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Saturday, March 15, 2008

Laura Berman:

Smoking flames out at this bar



It's a burger-and-beer tavern in a Southfield strip mall, the kind of place where patrons check their cholesterol count worries at the door and pack Marlboros in their pockets.

At Brady's Tavern, the sign on the door announces a social policy change with untold consequences: As of April 1, the ashtrays will be collected and boxed, and a no-smoking policy will go into effect.

This is the bold decision of Bob Berg, the tavern's owner ("I've been here 15 years and I'm Irish," he says, batting away questions about the Brady name), who has carved out territory as a successful restaurateur by offering the sort of hearty food that includes a "garbage burger," served with three cheeses, bacon and grilled onions, among other accoutrements. The atmosphere -- patrons like to compare it to the "Cheers" bar -- traditionally includes a haze of smoke.

But since the beginning of the year, a sign on the front door has been announcing impending change.

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Berg's one of fewer-than-you-think true pioneers on the no-smoking front. The vast majority of the almost 5,000 no-smoking restaurants listed on the Michigan Citizens for Smoke-Free Air Web site (www.smokefreemichigan.org) belong to national chains, from Burger King to Starbucks, many of them fast-food restaurants that don't have liquor licenses.

While the Michigan Restaurant Association likes to suggest that no-smoking progress is marching right along (up 122 percent since 1998), only a handful of well-known, full-service restaurants have banned smoking outright.

And most are trendy restaurants that draw a health-conscious crowd of people who eat their vegetables,

often steamed. There's less obvious clamor for caloric and health discipline in the darkness of Brady's, where the horseshoe-shaped bar dominates the restaurant. In this kind of space, Berg's decision is less obvious than it is risky and brave. Why is he doing this?

"For all the right reasons," he says.

He sees the future, and it doesn't include clouds of smoke in restaurants. "It's going to happen, so why not be first?" he says.

The nearby Beverly Hills Grill and Fiddleheads have also banned smoking, so Brady's could be situated in a no-smoking belt.

At the bar on a recent weekday, nonsmoking Scott Kloster, a lawyer, sat with his friend John, a smoker.

"I like to come here but my wife doesn't like to come here at lunch, because she doesn't want the smell of smoke on her business clothes."

Berg has three children and recognizes that he doesn't like his own kids to breathe smoke.

"I'm not trying to convert anyone. And I'm going to try to make our smoking patrons comfortable with a

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bench outdoors."

But that sign on the door?

"It's just a sign of the times," he says.

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