



_PHOTOS: KIM HUGHES



MON DEC 3, 2012

PLACES

Bars that refuse to die

Seven Toronto watering holes that are older than your dad.

BY: KIM HUGHES

Between the slender profit margins, endless hours, and uniquely challenging customer base, few businesses are tougher to run than a bar—which makes the success of trendy new spots so exciting... and the tenacity of old-timers so admirable. Why do some spots gather breathless raves only to fold while others who ignore the odds and any up-to-the-minute criteria (bottle service, signature cocktails, mixologists) survive through the decades, sometimes despite themselves? Beyond rock-bottom prices and no dress code, what’s the secret to the success of Toronto’s vaguely dodgy taverns?

Excluding faux-dive hipster joints and self-identifying uni-cultural imbiberies (a.k.a. the English/Irish/Scottish pub), we went sleuthing for landmark joints that’ve been slinging drinks since beers came in stubbies and, in some cases, since ladies with escorts used separate entrances. And yeah, it’s tougher than it sounds.

Name: The Duke (pictured at top), 1225 Queen St. E. (#LES)

Established: 1870 as a pub/eatery downstairs and a hotel upstairs (originally named the Morin House Tavern).

The vibe: State-of-the-art 1981 with shiny, spill-resistant red-and-black surfaces and a dancefloor that actually gets used—witness the doll in the strapless number twirling around by herself, not that anyone bats an eye. Also clean, minimalist, and blessedly free of beer company propaganda.

Average age of patron at the rail: 45.

Number of baseball caps counted: Three.

Best-selling draft: Tie between Creemore and Canadian.

CP24 on TV? Yes.

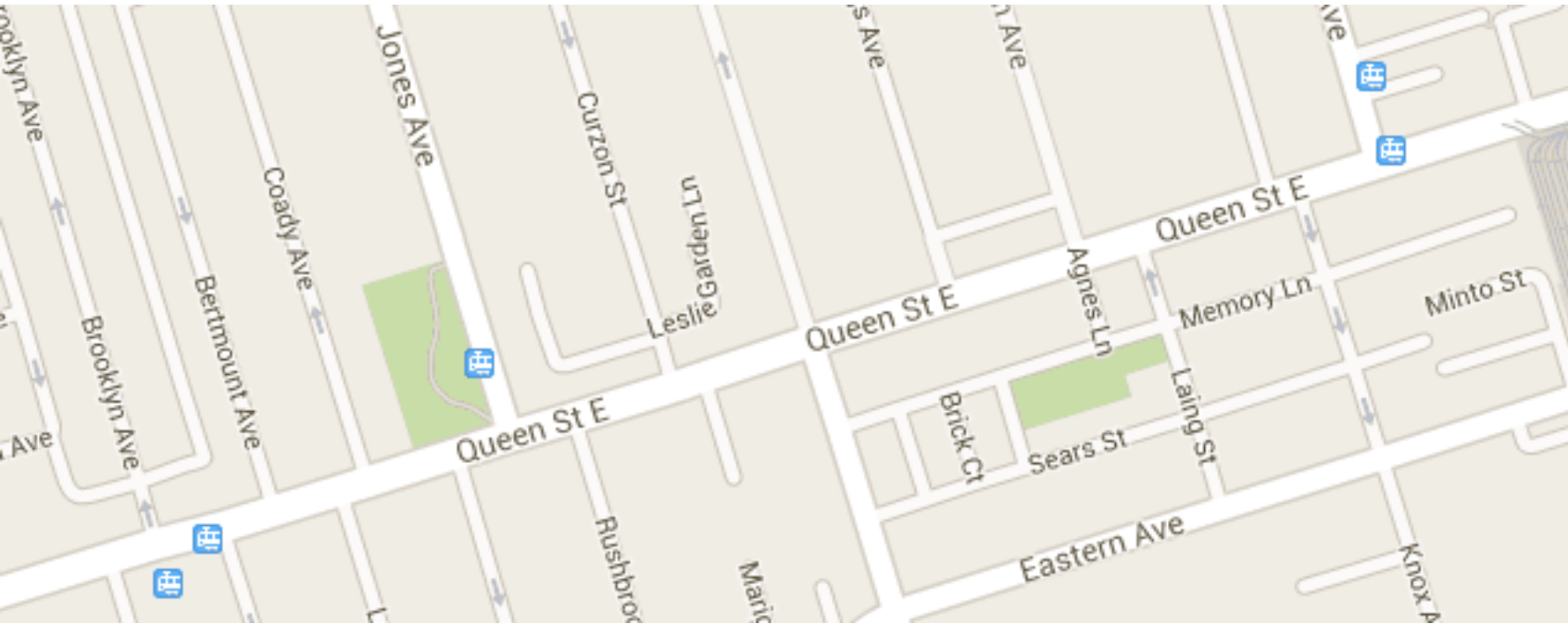
What’s playing? Flashback ’70s on Galaxie.

