

Remembering Dennis Ray Wheaton

On December 27, 2020 I tromp along on my treadmill, reading the Sunday New York Times. I pull up the next section. On the first page, I see colorful hand-drawn images with an inviting cocktail sitting square in the middle, some kind of fruit-based concoction inside in a tall oval-shaped glass, it's topped with a purple straw, a skewered cherry, a sliced orange and, of course, that little half-unfurled bright umbrella. The headline reads, "Reclaiming the Tiki Bar."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/23/business/tiki-bar-history.html?searchResultPosition=1>

I'm sucked in, speed up the treadmill, and hasten to read the three-page article. It tells a quick early history of the tiki bar, accurately from what I know, and then moves on to contemporary concerns about cultural appropriation and even racism (I don't think they mentioned sexism but it's there too in the tiki bar's social history, if you want to track it down, as is polytheism and animism, albeit perhaps jokingly.)

My first thought is, "I need to tell Dennis." So he can read it too. Then it occurs to me that he would have already seen it himself, because he was an avid reader of the Times. I put the newspaper down on the table and got distracted by something else. I never emailed Dennis to touch base on this article even though I still intended to do so. My regrets. My deepest regrets.

On Tuesday, December 29 I received an email from Dennis's wife Susan informing me that he had passed away the prior weekend. That email I thought about sending on Sunday might have been too late, but it also might have been my last communication with Dennis, a long and cherished friend, colleague and collaborator. Like I said, deep regrets.

Why was that tiki bar story relevant? It was of interest because some years earlier, Dennis and I had published a scholarly article on the social history of the tiki bar. Silly? Frivolous? Certainly, some of my colleagues thought so. But Dennis and I had gotten interested in tiki bars for a serious purpose. We had been pursuing a research agenda about authenticity in consumer products and services. (See:

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/50917925> The Organizational Construction of Authenticity An Examination of Contemporary Food and Dining in the US.)

Our work together often centered on food and dining, areas of Dennis' great expertise. As part of our thinking, we asked ourselves, what is the least authentic kind of restaurant or place we know, the most inauthentic place?

Trader Vic's and tiki bars came to mind. We'd not been to one---at least any time recently. So, we hopped in my car, rolled down El Camino Real in Palo Alto, plopped down at the local Trader Vic's bar and ordered up. Sure enough, the place seemed like a joke to us when it came to authenticity. Camp, even kitschy. A mai tai got the creative juices flowing. What was the history of this kind of place? Had it ever been considered authentic? Those questions set us off for years on a social history project about the tiki bar. I won't reiterate our answers here but

instead refer you to the published article reporting our findings here:
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10253866.2018.1457528>.

I first met Dennis in the mid 1980s. I was at the University of Chicago to give a talk and Paul Hirsch invited him to a dinner they had set up for me. As I remember it, just the three of us were there at a small place in Hyde Park. We had a good time but like most such events, I expected that would be the last I would see or hear from Dennis, who was a graduate student at Chicago at the time.

Sometime during our dinner, I must have mentioned to Dennis that I was starting to study craft brewers. Because a bit later I got a letter from him making me an offer too good to be true: If I would pay his registration fee, then he would attend the National Microbrewers Conference convening soon in Chicago. He would interview key figures in the emerging industry and write up a report for me to use. I knew Dennis was trained as an ethnographer, I knew he was smart, I knew he knew food and drink. He also wrote for the NYT as a free-lancer, so he could use their credentials to help get access. Of course, I agreed immediately.

A few weeks later, I received the report and transcription. It is fabulous! All 100+ pages of it! It not only helped me understand the industry better, it contained many valuable quotes. Today, it stands as a rare contemporaneous account of the pioneers of craft beer in America. With the permission of Dennis' wife Susan Weiss, I post it here for others to peruse and use. We only ask that you give Dennis attribution. See the posted report on this web page.

That exchange started a lifelong relationship with Dennis. When I was in Chicago and had time, I would spend an extra day or two with him. We would eat, and yes, we'd really eat. Of course, for Chicago magazine we ate at some of the best restaurants in the city. Others have written about those terrific experiences and although I will mention a few below, I will not repeat them in detail here.

I do want to want to note that Dennis was no food snob, he loved quality low-end and street food too. With Dennis, I recall:

- woving down several orders of fried chicken outside at Harald's in south side Chicago, after getting our meal through a window of bullet-proof glass a couple of blocks from Barack Obama's house;
- eating a "cheeseboiger" with beer and onions for breakfast at the Billy Goat Tavern below Michigan Avenue in Downtown Chicago;
- sharing a two-pound-plus juicy smoked beef rib at midday at Louis Mueller's in Taylor, Texas;
- slurping down a bowl of spicy Vietnamese pho tai chin for lunch at Pho Vi Hoa in Mountain View under the watchful gaze of the stern military-like owner at the cash register;
- nibbling down a hot Choriqueso Torta at Xoco in downtown Chicago while squeezed up against the wall by the crowd;

