

Playing With the Rich: A Day of Yachting on the Bay

If you have ever gone sailing with the rich, by their invitation, you're in for a good time, generally. They can be quite gracious. They keep lots of cold beer aboard, which they will happily share with you and other guests; they even serve nicely chilled white wine in little cups, particularly when sailing downwind, which is the most pleasant and quiet direction to sail, as everyone knows. As Scott Fitzgerald once observed, the rich are not like you and me, unless the yacht that they happen to be racing is losing, in which case they become once again just like you and me.

I pondered this proverb shortly after being politely asked to leave the 'Members Only' bar at the New York Yacht Club's Newport encampment, where I had begun to tack over toward a wonderfully large ripe cheese, one which, I must confess, I had begun to covet with my unworthy eyes; but I am getting ahead of my story.

Thanks to a kind friend's invitation, I went yachting one fine summer's day as an invited guest aboard a 12-metre racing yacht, in fact a former successful America's Cup defender. Yachting is not sailing. I have been sailing for many years, in big boats and little boats, up and down Narragansett Bay and elsewhere. In all that time I never realized that I was not actually yachting. What's the difference? I cannot be certain, except to say that, like an epiphany, when you get there, you will, all of a sudden, know that you have arrived.

Certainly, there are many similarities between yachting and sailing. Both involve wind, sails, boats, booze, a certain amount of discomfort, and frequent use of the 'head'. Maybe it had to do with being on a very large, fast, and expensive sailboat; but at the close of the day, I knew that, finally and for the first time in my life, that I had been actually 'yachting'. It was, I think, a matter of many little details, from the size of the

boat to the location of the event, to the people involved in the event, but in the end it all added up to a remarkable experience, and I understand, I think, why the rich like to keep it in their own domain.

I thank my friend Jim – a friend since High School – for the invitation to go yachting. Jim’s family owns a tidy bagel shop in Bristol, and was contracted to supply some ninety-odd bagel sandwich lunches, complete with chips, pickle, and cookie – to the crew and guests aboard the five 12-metre yachts competing in the Save the Bay 2004 Regatta. He called me a couple of days beforehand and asked me if I would like to help deliver the lunches; for my trouble, I might have the opportunity to sail on one of the yachts in the race. Naturally, I was delighted by the prospect, and accepted.

The five yachts participating in the regatta ranged from vintage to modern, and included successful America’s Cup defenders, such as WEATHERLY, the winner in 1962, and the boat that I sailed on that day.

Jim and I loaded the boxes of bagel lunches into the shop’s new ‘bagelmobile’, which Jim’s father recently bought to make deliveries for the shop’s growing wholesale business. It really is nothing unusual, just a nice new Dodge Caravan. It is a light brown color, however – the color of a lightly toasted bagel – and might have been appetizing in appearance if it were not shaped entirely like a motor vehicle.

We drove to the New York Yacht Club’s Newport clubhouse, a beautiful Gilded Age relic, a former mansion in the French Chateau style, complete with meticulously sculpted grounds, some very large and ancient trees, and a fetid green pond full of plump quacky-ducks.

Of course we could not go inside the mansion, but could peer in the windows. We were told to deliver the lunches to the loading area down on the dock. Our three boxes of bagel lunches looked dwarfish next to the big bags of ice, copious bottles of

wine, and cases of beer unabashedly stacked for loading. Jim wondered, aloud, what the boat assignments were going to be. What if, he mused, he and I ended up assigned to different boats?

“They have to put us on separate boats” I replied.

“Why is that?”

“Because no one boat can carry enough beer for the both of us” I replied, beginning to feel a little jaunty and yachty.

I glanced around at the other crewmembers and guests gathering on the dock. It was almost time for the skipper’s meeting. These meetings are a racing tradition, during which time all the boat skippers, crew, navigators, etc. are told everything that they need to know, and then some, about the race course, the particular rules for the day, and other pertinent and often arcane information. This information is usually delivered by a crusty old salt (i.e., Race Committee Chairman) at rapid-fire rate. As with all skipper’s meetings, when finished, the participants, particularly the skippers, are more confused than they were before the meeting began. So, they sail out to the race course, turn on their hand-held VHF radios, and sort it all out during the actual race through constant and sometimes shrill and short-tempered communication with the Race Committee boat, which is usually anchored out in some choppy place near the Starting Line.

