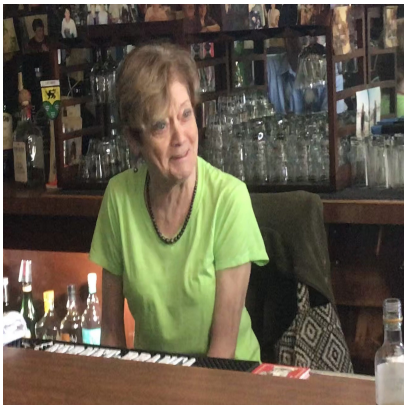

Longtime owner of Inner Richmond neighborhood bar keeps the Irish flowing

Description

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Itâ??s 5 oâ??clock on a Friday evening and customers are just starting to crowd into Oâ??Keeffeâ??s, a no-apologies Irish bar in the Inner Richmond. Annie Oâ??Keeffe, the diminutive owner, is serving up $4 beers and $6 shots of whiskey.

Itâ??s not too busy yet, so she takes a couple of minutes to fetch a bowl of water for a customerâ??s dog. A young woman asks for a cup of tea. Oâ??Keeffe, short, slim and given to wearing loose dresses over leggings, serves it up and brushes off an offer to pay. â??Thereâ??s no need,â?• she says with a wave.



While putting out a bowl of water for customersâ?? dogs, Annie Oâ??Keefe gets a kiss from a regular customer. (Photo by Bill Snyder; all other photos by Colin Campbell)

Except for the fact that smoking is no longer permitted, that scene might have been much the same any time since 1977. Thatâ??s the year the now 71-year-old Northern Ireland native quit her job as a bank teller and started working for the owner, her boyfriend Tim Oâ??Keeffe.



Annie began working at the bar in 1977, when it was owned by Tim Oâ??Keefe, who became her husband within a few years.

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They married a few years later and worked together until Tim, born in County Cork, died of cancer, in 1997. The hand-colored sign hanging next to an Irish tricolor outside the front door still reads â??Oâ??Keeffeâ??s Annie & Tim.â?• A photo of the late publican hangs behind the bar.

Oâ??Keeffe didnâ??t consider selling the place when her husband passed. â??He always wanted to hold onto it until the end. Those were his wishes.,â?• she said. Her back bothers her these days, so she generally only works Friday nights, with employees picking up shifts the rest of the week. (Oâ??Keeffeâ??s is closed Tuesdays and Wednesdays.)

In business since 1972, Oâ??Keeffeâ??s is the kind of homey dive bar no longer fashionable in many parts of the city. It doesnâ??t serve fancy, $12 cocktails and offers no food. It doesnâ??t even have beer on tap. Wrestling a heavy keg, said Oâ??Keeffe, â??is too much for me.â?•

When a customer orders a Guinness, offered warm or cold, she pops the lid on the black can and quickly plunks it upside down into a pint glass, rather than pouring it slowly and letting a foamy head form, a no-mess, time-saving technique.

Oâ??Keeffe came to San Francisco in 1975 for the wedding of a brother and stayed. She and Tim never had children â?? he had three from a previous marriage â?? but sheâ??s not without local family. She has 11 siblings, seven of whom still live in San Francisco.

Where everybody knows your name

Her mother ran a shop in Northern Ireland for a while, but when the babies kept coming, she had plenty to do at home taking care of them, said Oâ??Keeffe. Her father worked for the local government, known as the Council, doing road maintenance. For a few years in the 1930s, he lived in New York City, where he was a bus conductor. But he moved back to Ireland, â??because he knew where the pretty girls were,â?• Oâ??Keeffe joked.



Photos of Tim Oâ??Keefe, above, and Annie, below, grace the establishment walls, along with other memorabilia.

Oâ??Keeffe is from Mohill, a small town County Leitrim. Although sheâ??s lived in San Francisco far longer than in Northern Ireland, her accent is strong. When she speaks rapidly, which is often, it can be a bit hard for someone not accustomed to her brogue to follow.

Her bar is an orderly place. Customers shoot pool, watch sports on three large screens and frequently engage Oâ??Keeffe, who is not at all hard to engage, in conversation. â??I love to meet people and shoot the breeze,â?• she said.

She knows many of her customers by name and doesnâ??t worry much about someone whoâ??s had too much to drink getting out of hand. â??When they do, I show them the door.â?• She keeps a baseball bat behind the bar, just in case, â??but Iâ??ve never had to use it,â?• she said.

The Richmond District isnâ??t as heavily Irish as it once was, but on any given evening youâ??ll likely find Irish men and women here drinking and chatting each other up.

â??It feels like a bar in Ireland, mainly because of Annie,â?• said Kenny Somerville, a Northern Ireland transplant whoâ??s been habituating Oâ??Keeffeâ??s for a couple of decades, occasionally performing on banjo and mandolin. â??Sheâ??s very Irish in her sense of humor,â?• he said. â??The way she deals with people is very familiar to me.â?•

As befits a neighborhood bar, many of the customers live or work nearby.

Leaving â??The Troublesâ?? behind

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Bob, a professional in his early 50s, was there with his well-behaved dog at his feet. â??Iâ??ve been coming here 10 years â?? itâ??s a block and a half from home,â?• he said. â??Itâ??s like a family with lots of regulars. Itâ??s dog friendly and my momâ??s maiden name was Oâ??Connor, so I have claimed Irishness.â?•

At the time Oâ??Keeffe emigrated, Northern Ireland was embroiled in the sectarian violence known as The Troubles. â??We were right beside the border. It was pretty rough,â?• she recalled. â??There were a lot of killings and shootings.â?•

Her family wasnâ??t involved in the fighting, she said, but her Republican sympathies â?? the Irish version â?? are on open display. Thereâ??s a poster of Bobby Sands, an IRA leader who died during a hunger strike in prison; a sign that reads â??Get England out of Ireland;â?• and the jukebox is loaded with songs celebrating Irelandâ??s battle for independence and the struggles in the North.



Annieâ??s bar once hosted meetings and benefits for the Irish National Aid Association, known as Noraid, during The Troubles in Ireland.

The bar hosted meetings and benefits for the Irish National Aid Association, known as Noraid, during The Troubles. San Franciscoâ??s Board of Supervisors recognized the coupleâ??s work on behalf of Noraid with a certificate of honor that still hangs on the wall.

The pandemic was hard on local businesses, and Oâ??Keeffeâ??s was no exception. It was closed for nearly two years and itâ??s taken a while for business to revive. â??People were still nervous about being in a crowd,â?• Oâ??Keeffe said. â??Some still are, even with masks.â?•

All are Irish here

But the bar stools are filling up now and Oâ??Keeffe has kept prices low in defiance of inflation and worries over profit margins. Retirement? Not likely. â??I enjoy it every day. Iâ??ll keep going as long as I can.â?•

And thatâ??s good news for customers like Jack, an Asian man in his 60s who has a real estate office across the street. â??The people are friendly, the drinks are reasonable, and us old Irish guys got to stick together,â?• he said.

Senior Beat writer Naomi Marcus contributed to this story.

Category

1. All Posts

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