

Is Hooters the Most Underappreciated Restaurant of the 21st Century?

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On first glance, Hooters, the sleazy chain restaurant from Clearwater, FL, is everything I hate: The garish orange décor, the absurd focus on the secondary sexual characteristics of its wait staff, the discomfiting lack of vegetables on the menu, the wood-burned sign pointing the way to the bathroom that reads “John J. Crapper.” Instead, it’s one of the few places in the world in which I manage to feel wholly, intimately at home.

Hooters was founded on April 1, 1983 by six Floridian businessmen, as an April Fools Day Joke. They assumed their business model, transparently centered on hiring well-endowed, attractive women to serve breaded deep-fried chicken wings, was doomed to fail. Conversely, the restaurant chain founded on the bedrock of women’s emotional labor and sexual availability has led to upwards of \$900 million in revenues each year and inspired countless knockoffs including Twin Peaks, where the waitresses dress as sexy lumberjacks, and Tilted Kilt, where the uniforms are a lascivious abomination of Scottish traditional dress.

Yet despite their financial success, in 2017 Hooters is more often trotted out as the punchline to a joke than it is a valid option to go and dine. When Drake made reference to wanting wife up “Courtney from Hooters on Peachtree” in 2013, it was read as an example of Aubrey’s interminable thirst rather than a genuine proposition.

Whenever I tell people that I’m a “regular” at Hooters, they tend to giggle uncomfortably and reply, “I’ve never been.” I suspect they’re dealing with their own cognitive dissonance regarding a bookish hetero woman’s fiendish enthusiasm for a space that was tailor-made for tit-hungry jocks. I revel in this moment of squirming discomfort and use it as an opportunity to get people out of their comfort zone. Indeed, I am a veritable Hooters evangelical, constantly proselytizing about the Gospel of Hooters.

There are myriad reasons why many of my peers have never been to Hooters. The concept of a “breastaurant” in 2017 now feels archaic as opposed to raunchy. It’s no longer that the concept of scantily-clad women servers feels sexist – Kim Kardashian’s rise to fame demonstrates that taking off your clothes and parlaying a sex tape into a capitalist empire can make you a feminist folk hero rather than a target of it’s ire – its mostly that Hooters represent a simplistic vision of heterosexuality that most young people brush off as interminably boring. Hooters is, to put it plainly, irredeemably uncool.

In recent years, restaurant culture has been insidiously infected by a certain low-grade hipness that dictates every new establishment must have carved wood tables, Edison bulbs, and a kale salad on the menu. Writer Kyle Chayka dubbed this faux-industrial aesthetic [“airspace”](#) and outlined how the globalization of taste has made it possible to travel from Talinn to Tokyo and patronize only establishments that

adhere to this monotonous aesthetic.

Hooters represents the diametric opposite of airspace: the tables are plastic, the lighting fluorescent and its best attempt at creating an 'atmosphere' is Miami Beach, not a reclaimed factory. Because Hooters is so antipodean to the zeitgeist, it is also completely unpretentious. Hooters does not care if you have a preferred typeface or passion for bourbon cocktails. If you're a social media rock star or a supply chain ninja you should look elsewhere for belonging. It doesn't pander to anyone, unless you happen to be a heterosexual man whose idea of a sex icon is still Pamela Anderson. Even then, you still might not find your buzz. Hooters girls do not skew generic. They are not all skinny white approximations of a *Baywatch* actress, and from my own observations, one does not need to have double D's to work there.

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Six years ago, I was working in downtown Toronto in a building that was two blocks away from the only Hooters in the city. The idea of eating lunch at Hooters was often volleyed around the office as a joke and one day my co-workers and I finally scrounged up the moxie to go in. We walked in and surveyed the area, noting the giant TVs tuned to every conceivable sport and the family-size roll of paper towel at every table, then sat down and ate lunch and drank a beer. The strangest part of eating at Hooters that first time was that it didn't make me feel like a pervert at all. Buoyed by the confidence of going there once, I decided to make it my mission to keep going back.

In practice, Hooters' salacious reputation is relatively unfounded. At Hooters I have observed: straight couples going on dates, power business lunches, lone men with their eyes glued to the sports channel, and even a young family toting their screaming baby. They bill themselves as a "family restaurant." Hooters locations skew towards gigantic, so you can almost always get a table without a wait. The Hooters of imagination is flagrantly different from the Hooters of reality: it's really just another low-key sports bar with tons of different beers on tap and gratuitous wood paneling.

Part of Hooters' regressive appeal remains, of course, the scandalous uniforms: a skintight white tank top plastered with the owl logo, vertiginously short orange gym shorts, and knee-high white tube socks. The Hooters uniforms are a sexualized parody of a work uniform. They would make a good Halloween costume. I am neither offended nor titillated by the Hooters uniforms. For me, going to Hooters is like a trip to the nude beach. I'm not there to gawk, I'm there to enjoy myself with friends in an atmosphere that demands very little of me. A glimpse of crescent moon butt cheek might be more likely there than it is at Chili's or Red Lobster, but like at a nude beach, one's eyes quickly adjust and you barely even notice that the leathery old guy playing beach volleyball over there is wearing a cock ring.

The reason why Hooters appeals to me so much is because by tailoring itself to heterosexual men, it has unwittingly created a space where female patrons can go to

be invisible. Waitresses take on the task of performing femininity, and I am left to eat my plate of boneless wings in peace. The Hydra of Capitalism and the Patriarchy make sure that a safe space cannot exist without giving something up, so while I sip my pint of Coors Light in blissful enjoyment, I am certainly contributing to the oppression of other women. But these are the options women are faced with: either go to a bar filled with awful men, or go to a bar where those awful men are looking at other women.

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The Hooters slogan declares itself “delightfully tacky yet unrefined.” When you break it down word by word, the statement is so illogical and redundant so as to be nearly devoid of all meaning. Is something “delightfully tacky” not already “unrefined?” What is the teleological purpose of the “yet?” And yet these five somewhat-garbled words come together to encompass the Hooters ethos in a holistic way. Hooters is self-aware enough to know that they rely on a gimmick to attract business (“delightfully tacky”), however, they backpedal on the joke by announcing they are also “unrefined,” acknowledging that segments of their clientele are liable to be sexist pigs. The slogan is an ouroboros of logic that makes a joke and quickly takes it back, just in case you didn’t find it funny.

Let me be explicit: the food at Hooters is merely average. Almost everything is deep fried, and each wing dish hovers around 1,000 calories. Order the all-you-can-eat special and you’re in for a blazing stomachache. The menu features something called a “chicken finger sandwich,” which appears to be three deep fried chicken strips topped with an orgy of buffalo sauce in between two slices of Texas toast. I once made the mistake of ordering a burger that ended up being less than the sum of its parts. But if you stick to what’s familiar – deep fried wings smothered in sauce of varying degrees of spice – then you get what you pay for: conventionality as comfort food.

Normally I’m the type to fret about carbs and whether or not what I’m ingesting is doing a modicum of good for my body, but at Hooters these concerns melt away and I allow myself to enjoy what all the other patrons (men) don’t have to think twice about; a plate of wings and a pint or three of some subpar beer. My love of Hooters may be unconventional, but it’s not the least bit ironic.