

The Stockyards: A Reminder of Arizona Before the Controversy

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By **Michele Laudig** Thursday, May 27 2010

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I'm here to talk about food, not politics. But let me tell you, the calls to boycott Arizona businesses have made me upset.

If local establishments falter from the fallout — and they're barely starting to show signs of life after this ass-kicker of a recession — it'll be bad for everyone, no matter where any of us stands on SB 1070. I've had plenty to say about supporting locally owned independent businesses in the past, but the recent firestorm over illegal immigration makes me even more adamant about putting my money where my mouth is.

This time around, I did it at an iconic Phoenix restaurant where I could forget the tense headlines for a couple hours and celebrate a bygone time when Arizona was considered somewhat glamorous in its rugged, Old West individualism. Imagine that.

Renovated in 2005, The Stockyards is an old-school gem with hefty black booths and dark wood chairs, a chandelier made out of branding irons, classic Western-themed paintings, and echoes of the 1950s, when the city's power brokers came here to schmooze over steaks and shrimp cocktail. The menu is still heavy on the meat and potatoes — including exotic meats, like elk, buffalo, and the legendary "calf fries" — and the waitstaff is both gracious and attentive.

If you're almost convinced that "controversy" is one of the state's "Five C's," head to The Stockyards for a refreshing reminder of the way things were (back before many of us moved here or likely were even born yet).

For decades, cattle, copper, citrus, cotton, and climate were considered the five pillars of the state's economy, and The Stockyards is a proud tribute to the first. Consider the hard-to-miss, gloriously kitschy cow statue on top of the mid-century building, which is included on the city's Historical Register, or the restaurant's name, which references a long history.



Jackie Mercandetti

Take a bite of Arizona history at The Stockyards, a time-honored steakhouse where meat eaters can get their game on with elk, buffalo, and more.

Details

The Stockyards
5009 East Washington Street
602-273-7378
www.stockyardsrestaurant.com
Hours: lunch, 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday through Friday; dinner, 5 to 9 p.m. Monday through Saturday and 5 to 8 p.m. Sunday.

Calf fries: \$10
Wild boar and venison sausage: \$14
Grilled elk: \$40
Skillet salmon: \$28



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By the early '50s, the **Tovrea Land** and Cattle Company had nearly 40,000 head of cattle in 200 acres of pens — supposedly the world's largest feedlot at the time — and this was the Administration Building for its operations. The restaurant opened after a fire prompted a rebuild in 1954.

For a place that calls itself "Arizona's Original Steakhouse," I wouldn't expect a lot of surprises — nor were there many. Of course there's prime rib and Porterhouse and all kinds of beefy temptation. I sank my teeth into the filet mignon and it was well prepared, its salt-and-pepper-coated crust giving way to a succulent pink middle.

But the things that intrigued me most were those unexpected dishes that jazzed up the routine. Why would I bother with oysters Rockefeller (much as I love them) when I could nibble on wild boar and venison sausages with apple-cranberry chutney? The sausages were so juicy that they burst when I slid my steak knife through their crispy casings.

Even more out there were the calf fries, something you just don't see on menus around town. What are those, you ask? Think of meatballs in the most literal way. That's right, they're deep-fried testicles — chunks of them, actually, because whole calf balls are pretty big, from what our waiter told us (in a somewhat TMI fashion). Crunchy on the outside and spongy on the inside, they had a beefy, mildly musky flavor that hinted of liver. And you have to be a little ballsy to try them, even when there's plenty of pungent cocktail sauce on hand.

An acquired taste to be sure, but come on — there was no way my friends and I were coming to The Stockyards without sampling their most famous dish. The funniest thing that came out of one day's visit was when a pal realized she'd ordered a quarter-pound buffalo hot dog to go along with the balls. Her boyfriend may not let her live that down.

In comparison, a roasted corn and black bean quesadilla sounded tame, but at least nobody had to eat it on a dare. Golden buttermilk onion rings were sizzled to a mouthwatering crunch, while the cool Caesar salad with shaved Parmesan could've used a bigger dose of garlic.

For me, the winning entrée was just as satisfying as a good steak, only it was a more rare treat: grilled elk. Seared medallions of juicy, ruby-colored meat were teamed with a rich juniper-rosemary sauce that I scooped up with bites of garlic and chive potato cake. Buffalo meatloaf, served atop mashed potatoes, came in at a close second. It was so moist that it hardly needed the pan gravy ladled over it.

Pecan-dusted walleyed pike with sweet cream butter sauce sounded interesting, but ultimately I preferred the skillet salmon thanks to its tangy citrus-chile glaze. Since both dishes came with the same bland heap of rice pilaf, sauce made a difference, and the latter's gave the rice more kick.

Fighting meat overload with a dose of sugar, my friends and I gobbled up pecan pie with bourbon whipped cream — but were convinced that the bourbon was actually in the pie. You really could taste a bit of booze behind the sweetness. In any case, it was decent. And sour cream cheesecake was so good we practically fought each other for every forkful of velvety decadence.

Without a doubt, The Stockyards is one of the most delightful places in Arizona to put politics aside and simply have a ball.