

# HUNTER'S INN

## This rural coastal restaurant and tavern runs a special tradition

By MATT LOVE

I sat drinking a beer at the longest bar I've seen on the Oregon or Washington coasts and listened to a Hunter's Inn regular talking to another regular with exquisite detail and superb narrative skill about his losing battle with a wily rat he was trying to exterminate. He'd killed other rodents with the usual poison, but this certain rat refrained from digesting it and another, more lethal one.

"He wouldn't touch it. He knew," said the man, with obvious respect for his adversary. I don't think he wanted to kill it anymore.

I thought it was about the best story I'd heard in a long, long time, and it happened inside Naselle's Hunter's Inn on a weekday afternoon.

There was a lot more to Hunter's Inn than the great rat tale, the soothing rustic ambiance or the fact that during the hunting and fishing seasons, the establishment's five or six rooms are routinely booked. The house whiskey is Canadian Hunter with a new logo of two huskies. It instantly reminded me of my dearly departed husky, so I had to chase the beer with a tribute shot. The whiskey wasn't all that good, (maybe try it on the rat?), but my husky deserved it after almost 17 years of companionship.

Hunter's Inn also features a server named Nicole, who is an excellent storyteller in her own right.

I noticed a piece of paper taped up behind the bar with a headline that read, "The Wall!!!" and asked Nicole about it. She informed me The Wall contained a list of names of regulars who participate in a Pay it Forward-kind of game. It works like this: when a customer buys another customer a drink who doesn't want to drink it that moment, the recipient's name goes on The Wall and they can claim the freebie later.

That got me thinking. Could I buy a drink for Elvis Presley and have his name written on The Wall and thus create a tiny private existential mystery in Naselle? I asked Nicole and she went to confer with the owner. No, the person had to be real and alive. Sorry Emily Dickinson, you would have been next.

Nicole seemed positively giddy to tell me about The Wall, but then she said, "That's nothing. You've got to hear about The Jar." Then she walked away to serve a patron.

The Jar? Nicole returned and directed my attention to a jar behind the bar loaded with one dollar bills and another one with numbered ticket stubs. The jar had a four-character number written on the label.

Nicole told me the game worked like this: Any customer could write their name on a ticket and have that ticket deposited into the jar. The customer kept the other half of the stub. Every day, a Hunter's Inn bartender added a dollar to the money jar and then drew



Hunter's Inn in Naselle, Washington, has a restaurant, bar and small motel.

PHOTO BY DANNY MILLER



Hunter's Inn features a long bar.

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Hunter's Inn in Naselle, Washington, runs a low-key daily raffle in The Jar.

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a ticket from the other jar. The ticket's winning number was listed on the label and never announced. If a customer happened to visit the bar that day, and noticed he had the winning number, and had his ticket with him, then he won the kitty. If the customer wasn't there, or didn't see that he'd won (which happened recently), his name went back into the jar.

This game had been going for 30 years; the tickets with names on them have never been replaced. In all my years of coastal tavern life, I had never heard of such a tradition. Naturally, I got a ticket and now I'm in The Jar for life. I know I'm going to win, too.

"We really should go through and get the dead people out," said Nicole.

No! Leave the dead alone. They rest immortal inside The Jar in a way an epitaph on a headstone can't possibly match.

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*Matt Love is the author/editor of 14 books, including "A Nice Piece of Astoria" and "The Great Birthright." His books are available at coastal bookstores or his website, nestuccaspitpress.com*