Jukebox/karaoke? Indeed. In fact, the Duke’s various karaoke offerings are legendary, notably the

Sweet Daddy Siki-hosted Saturday afternoons. Tribute acts (see *Blue Radio*) also feature prominently. An ancient Silver City jukebox collects dust in the corner.

Cost of a round: \$8.75 total for a half-pint of Creemore and a pint of Export.

Secret of their success: Location, location, location— there’s a 24-hour streetcar stop within crawling distance and free parking out back. Plus, the antiquated enclosed smoking room points to a business willing to go the distance for its clientele even if smoking, you know, kills clients dead.



Name: Linsmore Tavern, 1298 Danforth Ave. (#DAN)

Established: 1934, but the building dates to about 1919 according to Ryan Mangano, whose dad Basil bought the joint in 1982.

The vibe: Infinitely more inviting than you’d ever guess just by looking at the exterior. The faux-Tudor beams and mounted deer heads lend an air of “ramshackle country club,” while the everyman dart boards and payphone holler “you’ll leave with at least a fin.”

Average age of patron at the rail: 45.

Number of baseball caps counted: One, and it’s on the bartender’s noggin.

Best-selling draft: A toss between 50 and Alexander Keith’s.

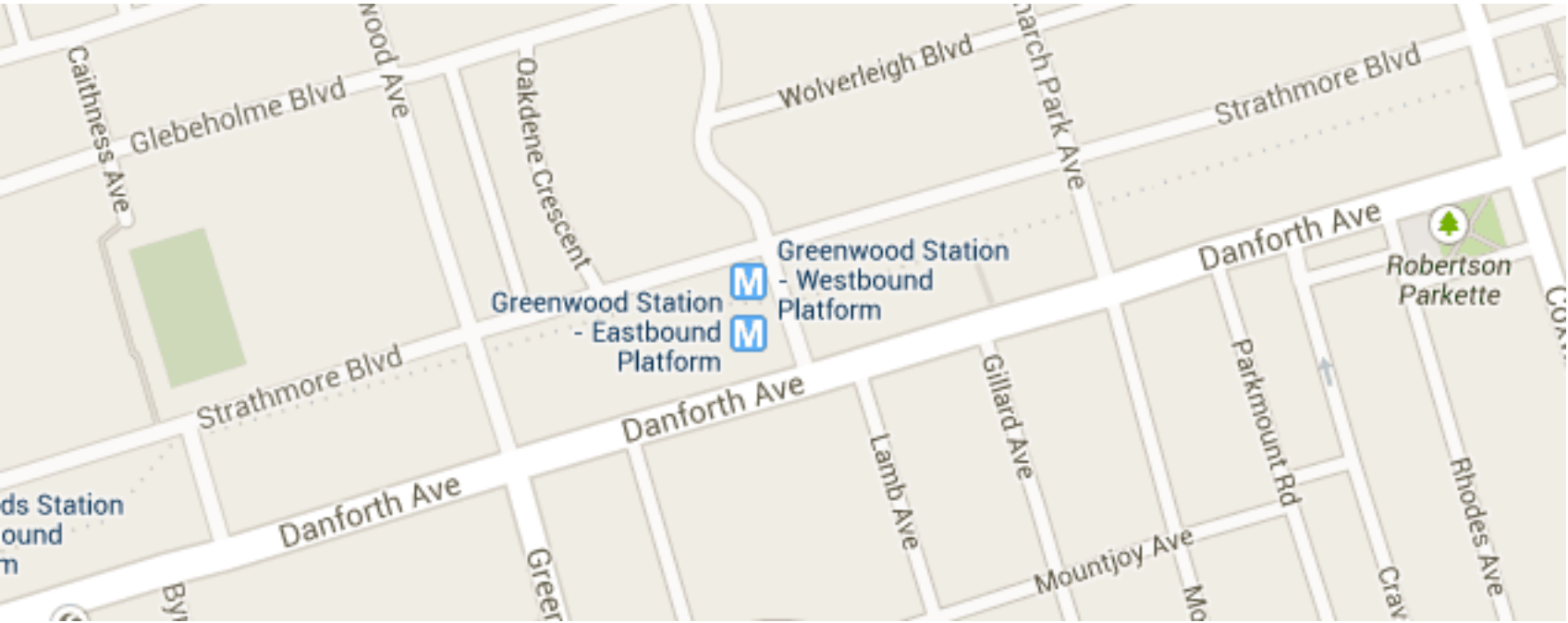
CP24 on TV? No.