- nursing hangovers with a bowl of steaming hot menudo topped with jalapenos at greasy Taco El Grelense M & G in tony Palo Alto;
- bellying up to the bar to scream for another locally made beer at Old McSorley's Ale House in New York, careful not to step on the waiter's garbage can liner-cum-apron;
- sneaking into the back yard at the fabled but closed Snow's BBQ in Lexington, Texas and chatting up the local pit hand Clay while he turned some briskets smoking for the coming weekend rush;
- sitting awkwardly but patiently at our four-place linoleum table square in the middle of the room at Frisco Fried in Bayview in San Francisco, waiting 45 minutes for our cooked-to-order fried chicken to arrive while watching the everyday personal dramas of the underclass play out: doors slamming, people screaming, the flashing EMT van arriving and taking in the convulsing elderly woman turning on the curb of the sidewalk just moments after sitting at the table next to us and shouting back to her ne'er do well lousy adult son.

Dennis was especially fond of Mexican food and Tex-Mex. He knew an enormous amount about it and was always pointing out little things that were lost on me. What I regard as maybe Dennis' best Chicago column was around 2000 and it was on Mexican food and restaurants, in Chicago but also in Oaxaca. He was nominated for a Beard award for it, (but it does not show up the magazine's online archive, part of the pre-digital archive I guess). Rick Bayless of Chicago was one of his heroes, and Susan tells me that Dennis once received a personal note from Bayless telling him he appreciated how much Dennis knew about the food. That would have made Dennis's day, week, no, year. Susan also tells me that Dennis spent a few days once cooking with famed Diana Kennedy, the woman now widely blamed for igniting the cultural denigration of Tex-Mex food. Dennis's intense interest in this food genre led to another project we conducted and published an article on about the social history of Tex-Mex cuisine. You can read it here: <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/tex-mex-culinary-sham-or-authentic-cuisine>

Of course, I did get the opportunity to share some fine dining experiences with Dennis courtesy of Chicago magazine. He took me to places I knew well but could rarely afford, like Per Se in New York. But he also always knew the new avant-garde type of place and we went there too. Places like WD50 in New York and Coi in San Francisco. I got to eat at Peter Luger's in Brooklyn as part of Dennis's two city comparison of steakhouses in Chicago and New York. I can imagine the howls in the Windy City when his cover story announced New York the winner.

Dennis took his restaurant critic work very seriously. When he was asked to review a restaurant with an unfamiliar cuisine, or when he encountered something unfamiliar, he took to studying and analyzing it like a scholar. He read articles, he talked to people, he bought cookbooks, he bought ingredients, and he experimented in his kitchen. As he once told me, he felt it was important to figure what is really going on with a certain type of food. He also researched the history and the social history of the food.

Dennis did better research work than some university scholars do. All for a magazine, for less than a professor's pay. Did he have any regrets? He told me that while he and Susan didn't have money, they felt like they ate like billionaires, going to top places every other night, ordering wildly and plentifully, taking out the leftovers for the intervening days. He did tell me that his one regret was not negotiating a gym membership as part of the deal--eating like that puts the pounds on you, even if you eat judiciously. The spells of intense eating he sometimes did were mind boggling. Imagine eating at 40 steakhouses in 30 days, or a comparable bout of pork ribs. All in Chicago, where the portions run ample. It is no wonder that Dennis developed diabetes.

An ever-present part of the Wheaton review team was Dennis' animated wife of many years Susan Weiss. Susan ate with Dennis and his guests at most meals, and she helped him with organizing his notes the next day. For this essay, I asked Susan to look at the old articles and tell me if she had a few favorites to highlight. She replied:

"...what sticks out in my mind are types rather than specific articles. For many monthly articles there were two restaurants reviewed, and we used to visit them two to three times each. (Now due to budget before pandemic the reviewer was only going once! Thank goodness he got out before those restrictions. You really can't give a reliable review based on one visit.) But there were those articles on steakhouses, pizzas, sushi, or BBQ, where we dined at that type of restaurant almost every night for a month or two! For example, there was one steak article where we narrowed a longer list down to 20 steakhouses. Eating steak out almost every night! Or Best New [Restaurant] where we also would dine out almost every night for a month or two.

Then there were the restaurants we compared to other cities. He did a nice one comparing Topolobampo and Frontera Grill to two restaurants in Dallas. Or pinxtos after visiting San Sebastain, Spain, and eating at numerous tapas bars there. Or visiting the French Laundry and Alinea for one article. Or comparing some New York steakhouses with Chicago steakhouses. Once we went to about every restaurant in Chinatown!

[I also recall] the time the editor sent us to New York to eat at 7 delis in 4 days so he could be knowledgeable about the Chicago deli scene. The editor wanted him to have the chopped liver at the now closed Romanian Steakhouse (have to verify name). Those were the days when the magazine had a bigger budget."

When Dennis passed, we were working a project about authenticity in American barbeque. Like all of our projects, it was on a slow timetable without any certain completion date, or even a plan to complete it. We exchanged ideas and wrote when the moment moved us, when we had some insight we liked. Somehow we had managed to do this before to decent effect, and were confident we could do it again. Besides, we were having fun. Among other things, the project required a three-day road trip to Austin, Texas and environs, interviewing pit masters, eating barbeque, and washing it down with alcohol to cut the fat. The project remains unfinished and I

hope to take it up again and make something out of it. For now, all we really have are some preliminary notes Dennis had jotted down. I post them too on this web site in case there is any interest.

Dennis was a humble and quiet man, not a big talker. He expressed himself through his writing. To me Dennis exemplified the kind of writer that famed novelist-poet Jim Harrison had in mind when someone asked him if he read interviews of other writers. "Why would I do that?" he asked in return. "Any writer who does not leave the best part of himself on the page is not worth listening to, and if he does that, then you should read what he writes, instead of listen to what he says" (quote paraphrased from memory).

If you listened carefully when Dennis spoke in his quiet voice, you usually learned something interesting, maybe really interesting. It is now our profound misfortune that we no longer have Dennis to listen to directly. But we can still read what he wrote and he will remain in my ear forever and I hope he does in yours too.

Glenn Carroll
January 26, 2021



BIBLIOGRAPHY OF DENNIS RAY WHEATON

Beard Foundation acknowledgment: <https://www.jamesbeard.org/chef/dennis-ray-wheaton>.
Dennis was nominated for awards in 1999 and 2001.

Semantic Scholar: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/author/Dennis-Ray-Wheaton/116387286>

List of Dennis's recent (2007+) Chicago stories as critic:
<https://www.chicagomag.com/contributor/dennis-ray-wheaton/>

Some of my favorites:

"Cities on the edge" <https://www.chicagomag.com/chicago-magazine/september-2005/cities-on-the-edge/> (Full disclosure, I was living in NY then and accompanied Dennis to WD-50 and Per Se.)

“Palette meets palate” <https://www.chicagomag.com/chicago-magazine/september-2009/dining-out-palette-meets-palate/>

“Hog wild” <https://www.chicagomag.com/chicago-magazine/february-2009/dining-out-hog-wild/>

New York Times articles by Dennis:

<https://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/18/garden/at-the-nation-s-table-chicago.html?searchResultPosition=6>

<https://www.nytimes.com/1987/12/30/garden/at-the-nation-s-table-chicago.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/1988/06/01/garden/at-the-nation-s-table-chicago.html?searchResultPosition=2>

<https://www.nytimes.com/1988/08/10/garden/at-the-nation-s-table-575588.html?searchResultPosition=3>

<https://www.nytimes.com/1988/09/21/garden/at-the-nation-s-table-chicago.html?searchResultPosition=8>

<https://www.nytimes.com/1989/02/08/garden/at-the-nation-s-table-830289.html?searchResultPosition=10>

<https://www.nytimes.com/1989/03/22/garden/at-the-nation-s-table-902589.html?searchResultPosition=7>

<https://www.nytimes.com/1989/05/03/garden/at-the-nation-s-table-071989.html?searchResultPosition=9>

<https://www.nytimes.com/1996/08/11/travel/if-the-democrats-arrive-hungry-chicago-is-ready.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/travel/on-the-road-the-grand-detour-off-ramp-dining-631256.html?searchResultPosition=1>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/05/travel/grasshoppers-with-mescal-in-oaxaca.html?searchResultPosition=3>

Abstracts of some articles by Dennis:

<http://www.readabstracts.com/author/chicago-2004/dennis-ray-wheaton/>

<http://www.readabstracts.com/author/chicago-2005/dennis-ray-wheaton/>

SCHOLARLY ARTICLES:

Wheaton, D.R., 1985. The strength of primordial ties: Suburban community adaptation to school system retrenchment. *Population Research and Policy Review*, 4(2), pp.133-148.

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/BF00127548>

Wheaton, D. R. 1996. Book Review of *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. By John Van Mannan. *American Journal of Sociology* 102, March 1997, p. 277.

<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/229269>

Wheaton, D.R., 1997. Book Review of *Kitchens: The Culture of Restaurant Work*. By Gary Alan Fine. *American Journal of Sociology* 102, March 1997, p. 1489.

<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/231114>

Wheaton, D.R., 1997. Eating agendas: Food and nutrition as social problems. *Contemporary Sociology*, 26(1), p.94.

Carroll, G.R. and Wheaton, D.R., 2009. The organizational construction of authenticity: An examination of contemporary food and dining in the US. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 29, pp.255-282.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191308509000070>

Carroll, G.R. and Wheaton, D.R., 2017. "Authentic Kitsch: Donn, Vic and the Emergence of the Tiki Bar Social Category." *Academy of Management Proceedings*. Published Online:30 November 2017.

<https://doi.org/10.5465/ambpp.2016.10930abstract>

<https://journals.aom.org/doi/10.5465/ambpp.2016.10930abstract>

Carroll, G.R. and Wheaton, D.R., 2019. Donn, Vic and tiki bar authenticity. *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 22(2), pp.157-182.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10253866.2018.1457528>

Wheaton, D.R. and Carroll, G.R., 2017. Where did "tex-mex" come from? The divisive emergence of a social category. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 37, pp.143-166.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191308517300035>