Holiday

SUMMER 2018

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Hello sailor
Seattle’s hippest nautical neighbourhood is home to an eccentric yacht club where members sink more beers than boats, finds Lauren Bravo

Photography BEN QUINTON
uring a crisp, bright afternoon in Ballard, northwest Seattle, I am drinking (allegedly) the only cup of tea to have ever been served inside the Sloop Tavern. The rest of the clientele in this nautical dive bar are finding it absolutely hilarious.

The more conventional liquid order within these walls goes by the name of a ‘sloopersize’ – a mammoth 55oz tankard of impossibly foamy beer, designed to quench the thirst of hardy fishermen after a tough morning out on the choppy Puget Sound waters. If anyone wants to know the answer to ‘What shall we do with a drunken sailor?’ I can now say with some confidence that they’d find it here.

Picture a stereotypical yacht club and the mind leaps to gold-buttoned blazers, pristine sailing whites and dry martinis sipped by lips well used to balancing a silver spoon between them. But at the Sloop Tavern Yacht Club the vibe couldn’t be any more different. Instead of a stuffy hangout for the moneyed elite, this humble drinking den is the gateway to a whole other Seattle – one founded by fishermen, steeped in maritime tradition and fuelled by some of North America’s finest seafood.

Bedecked with black and white photos of boats, gleaming racing trophies, gaudy neon signs and sailing regalia aplenty, this squat roadside tavern first opened its doors in the 70s when the bar’s then-owner, Wayne Schmidt, began sponsoring sailing events for anyone and everyone who wanted to race – just not too seriously. Proudly anti-establishment, the club’s first annual subscription was a mere $3, and all members needed to join up was a boat and a bucket. “People thought we were a disgrace,” Wayne has admitted. How things change.

Four decades later, and not only has the down-to-earth club swelled to 285 members, its sense of camaraderie is off the charts. “We’re a high-karma club, with zero pretensions – unlike some of the others around,” explains Grant Fjermedal, a former commodore and Sloop Tavern stalwart of 42 years. He’s also the very embodiment of Ballard’s Scandinavian fishing village heritage. Having migrated here from Norway in 1909, Fjermedal’s grandparents’ names are inscribed on the weather-worn statue of Norse explorer Leif Erikson that stands proudly at the town’s Shilshole Marina.

Grant’s floppy white cap, he tells me, is known as a ‘Ballard Stetson’, worn “so you can sling a fish over your shoulder without hitting yourself in the ear” (much like the cod and chips at the Sloop Tavern, stories here are best taken with a liberal pinch of salt). I ask whether there’s a club dress code and am
met with another wall of laughter. I guess that’ll be a no, then.

In fact, despite those bracing northwesterly winds, it turns out that the ocean is a great leveller, and not just sartorially. “We do have the odd wealthy person in the club, but once everyone’s on a boat, you’d never guess,” says Shannon Renner, one of many women to take the helm at the club over the years. Without overhead costs or paid staff, the STYC’s humble beginnings have helped it to stay affordable for everyone over the decades. “We’re made up of 100% volunteers,” explains Shannon. “And our members never let us down. We always seem to make it happen.”

And they make it happen plenty, with an average of 70 boats competing in weekly ‘beer can’ races, so called because they’re casual enough to enjoy a tinny or two while you sail – all summer long. Plus other events with brilliantly off-the-wall names like Take Your Time Fridays and Three-Buoy Fiasco.

Back in the early days, the club had to fight hard for the respect of the local sailing community. But these days snobbery rolls right off Sloop members like water off the proverbial duck’s back. “We may not be a ‘proper’ yacht club,” shrugs board member Ken Chin, “but our membership numbers match those of other local clubs, and the way we run our business is actually better. We give people of lesser means a way to go out cruising and just enjoy themselves.” Shannon nods in agreement. “These days people are more respectful, because they see the talent we’ve got on our books.”

As well as boasting some of Seattle’s finest tackers and jibers, the Sloop Tavern Yacht Club is a rite of passage for rookies who want to learn the ropes alongside more experienced skippers. “If you’re a young person with a sailboat and you don’t have a whole lot of money, this is the place you’re going to come,” says club treasurer Tammy Walker, whose boat Kowloon is often crewed by newbie sailors. Charity is a key part of the STYC ethos too, with its annual Blakely Rock Benefit Race raising thousands of dollars for local causes. “We start off with a pancake breakfast,” says Grant. “I’ll have a spatula in one hand and a mug of beer in the other.” How does he steer? “With my knees.”