What’s playing? Thanks to the pool-shooting hipsters by the jukebox, N.W.A. followed by AC/DC. Both give way to karaoke (which promptly packs the place) at 10 p.m. on a Friday.

Jukebox/karaoke? See above.

Cost of a round: \$9.75 total for a vodka shot and pint of 50 (because “we don’t really sell half-pints”).

Secret of their success: “We have [hotel] rooms upstairs and, for years, Dad was subsidizing this place to keep it alive because so many people treated it like a home,” Ryan Mangano says. “It’s a big family in here. We want to keep the regulars happy but also bring in a new crowd.”



Name: The Black Swan Tavern, 154 Danforth (#RIV)

Established: 1903 as the Hotel Commerce. It became the Black Swan in 1972, and was purchased in 1984 by the Pachis brothers. Gus Pachis’ sons John and Bill have pretty much run the place ever since, taking over the business outright in 1999.

The vibe: The crowd can vary depending on who’s tearing it up across the street at the Danforth Music Hall, but codgers generally warm barstools during the daytime. Thanks to its Riverdale postal

code, this is probably the most cosmopolitan joint still holding an old-school tavern licence.

Average age of patron at the rail: 45, comprising a handful of 20-somethings and 50-somethings.

Number of baseball caps counted: Two.

Best-selling draft: “Easily Export since 1984,” enthuses John Pachis. “Ours is the freshest in the city. We serve *a lot*.” Bonus points: the exceptional souvlaki dished up during Taste of the Danforth (and only then).

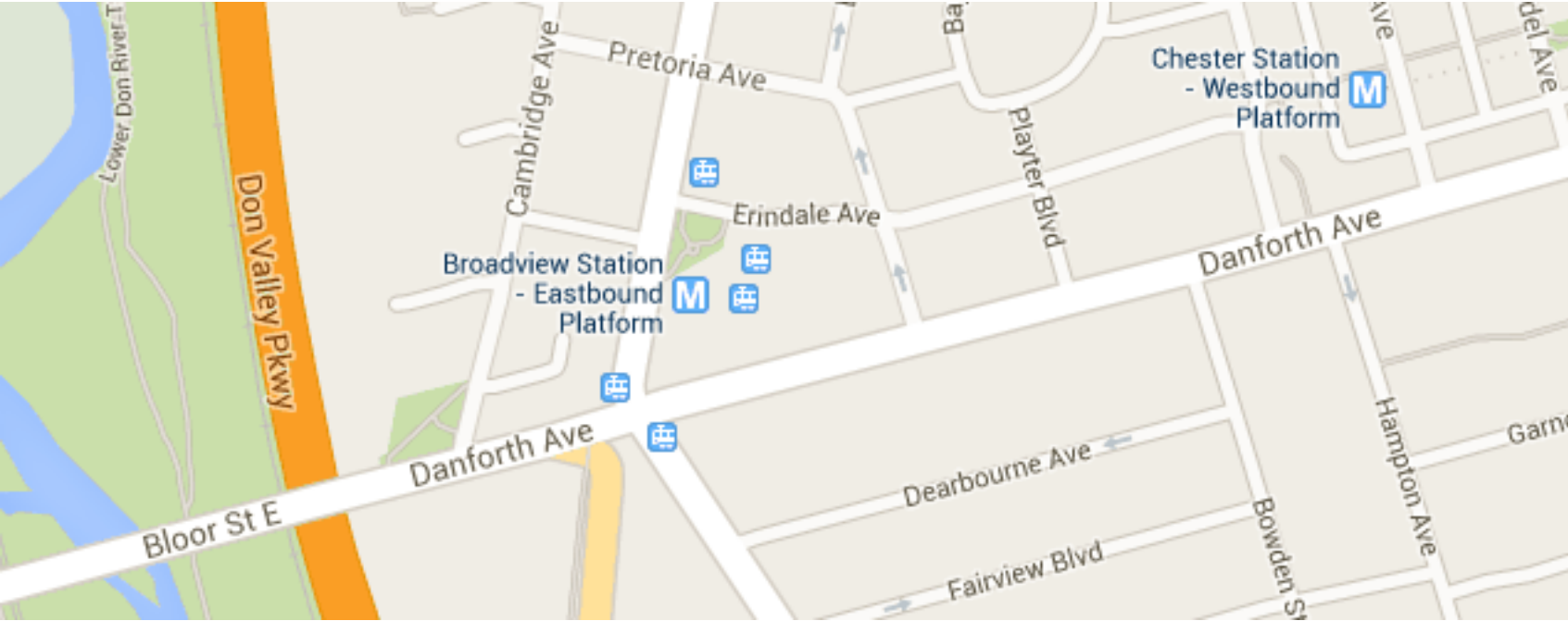
CP24 on TV? No.

