



Counter intelligence

TWO CHICAGO SALOON MAVENS SET OUT TO SEE IF THE BAR HAS RISEN TO A NEW LEVEL

There are not that many people who have written books about Chicago bars. So it was appropriate that I, the author of the now impossible-to-find "Dr. Night Life's Chicago," meet Ryan Ver Berkmoes, co-author of "The Official Chicago Bar Guide," in a Chicago bar.

This one used to be a plain and cozy Old Town tavern called Marge's, but it has been transformed into a vastly more sophisticated joint called Marge's Still.

Ver Berkmoes was sitting at the bar, taking notes. "Interesting changes here," he said. "Very interesting."

The city is always changing, and it is sometimes difficult for those of us who live and work here to take notice. "One of my big surprises this trip has been the extent of regeneration on the South Side between Cermak and Kenwood," he said. "It's quite remarkable."

He was nearing the end of five weeks spent walking the city in order to complete the research for a book, "Walking Chicago," to be published by Wilderness Press next year. "It's the most fun I've had on a project in a while," he said. "This publisher did an L.A. walking guide that's been a huge hit. Who would have thought, L.A.?"

Ver Berkmoes is no stranger to town. He moved here in 1983 after graduating from the University of Notre Dame and wrote for newspapers and magazines and, in collaboration with John McGrath, took the measure of Chicago's bars in their 1994 book. He eventually went to Europe, stayed there for a while and hooked up with Lonely Planet Publications, the large

and first-rate guidebook publisher, for which he has, alone and with others, written many books about such places as Sri Lanka, Bali, Ireland, Canada and, in 1998, Chicago.

Now based in Portland, he gets back here a couple of times a year, and has enough friends to keep him up on what's going on.

"But you really have to see some things for yourself," he says. "You walk out of the Green Line's 35th Street stop and, instead of Stateway Gardens [public housing project], you see a Starbucks. I don't know if seeing a Starbucks is a good thing, but it is a stark and dramatic visual of what's happening. Meanwhile, in Bridgeport, you are as likely to hear someone speaking Spanish or Chinese as you are heavily accented, classic White South Side. And, of course, I think it's hysterical that you can buy an over-priced new home overlooking Bubbly Creek."

"I am pleased to see the amount of money being invested in the city's esthetic infrastructure—and the pockets of favored contractors," he said, knowingly. "It is heartening that I can include walks in many places that I would not have just a few years ago. But then I am also shocked at the condition of so many Chicago neighborhoods. There are some once-grand boulevards and parks that are just bombed out. For 10 years I have been living in other cities and countries, and there is simply no other First World place that would have allowed such decay. Nowhere."

The passionate observations continued through a lot more drinks, making me more than eager for the book and Ver Berkmoes' next visit. □
rkogan@tribune.com