A shore thing

It’s not only Sloop that’s hellbent on passing on boating skills to the next generation. On the edge of Seattle’s Lake Union in the shadow of Amazon’s shiny new HQ, The Center for Wooden Boats has over a thousand active volunteers, who all pitch in to help build and restore boats, oars and equipment in exchange for boat rental. Three hours of elbow grease earns you an hour of free rowing. Or in my case, 10 minutes of flailing around helplessly in circles.

“Don’t sweat it. Every time someone brings a boat back damaged, we get a whole new bunch of volunteers,” consoles Fleet Manager Shelby Allman, as she rescues my rogue oar. “It’s a constant cycle of people learning to sail and then learning how to fix the damage.”

When the museum’s new Wagner Education Center opens later this year, it will house one of the biggest public carpentry shops in all of America.

The backdrop to all this messing about on the water is the increasingly trendy
neighbourhood of Ballard. Just a hop, skip or paddle away from downtown Seattle, the Scandi-style waterfront area is rapidly evolving as younger crowds move in, but remains anchored to its seafaring roots. “This is one of the only communities that’s really kept its core,” says Shannon. Despite an influx of hipsters, “there’s still a history and heritage that people gravitate towards.”

As local resident Ashley Rodriguez, who runs shop and dining space Not Without Salt, summarises: “Ballard is cool, but in a toned-down sort of way. Less curled moustaches and more thirty-somethings in flannel carrying their babies in front packs.”

Alongside weathered local institutions like Ballard Smoke Shop and live music venue Tractor, new eateries are helping to turn the neighbourhood into a first-rate dining destination. There’s ice-cream parlour Salt & Straw, which doles out generous scoops of mouthwatering flavours such as honey lavender and sea salt with caramel ribbons. Daily queues snake out of the door for Dungeness crab eggs Benedict at The Fat Hen and at airy oyster bar The Walrus and the Carpenter, punters jostle for spare stools, while behind the gleaming zinc bar, chefs shuck their way through seven different varieties of oyster caught fresh that morning. Scarfing these plump, briny beauties with piles of warm sourdough and whipped butter, you start to feel distinctly sympathetic towards Lewis Carroll’s fictional gluttons, for
whom the place was named. Blame all the fresh sea air you like, but Ballard makes you really greedy.

Up the road at Ray’s Boathouse, a plum waterside spot, the menu is another love song to the deep blue sea, featuring dishes such as steaming clam chowder, succulent wild salmon, chunky Alaskan spot prawns, and a meltingly rich, silky black cod marinated for up to 10 days in sake kasu, the earthy by-product of sake fermentation.

“The ingredients are all from here, and we want our food to taste that way. We really want you to know it had fins,” chuckles executive chef Paul Duncan.

Out on the wooden deck, as the sun melts into the waves in a dreamy golden sunset and the snowy peaks of the Olympia Mountains flash coral in the distance, it’s a stretch to remember that you’re in a 21st-century city at all.

“There’s a certain introspective moment you have when you’re sitting out here, nothing in front of you but sailboats, thinking about them washing in where the Salish Sea meets the Puget Sound, and all the islands the water caresses along the way,” muses Paul, lost in his own thoughts.

Back at the Sloop Tavern, we’re a few more pitchers down and the stories are still flowing thick and fast. Legend has it that one day, two Australians named Brian and Peter sailed to Seattle on the first leg of their round-the-world-trip. “They staggered in here one foggy morning and promptly decided to abandon the rest of their trip.”

“It’s the only hazard of this most friendly of sailing clubs – pop in and you may not want to leave. There are countless examples of how Sloop has effortlessly seduced those who’ve walked through its doors, and any visitors rocking up had better come prepared for the unexpected.

“I pulled in here for a beer one night and ended up on a two-week sailboat race to Hawaii,” says Grant Fjermedal, who still looks faintly bemused by this turn of events.

As for me, an afternoon on the mercifully calm water with Sloop racing veteran Kirk Utter does teach me a few things. How to fold a mainsail (not like a bed sheet, it turns out), and how to take a halfway decent selfie on deck without spilling your whiskey (medicinal of course, it was cold). It’s enough to give me a taste for life on the ocean waves.

“There’s no better place on earth than here to sail, with our sheltered inland waters and beautiful harbours,” boasts Grant. “People who have sailed around the world, come back and say, ‘If only Seattle had a warmer climate...’ But steely skies come as a package deal, along with the can-do Scandinavian resilience. How would the Sloop Tavern Yacht Club sum up the spirit of Ballard? The answer comes complete with Nordic-American accent. ‘Ya sure, you betcha.’”