What’s playing? The Blues on Galaxie.

Jukebox/karaoke? There is a jukebox and lots of live music, including acoustic bands on the main floor through the week and blues (and sometimes theatre) upstairs on weekends.

Cost of a round: \$8.55 total for a pint of Ex and a half pint of Flying Monkeys.

Secret of their success: “This is a traditional Canadian tavern,” John Pachis says. “Always has been, always will be.”



Name: Duffy’s Tavern, 1238 Bloor St. W. (#BCT)

Established: 1949.

The vibe: Standard-issue pub with a smidge of frat boy and a whiff of rec room. At age 63, Duffy’s is a relative kiddo among the stars in our round-up, but this scrappy little bruiser looks here to stay.

Average age of patron at the rail: Once again, 45.

Number of baseball caps counted: One on arrival, two by the time we split.

Best-selling draft: A toss-up between Steam Whistle and Amsterdam Natural Blonde.

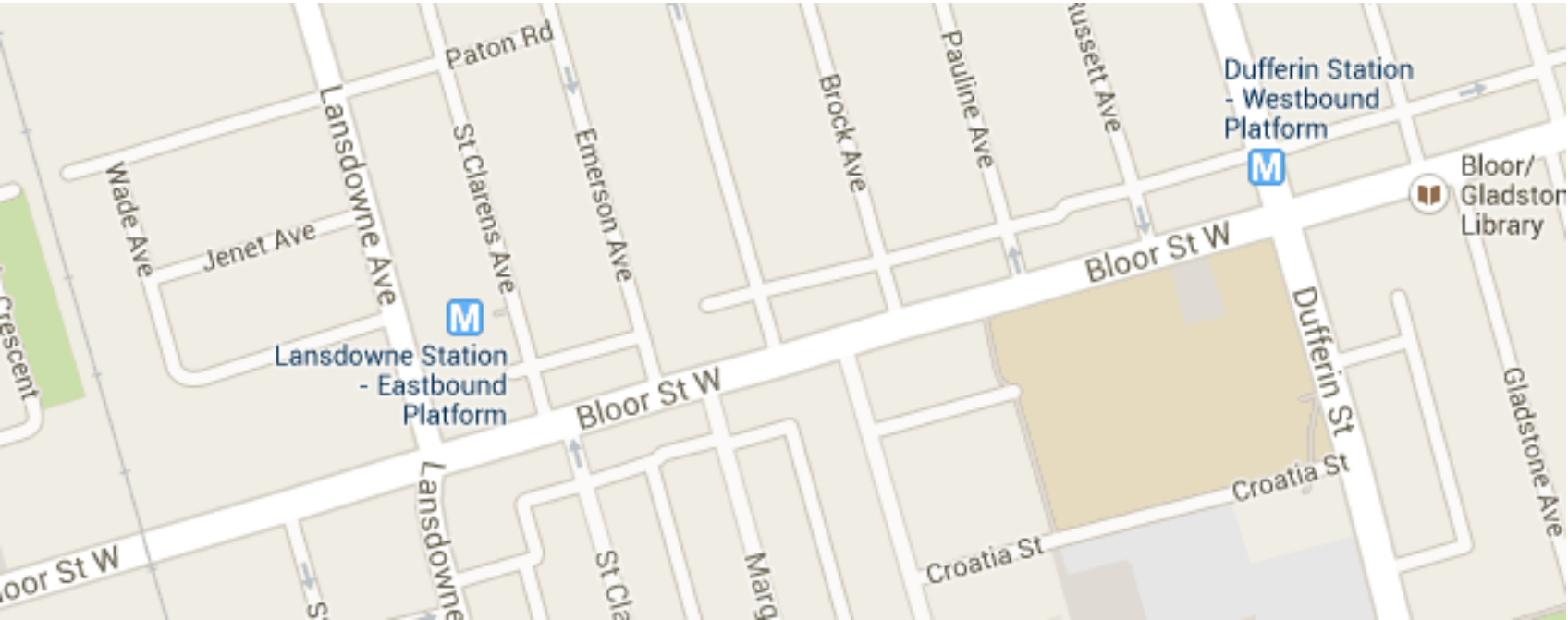
CP24 on TV? No.

