scale version of the popular steakhouse. Like Ruth's Chris, the Stadium Club doesn't use a grill; all its steaks are prepared on an imposing stainless steel Vulcan broiler, which generates the high heat of a grill, without either its messiness or its benefits.

My New York strip is a monstrous cut, nearly two inches thick. But it sports no char, no grill marks, no quadrillage—nothing that gives steaks added flavor and texture. The strip doesn't have much seasoning or caramelization, either, save for a few discreet patches of brown along the soft edges of the steak. Mostly, it's just a well-cooked, medium-rare piece of meat, spilling its red juices all over the white plate while relying on its size and USDA prime pedigree to justify its white-tablecloth treatment. The filet mignon at least has some taste buried within the tender muscle, a not-unpleasant liver flavor, but the cut is not seared or seasoned well, either.

When the restaurant manager approaches our table, inquiring about the steaks, I tell him the truth. He deserves the truth. He's a gracious man who broke open a bottle of Sterling Vintner's Collection when our waiter initially told us that the Stadium Club doesn't sell wine by the glass. (He poured me and my guest a glass of the silky merlot and charged us \$15 for each, a more than equitable price; a second visit revealed that the manager had turned this gesture into a formal practice.) I tell him that I prefer grilled over broiled steaks, just because I like my rib-eyes or strips blackened from the heat of searing hot grates. Next time, he informs me, just ask for extra char, which the chef can add to any steak.

A day later, I decide to stop at Ruth's Chris in Bethesda to better understand how the steakhouse handles its meat. I have to confess, I've never been to Ruth's Chris, and I find it somewhat hard to believe the chain could have survived all these years with an approach to steaks that totally discounts char. When I tell the bartender how I prefer my steaks, he informs me there is a way around the limitations of the broiler. He calls it "Pittsburgh rare," a piece of cooking nomenclature that I had not previously encountered. At Ruth's Chris, it means the cooks sear your steak in a pan before tossing it under a broiler to your desired temperature.

Pittsburgh rare, I'd later find out, is actually a more specific technique with its own colorful back story. The preparation calls for a cook to sear a steak over extremely high heat until it emerges with a blackened crust but remains almost cold and raw at the center. Depending on whose story you believe, the term "Pittsburgh rare" was born either from a kitchen mistake at an Iron City restaurant or from steelworkers who allegedly (and probably apocryphally) seared their steaks on blisteringly hot smelting furnaces. Whatever the tale, the technique works. My medium-rare rib-eye at Ruth's Chris arrives on a frighteningly hot plate, like a fajitas platter, which sizzles with juices and melted butter. The steak is deeply charred across its entire surface, almost au-poivre-like in crustiness. Its smell is intoxicating, the mix of butter and browned meat activating my saliva glands the moment the plate hits the bar. The rib-eye, in short, is delicious.

On my second trip to the Stadium Club, I order the 24-ounce bone-in rib-eye for \$48 and tell the waiter to prepare it Pittsburgh rare. He doesn't blink an eye at the request, nor ask for explanation, which fills me with hope. My optimism is not completely misplaced. The hulking piece of meat comes to the table freckled with blackened specks of seasoning. If it's not exactly char, it's close enough. The blackened spices add flavor, though not much texture, to the cut, which is rare and cool at its center. I'd say the chef understood at least half of the Pittsburgh rare request.

Even with the imperfect char, I'm pigging out on this cowboy cut, which is the closest thing to a perfect steak at the Stadium Club. I could see myself ordering it even at a place that doesn't provide a side order of legs with every entree. In fact, I'd dare say that ordering any cut "Pittsburgh rare" increases your likelihood of a quality steak experience. I'd definitely take my chances with the beef over some of the other options here, namely the mealy tuna tartar appetizer spiked with ginger in a vain effort to give it some flavor, or the fresh lobster tail blackened with spices and cooked to a rubbery texture. I might even order it over the decent deep-fried crab cakes with the delicate Old Bay perfume.

I single out the steaks because, at the Stadium Club restaurant, you must order an entrée. House rules dictate that you can't order, say, an \$11 wedge salad (a clean, crisp wedge salad with a light bleu cheese bite) and then expect to ogle the dancers the rest of the night. Not that there's much to ogle from the restaurant itself. The space is tucked into a corner of the building, glassed in and separate from the dark, strobe-lit club where the strippers do their thing. Unless someone's working the pole nearest to the restaurant—and there usually wasn't when I was there—you must find the exact right sight line to spot the stripper deeper within the club. The effect is like being at the zoo, tapping the glass to get the chimp to come out of hiding.

Once you're done with dinner, you can finish your wine in the club itself at no extra charge. If I were a stripper aficionado—I'm afraid I was more interested in the TV showing Strasburg's latest start—I'd approach the main club through the restaurant. Yes, the club offers a stripped-down bar menu so you can eat small bites right beside your favorite pole. But after watching a dancer strut down one of the bar tops, pausing to put her backfield in motion right in a patron's face, I think I'd prefer to eat my dinner in the hermetically sealed, crotch-free environment of Stadium Club's steakhouse.

Stadium Club, 2127 Queens Chapel Road NE, (202) 269-4477

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