

Football, Food & Drink

Written by {ga=mattvan1}

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I was in a bar when I watched the Browns on television for the first time. More than anything, I remember the energy of the crowd; probably 100 or so people - mostly blue collar guys yelling at the TV as if their lives were depend

ent upon the outcome of every snap. I didn't understand the true significance of their passion, but I did know I was a small part of a very big deal.

Something special.□

There was a collective fervor which I had never seen before. I also remember the haze of cigarette smoke and the smell of stale beer.

I don't recall much about the game itself, who we played or even the outcome, but that was a long time ago. I was 8 years old.

I grew up watching the Browns in a bar. Literally. I won't claim this provides me with any great insight into the game of football, but it certainly shaped how I feel about the team and my birthplace, and may help explain a bit about my love for football, food, and drink.

Now, before someone tries to report my parents to Child Protective Services, it might help if I placed my early football viewing habits in context. My grandfather owned a tavern throughout the 1960's and into the early 1970's. It was named The Lighthouse Inn, and sat about 30 feet off

of Rt. 20 in Perry. I believe the structure is still standing, probably under a new name and certainly under new ownership. There are many facts about the 1960's NFL which are long forgotten, erased by the Kardiak Kids, Bernie, the mind-numbingly pathetic play since The Return, as well as the internet and DirecTV Sunday Ticket. Two of these facts are directly relevant here:

1. The Browns were really fu&%ing good.
2. All home games, prior to 1973, were blacked out. Regardless of attendance.

Honestly, I am not sure which of the above two statements of fact are more difficult to believe.

In the ensuing 8 years after their 1964 Championship, the Browns winning percentage was an amazing-by-recent-performances .675, they made the playoffs 6 times and played in two consecutive title games, losing to the Colts in '68 and the Vikings in '69. And during that time, no households within a 75 mile radius of Municipal Stadium could receive over the air signals from a local TV broadcasting affiliate.

This included the good folks of Perry Ohio and the patrons of the Lighthouse Inn.

All part of Pete Rozelle's plan to ensure butts in stadium seats on game day. Want to watch one of the best teams in the league on Sunday? Then buy a ticket and go to cheer in person. Didn't like it? Then listen to the game on the radio. Other than get in your car and drive 75 miles out of the city, you had no other choice.

Unless you knew of an enterprising tavern owner in Perry who constructed a 50 foot tall antenna mast with a signal amplifier and motorized tuner and was able to pick up a faint signal from Erie, or across the lake from London, Ontario.

No advertising. Just word of mouth. No neon signs or crafted beers or blender drinks. A lone twenty-something inch TV resting on a shelf against the back wall behind the horseshoe shaped bar. That was all it took for the place to be standing room only an hour before kickoff when the Browns were playing at home. The fire marshal was a regular, always threatening to shut the place down for exceeding capacity but always staying to watch some of the game. Important

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games were delineated by the fact that Grandpa brought out a sheet of plywood to cover the pool table – so people could stand on it. All hands were on deck for the madness – Mom, Dad, Aunt, Uncle - all pitching in to tend bar, empty ashtrays, and restock the coolers with “Sunday” beer. There wasn’t much for a little kid to do however. Just sit on a captain’s chair behind the bar and stare up at the TV. Waiting for the magic.

Adults in the family looked forward to road games, when the place reverted to a sleepy little tavern with maybe 8 or so people having a quiet beer on a fall afternoon. Not me. I wanted to be right in the middle of the action, feeling the anticipation of the crowd before kickoff. The cheering, the yelling, the discussion and dissection of every playcall. This was an event, something important. Significant.

Decades (more than I care to admit) later, I feel the same – if you can’t watch the game live, then the next best option is to get people together to share the experience. It’s how my friends and I try to spend nearly every weekend during football season. Typically there is an overarching theme (“we need to deep fry something”, “I’m going to smoke a brisket”, “I was thinking about a pot of gumbo”) and we go from there.

I’m excited to be writing for readers of The Cleveland Fan on what we make and the games we watch and how it all comes together (or not, as is often the case)

Nothing extreme or Super Bowl-partyish (my most despised football viewing day of the year - more on that later).

Just football, food, and drink.