



It's Cash Only at THIS OLD PLACE

By Clementine Carter

I don't really want to tell you this because I want to keep it a secret. It's this place, you see, that feels like a secret. They serve grilled steak slow cooked over an oak wood fire that tastes exactly like steak grilled over an oak wood fire. And steamed clams. And Miller beer on tap. If you don't like beer you can have wine. A couple of years ago it was French wine. Lately it has been Australian.

It's out of the way, and if you are hungry, you're going to have to wait for your food. I'm not kidding. The drinks come fast, as owner Barbara Runyon will take care of that, but the food is a whole different issue. The food comes when it is ready and it is ready whenever her husband Tom Runyon decides to fire up the wood and personally slice each steak from a big slab of beef with a pretty small, albeit sharp, knife. This is the sort of place to relax, share stories with friends, and enjoy a couple of laughs, like you hear about the good ol' days.

All of this goodness is housed in a beautifully old ramshackle building that looks as if Billy the Kid just tore down the steps guns-a-blazing. The first time I walked up the creaky wooden steps and opened the rickety door I found Barbara sitting at the end of the long, worn, shiny wooden bar next to a globe and a stack of *New Yorker* magazines doodling on white 3-by-five index cards. Coolly, she wrote on a card with a yellow No.2 pencil all the information I needed to know:

This Old Place
818-706-8001
Steak and Clams
Thurs., Fri., Sat. 7-?
Sunday 2-6
Cash Only

All of this is non-negotiable, mind you. If no one shows up, they close, and they're open until everyone leaves. No outside food or drink is allowed. On Sundays only steak stew is served. If they don't like you, they'll kindly ask you to not return. When I saw it happen, the guy grumbled on his way out, "I've been kicked out of worse places."

On a recent Friday night, Billy Gale, the resident musician who

languidly sips red wine, sang and strummed for us. He brought tears to my eyes with his love song, "My Margarita." After a couple of tunes, Billy started talking history. The Runyons have owned the place for 35 years. It was the general store and post office for the old Cornell settlement along the stagecoach route back in the day.

The smells of grilled steak were coming at us from all sides. The place was getting crowded. Barbara said it would take well over an hour for three steaks. Tom, who was wearing a winter hat with ear flaps and sitting in a large leather-backed chair next to the grill, said it would be 30 minutes.

I asked the couple at the bar polishing off the last of their clams how long they had been waiting for their steaks. "You eat before you get here," the woman said, laughing. "You come for the atmosphere," the man said, "and if you don't have a soul you don't belong here."

"Yeah," said the man next to them who was cutting into his steak, referred to as the Cornell Cut. "It's the best steak around." It sure smelled good, I said, but since I'm a vegetarian I wouldn't be tasting it anytime soon. "So am I," he said, "but you can't live on vegetables and grains alone."

They used to serve lettuce and a three-bean salad, but recently Tom read about contaminated lettuce going around making people ill and he refuses to serve it anymore. As for his three-bean salad, he was always getting teased about it, he said, so he stopped serving that, too.

We were getting hungrier by the minute as Barbara brought out silverware wrapped in white picnic napkins and a plate of hot, crusty sourdough bread with an entire stick of salted butter sliced into little pats carefully arranged in an arc along the curve of the oval plate. We ate, savoring every crumb and poured the last of the pitcher into our glasses.

Just as we're getting really hungry Barbara came out with three plates full of hot steak and baked potatoes with more salty butter dripping down the sides. After our meal, Barbara tallied up our bill from an index card. I swear it was like she never saw me before that night. It doesn't really matter, because I will always remember her. This Old Place is a reflection of its owners — full of heart and character and guts, the likes of which are hard to come by these days. □