Five hours of sun, spray, white sails, slanting decks, slapping waves, and camaraderie later, we were back at the dock, a little hungry, a little thirsty, and a little sun-burnt and tired. The New York Yacht Club had set up an outdoor cash bar on the grass near the patio. This bar was for the regatta participants, similar, I suppose, to tossing a chewy-bone out into the yard so that the doggie will eat it out there rather than on the carpet behind the couch. Drink prices were dear and everything from beer to martinis was served in plastic cups. A lady seated a few feet away sold tickets that, useless everywhere else in the world,

could only be redeemed for drinks at the bar. I have a problem with drinking a pricey cocktail out of a plastic cup; it feels demeaning, both to myself, and to the value of the ‘dark and stormy’ in the cup. Can a gentleman not find a place that serves a proper drink in a proper glass? I thought I might investigate that possibility. Some people on the patio were sipping red wine from lovely stemware, and ale from English pub mugs; it was clearly not a mirage; it had to come from somewhere; I suspected that there was an elegant bar within the walls of the Chateau.

Incredibly, the doors to the chateaux (seems ludicrous to call it a ‘clubhouse’), shut and locked earlier, were now open, permitting entry of even such a lost waif as myself. Feeling adventurous and just a little bit saucy, I wandered inside to have a look around, expecting to be hustled back out the door at any instant by some goon in a starched white shirt and black trousers. But no; the rooms were mostly empty. Wonderful rooms, shelves of leather-bound books, classic, vintage, beautiful, uncomfortable antique furniture; oriental rugs; half-models of famous yachts peppered the walls; beautiful oil paintings of yachts racing a hundred or more years ago; and more dark mahogany in the finely-tooled woodwork than in all the jungles of Sumatra. The marble-tiled Men’s Room resembled those found in finer hotels, the kind of hotels that I have stayed in rarely, and always on someone else’s corporate expense account. There was even a mouthwash dispenser.

As I wandered room to room, taking in the wonders at my leisure, I suddenly turned a corner and found myself facing the Member’s Bar. It was quite elegant, and somewhat busy. I hesitated, and would have sheepishly turned and fled, but for the sight of a very large, round wheel of some sort of wonderful cheese, with an ivory-handled cheese-knife stuck in the top of it, that had been recently placed on a corner of the bar for snacking. The sight of this mighty cheese emboldened me; even from a distance, I could see that this magnificent fromage was shot through with veins of blue; probably a heavenly, venerable old

Stilton, I thought to myself, crusty and runny and ripe with an air redolent of rotten sneaker. Whittier's 'Wreck of the Palatine' came to mind, as I noted the forbidding look on the face of the lady tending bar; "...Where waves had pity, could ye none spare?"

In my mind's eye, I can see Grandfather's face scowling; I can hear him saying, "What's the matter with you? Don't you know that you're not supposed to go in there? Who do you think you are?" His generation easily accepted one's assigned place in the established strata of society. One did not try to go where the rich go; one did not argue with a policeman. One did not question rules or regulations. To be sure, our culture has changed; people question authority, as the bumper sticker once urged. For my part, I have, on occasion, a difficult time with authority. A relative once told me that Grandfather had described me as a 'difficult guy'. Aside from the fact that I believe this relative to be insane anyway, this possibly spurious revelation, over the nearly twenty years since Grandfather passed on, has always itched me like hair down my collar after a haircut, not so much because he may have said it, but because it has, even for me, the ring of truth. No matter. We charge ahead, strapped to the front of Fate's locomotive, victims of our own genes and destiny. I decided once again to be a difficult guy.

I approached the bar carefully – gently tacking to the windward mark, hoping that the other patrons plus my casual air and zig-zagging would distract the maid behind the bar – and actually made it to the mahogany pier where, coming up alongside, I opened my mouth to order a drink – whilst eyeing the cheese – but I was immediately recognized for the chaff that I am by the well-practiced eye of the barkeep. I was politely but firmly told that this bar was for NYYC members only. Not even my membership in a local yacht club would help – no, no reciprocal privileges with dockside boat-shanties calling themselves Yacht Clubs, non-entities with the regrettable audacity to fly a burgee and issue membership cards. I would have to go to the plastic-cup bar out on the lawn and wallow

with the rest of the non-members; the graciousness of the rich has its limits, and comes to a screeching halt when privileged turf is thus trod upon.

Still, there was consolation; we were treated to a gracious grilled buffet, which cheered everyone, since we were all hungry. Now came back the graciousness; someone in authority, fearing that the nice lawn, still soft from recent rains, would be damaged by all the sailors tramping over it, decided that the meal would be served buffet-style within the NYYC club building, and we would be allowed to eat inside, at neat round tables. The buffet was excellent; all the elements that one would expect to find at a grilling, hamburgers, sausages, chicken, lovely salads, and – grilled hot dogs! Some day, I mused, I will be able to tell my unbelieving grandchildren that I dined, not a filet mignon, not on opulent beefsteak and oysters, but on a hot dog, at the New York Yacht Club, in most elegant surroundings! But that, after all, is part of yachting; roughing it a little; having a cheeseburger with a fine glass – ahem, plastic cup if you're not a member - of Cabernet Sauvignon. All class distinctions aside, it was a great day, a fine race, with great people and a fair wind – a great day for the Bay and everyone out there trying to save it!