

NEW YORK TIMES

August 26, 2007

Show Business

Ice Cream, Onion Rings and Tony Soprano

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BLOOMFIELD

And now for the article:

THE party of four in booth B-3 was about to collect the lunch check and pay the cashier, but one detail needed to be taken care of before anyone moved. They handed their waitress a disposable camera and told her to fire away. With two flashes, she did.

Ron Stark, a co-owner of Holsten's Brookdale Confectionery, the suddenly famous sweet shop and restaurant on Broad Street in this Essex County town, glanced over at the diners as a flashbulb went off.

He smiled and said, "Every day there's a couple of cameras going off in here."

Holsten's is the site of the last scene of the 86th and final episode of "The Sopranos." Tony Soprano, the fictitious mob boss, meets his family there for dinner. Then, as strangers lurk in the background, the screen goes black.

Exactly what happened after that became hotly debated after HBO first aired the episode on June 10: Was Tony killed or not?

What is not such a mystery is that business at the real Holsten's has soared after the episode and has not tapered off much.

"The first week or two was crazy," said Chris Carley, the other owner, who bought into the restaurant in 1981. "We had no idea what to expect. It was just nonstop people when we opened the door, to late at night."

Let me just interject here that I have never been to Holsten's myself. Having been a jaded New Yorker for most of my life, I have now spent over a decade and a half as a jaded New Jerseyan. But enough about me. Back to *The Sopranos*:

Other businesses are cashing in on "The Sopranos," too. Satin Dolls, the club in Lodi that was portrayed as the Bada Bing, is auctioning off stripper poles and other items. The owner of the Kearny building used for Satriale's pork store intends to sell pieces of the facade when he has it razed for a condo development.

Holsten's, which was opened as Strubie's in 1939 and was bought by the Stark family in 1964, became a tourist stop overnight. Take that party of four. Donald Higgins, who lives in a suburb of Chicago, brought his wife and two children to Holsten's on a recent afternoon.

His son, also named Donald, is a high school senior thinking about attending Rutgers University. Besides a tour of the campus, the Higgins family decided to tour several North Jersey spots featured on "The Sopranos."

They happened to arrive at Holsten's when booth B-3, where the Sopranos sat during the last scene, was vacant.

"We got lucky," the elder Donald Higgins said. "We walked to the back and said to each other: 'That's the table! Let's go!'"

Their lunch, naturally, included a \$2.75 bowl of onion rings. In the final episode, Tony ordered a bowl for the family, with the proclamation, "Best in the state!"

Quick aside here: I hadn't thought about it before, even though I watched that scene numerous times over, but who the hell talks like that, "Best in the state!""??? We'd just say they're the best, period, or the best around. North Jersey folks are not going to be thinking, hmmm, they have nothing like this down by Cape May, or over at the Delaware Water Gap! This isn't the state fair, after all. Obviously, the line was put there by David Chase as one last nod to the New Jersey landscape that he helped to put on the map, so to speak. Okay, now back to the article:

"Awesome," the younger Donald Higgins said. "They were so good."

The onion rings are bought frozen from a distributor. Mr. Stark and Mr. Carley are much prouder of their homemade ice cream and candy, as well as their hamburgers, which are made from beef that Mr. Stark said came daily from a butcher across Broad Street.

“They’re good,” Mr. Stark said of the onion rings. “Do I believe they’re the best in the state? Well, believe me, a lot of other restaurants sell the same thing.”

But David Chase, the series’ creator and executive producer, ordered onion rings – and liked them – when he had lunch there in February to check out the restaurant’s interior. Sales of onion rings have more than doubled since June 10, Mr. Carley said.

Don't you just love it! And ever wonder about how much of the food you order at a diner or coffee shop is actually just frozen food no different than the stuff you microwave at home? And remember that phrase we used to hear all the time, untouched by human hands? Whatever happened to that? Well, I guess that's not really relevant, but this next bit is great:

Mr. Stark soon noticed that the restaurant’s laminated menus were disappearing. A friend told him that patrons were taking them, and some were trying to sell them on eBay. One menu fetched \$4,150, he said.

The owners then made paper menus, and those disappeared, too. Someone bid \$121 for a paper Holsten’s menu. Mr. Stark said he thought that was crazy, contacted about 40 of the bidders and told them he would mail them free paper menus.

This reminds me of what Walter Benjamin called the *aura* of an original work of art (as opposed to a reproduction), which he described in terms of fetish value. But wait, there's more:

At one point soon after the episode first aired, the lines for a table – not just booth B-3 – stretched to the sidewalk outside the restaurant, which seats up to 80 people. The rush has died somewhat, says Ryan Moore, a waiter there, but tourists seem to know where to find it. The Higgins family said they used MapQuest.

The booth is not marked, and the only signs of Holsten's place in television history are two T-shirts hanging from the ceiling above the candy counter. A white T-shirt with the Holsten's logo and "The Final Episode" is being sold for \$23.95.

"A lady came in and bought 80 of them for a wedding," Mr. Moore said. "It's crazy how many people take TV so seriously."

There is talk of including Holsten's on a Sopranos tour. Meanwhile, Mr. Moore finds himself snapping photos for tourists every day. He also answers the same three questions: Where did Tony sit? What happened to Tony? And where's all the blood?

"They probably don't think that this kid's answered these same questions 100 times already," he said.

Piped over a loudspeaker is a radio station whose playlist includes "Don't Stop Believing," the Journey song that Tony plays on a tabletop jukebox in the final scene. There are no jukeboxes at Holsten's — "The Sopranos" used props.

Mr. Moore smiled when he said: "When that song comes on, we'll turn the volume up. And they love it."

The perfect song for people living out their televised fantasies, now that I think about it. Actually, there's been some talk in the local news about New Jersey's official state song--we don't have one. Here's a recent opinion piece from the editorial page editor of the [North Jersey Record](#) on the subject: