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Everything looks classic at the Golden Steer.

PHOTO BY TODD LUSSIER

Prime sip

If you want a well-crafted cocktail, steakhouses are the way to go

BY LISSA TOWNSEND RODGERS

YOU CAN KEEP YOUR BUFFETS: When I want to feel mighty Vegas, I go to a steakhouse. Even when not in the mood for enormous and expensive slabs of red meat, a steakhouse is often a pleasant place for a cocktail — the décor is always plush, the lights are always dim and the bartenders *always* know their way around a cocktail shaker.

The oldest steakhouse in Las Vegas is **Bob Taylor's Ranch House** (6250 Rio Vista St., 645-1399), which has been in operation since 1955. A long drive to the further exits of the 95, where the Red Rock Mountains look blue, one pulls into a dusty, wood-fenced parking lot and there's the restaurant, which is literally a ranch house.

Bob Taylor's centerpiece is the grill, where Flintsonian cuts of beef sizzle and sweat on a cast-iron grill. Both the restaurant and the adjacent "Sports Lounge" are decorated with bull horns, saddle tack and Steelers memorabilia. Even more impressive is the collection of vintage liquor decanters, commemorating all the Southwestern states, three unions, Reno, Binion's and the Mint. If none of that is eye-catching enough, the lounge has enough televisions to allow semi-awareness of both the MLB and the NBA. My Stoli-tonic was a strong pour and the Cajun shrimp scampi is irresistible: butterflied shrimp in a spicy, pinkish butter-laden sauce with plenty of cheesy toast with which to sop it up.

Almost as old — and celebrating its 50th anniversary this year — is the

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legendary **Golden Steer** (308 W. Sahara Ave., 384-4770). The Steer has hosted Frank, Sammy, Dean, Elvis, and Waynes both John and Newton, and little has altered since the heyday of hey-hey. The wood paneling is studded with Victorian light fixtures and landscape paintings; the tufted leather banquettes are comfortable; and classy waiters in tuxedos are still bringing "Diamond Jim" steaks and making Caesar salad tableside with the Sinatra recipe. The Golden Steer's bar is also unchanged, save for modernized barstools and the ubiquitous video poker. I decided to move into more classic cocktails and, not being a martini drinker, this meant a Manhattan. And such a Manhattan it was: a perfect balance of bourbon-sweet and vermouth-bitter, made by a gracious bartender who was not only a gifted raconteur, but valued his craft enough to know the remainder in the shaker is meant for a top-off, not the slop bin.

Also an institution is **The Steakhouse** at Circus Circus (2880 Las Vegas Blvd. South, 794-3767), which has been getting those "Best of Vegas" awards

for quite a while now. It's a seemingly subterranean space, well removed from the clowns and chaos beyond the door — just soothing, billiard-green walls and Tony Bennett tinkling on the sound system. The bar is dominated by the oak-and-plate-glass doors opening onto the room where immense slabs of beef are aged under the opal and amber stained-glass ceiling. The droll waitstaff have sitcom-worthy camaraderie, best witnessed from a seat by the service bar. An affable bartender made me an enormous Manhattan with cherry juice to cut the sharpness of the vermouth and an extra-long cocktail sword. The Steakhouse indeed provides the discreet, macho steakhouse atmosphere — even if all the orders for zinfandel I overheard made me wonder otherwise.

The classic, manly allure of the steakhouse extends to newer establishments.

Planet Hollywood features its own outpost of New York City's **Strip House** restaurant (3500 Las Vegas Blvd. South, 737-5200), which must be one of the most seductive restaurants in town. The walls

are flocked crimson velvet, with glowing, sepia-toned vintage girlie photos strung together weblike throughout the room and low, plush couches and booths tempt you to recline while you dine. I opted for a seat at the inviting bar.

My Manhattan was rendered with careful professionalism and had a pleasantly smoky aftertaste. But it was the food that was truly impressive. Although I only ordered an appetizer — clams casino, with a light herb butter and tiny cubes of pancetta — it came with an *amuse-bouche* of warm, creamy potato soup with basil oil, and ended with another "gift from the chef," a simple yet wretchedly decadent praline. Decadent indeed describes Strip House: Even the brocade napkins are bedecked with female silhouettes. You might be mistaken for a conventioneer (and the tab might make you wish you were on someone else's expense account), but Strip House will definitely make you feel welcome. Just like any good steakhouse should.