What’s playing? The Pulse on SiriusXM.

Jukebox/karaoke? There’s a jukebox plus live music of various stripes (including the occasional indie/punk-rock incursion) and, like most places we visit, pool tables, foosball and plenty of other pub-y ephemera (say that five times fast after a third round of shooters).

Cost of a round: \$5 for a small pitcher of draft (about two pints) on Saturday afternoons.

Secret of their success: Any place offering day prices and night prices for house pints (\$4.75 and \$5.25, respectively) clearly celebrates the oft-quoted truism that, at any given time, it’s 5 o’clock somewhere. Bless, you Duffy’s Tavern, bless you.



Name: The Imperial Pub, 54 Dundas St. E. (#DTN)

Established: Though officially founded as the Imperial Pub by the Newman family in 1944, this sprawling pile on the fringe of Dundas Square has a Technicolor history stretching back to the flapper era.

The vibe: The main room is a wonky mash-up of nine decades’ worth of decorating: remnant jukeboxes with selections by Peggy Lee and Glenn Miller, aquariums, hanging plants, an overhead, disused Smokeeter, a granite bar on glass block, clubhouse chairs, carpet apparently nicked from the Dunes Hotel in Vegas. You can look and look and look and never see it all. And that’s all before you head upstairs to the library.

Average age of patron at the rail: 50.

Number of baseball caps counted: Six.

Best-selling draft: Moosehead Lager.

CP24 on TV? No.

What’s playing? Swing-era jazz, provenance unknown.

Jukebox/karaoke? See above.

Cost of a round: \$13.50 total for a vodka-soda, half-pint Moosehead, and a vodka shot.

Secret of their Success: We can’t do better than what’s on the pub’s website: “We continue to operate on my grandfather’s formula: that nothing beats a cold beer in a friendly place.” True, but free pretzels would be, like, eight kinds of awesome.





Location: Eton House, 710 Danforth (#DAN)

Established: Circa 1929; operator Tom Sgouromitis allows that the business could date back anywhere between 1927 to 1931.

The vibe: Big enough to house your entire rec league yet quiet enough for a tête-à- tête (though first dates not recommended unless you’re *really* tanking). Best: no pushy/bizarre railbirds to ruin your night.

Average age of patron at the rail: 35 (on this night a couple of young guys skewed the average).

Number of baseball caps counted: Two.

Best-selling draft: Rolling Rock (!) and Alexander Keith’s.

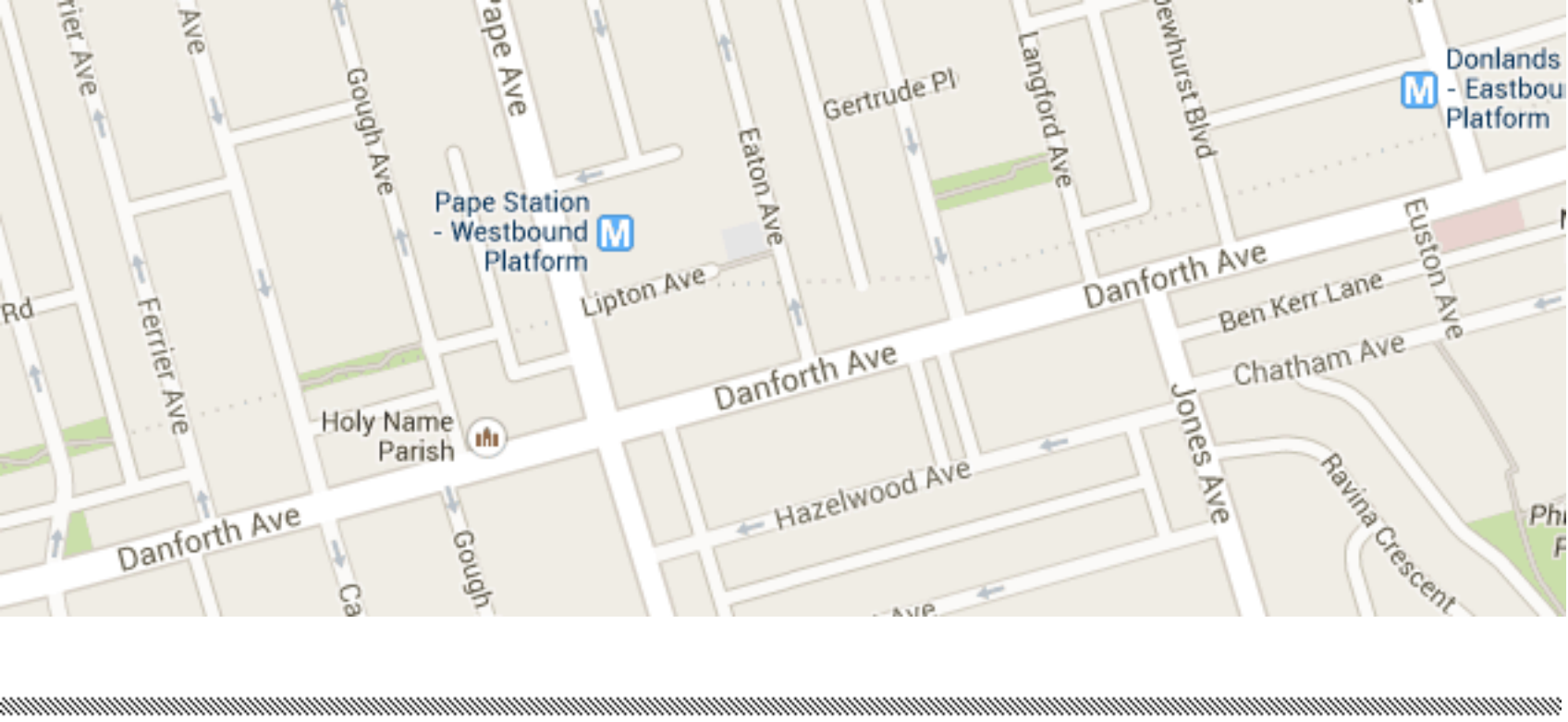
CP24 on TV? Yes.

What’s playing? I totally **hic** forgot to take note of that.

Jukebox/karaoke? Uh...

Cost of a round: \$12 total for two vodka shots.

Secret of their Success: “We’re running it properly, that’s all,” Tom Sgouromitis says of the business his dad Nicolas bought in the mid-1990s. “A lot of these new bars just don’t think enough about their customers.” If ever there was a moral to a story, that’s it. The \$1.50 half-pints of domestic draft are pretty swell, too.



Summary: All the places we visited were uniformly clean and cheery. The windowless façades may conjure scary images but the reality inside is totally different. Every owner (or employee) spoke of the same challenges, but with pride in working and running a place with history. If you want a beer or mixed drink and don’t need cutting-edge décor or attitudinal service, all these places offer exactly that. You’re welcome.

What’s your favourite old-school bar in Toronto? Let us know in the comments section below.

TAGS *Dominion on Queen, Duffy’s Tavern, Eton House, Linsmore Tavern, The Black Swan Tavern, The Duke, The Imperial Pub*

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Tester

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Lwr Lvl For Add'l Rent. This Space Is Currently Licensed For 120 Seats. **** EXTRAS **** Current Owner Is Ready To Retire After 17 Years In This Location

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11:02 am on January 5, 2013

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Report

avas

duffy's a great place for pre drinking outside of being at someone house

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12:38 am on December 5, 2012

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Frank

I will never accept a bar recomendadtion from anyone who orders half-pints.

20

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1:43 pm on December 4, 2012

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Report

2PintsLager

What about The Wheatsheaf? What about The Pilot?

6

2

11:46 am on December 4, 2012

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Report

Paul

I really don't understand why the Grid insists on conflating Bloordale with Bloorcourt. Not really a big deal, but they are different neighborhoods.

6

1

4:00 pm on December 3, 2012

Reply

Report

Rico

Never heard of either one. Born & raised here > 40 years.

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8:53 am on January 14, 2013

Report

Bobo

What patronizing crap.

I'd rather get a pint at any one of these than suffer any of the Grid-approved bars with exposed brick and fedora-clad half-wits.

14

5

1:28 pm on December 3, 2012

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Justin

Pretty condescending article coming from someone who shoots vodka.

 31  9

12:33 pm on December 3, 2012

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