

BLUE WATER DISPATCHES



By Louise Wollman

Let's get this out of the way: magazine competitions notwithstanding, Skinny Legs makes the best hamburger in the Caribbean. Thick as a '50s pompadour, 100 percent Omaha ground beef, no fillers whatsoever and fire-grilled—correctly—to order. The devil-may-care who requests medium-rare will find its juices running down their arms, lodging in hand crinkles and, despite all attempts at washing, teasing their noses for hours afterwards.

Skinny Legs is also about genuine, as distinguished from canned fast-food joints, faux bistros, pretend pubs like Pancho Villa's and

Applebee's, which conjure, but have all but eliminated, authenticity.

At first encounter Skinny Legs is—and I'm being kind—unpromising. Tired, threadbare rubber dinghies and older, hard-sided craft crowd the dock—itself blocks of cracked concrete and ancient splintered planks joined in some mysterious, wobbly fashion.

LOST SOLES

Meandering off the dock is a dirt path flanked by a graveyard of rusted-out cars; ancient outboard motors; weather-beaten work shacks; a faded green shipping container and the giant corroded carapace of an

Sailing On Your Stomach: In the wake of an insatiable food sleuth

Skinny Legs Coral Bay, St. John

Skinny Legs, fat burgers, overweight on entertainment

old marine travel lift—leading to an open-air wood shack unheralded by identifying signage. To access this back porch entry, you must traverse a pebbly stripe of sand, thereby interrupting some foursome's game of horseshoes.

The Skinny Legs décor, exuberant in its tackiness, is a mélange of plank tables, plastic chairs, painted surfboard menus, Kentucky Derby pennants and team-homage posters, finished by this saucy flourish: a collage of sandals and flip-flops called "The Lost Soles."

Burgers—beef, veggie or mahimahi—cheese extra—are served on a bed of potato chips. "We don't do French fries," says the waitress, guiltlessly. On request, at a buck more, sometimes-hot, sometimes-not sautéed mushrooms and onions.

Though Skinny's does promise "Same Day Service."

Bursting on St John's bar scene in 1991, Skinny Legs was named for its two owners, Moe Chabuz and Doug Sica, both endowed with amazingly thin pins. Doug, who bulked his up wearing knee sock full-time, died last year. One of his socks soon dangled amid The Lost Soles.

Like the T-shirt says, Skinny's is "a pretty 'OK' place." A far cry from the island's ritzy, glitzy side, where palatial \$10 million "beach mansions" climb

the hills.

Happiness appears the local profession: poor but happy with dirty fingernails. A sense of community, of shared history, permeates Coral Bay, with Skinny's functioning as unofficial town hall. Day and night, the joint is peopled with a cast of eccentric locals, aging beach bums and faded hippies looking like they squeak by on odd jobs. Many live on boats. Hair is the chief fashion statement here—bushy beards, shaggy mustaches, thin dribbles of ponytails, cascading waves of bottle curls and mangy, stogie-thick dreadlocks splaying stiffly in midair.

SOULFUL BROTHERS

On weekends Skinny's features live music. Starring one Friday night, Gann & Ike. Gann: a barefoot, fettuccine-thin, baby-face with a dusting of black beard and a pure Texas twang who specialized in long ballads of varied ancestry: Gordon Lightfoot to Johnny Cash to Bob Dylan.

My kind of music.

Just when I'm thinking it can't get any better, over sidled a grubby local wearing the sunniest of gap-toothed smiles and a baseball cap so frayed cardboard peeked from its bill. He plopped down on a nearby bench back, planted a grimy sneaker on the table, pulled out a set of rubber-banded spoons, then supplemented the already rollicking performance with a shower of distinct, staccato clinks, clacks, trills and jingles—an impossible number a second.

The crowd was clapping and cheering and beer drinking like mad.

Surely nothing more colorful could be added to this cast of characters?

But then in whizzed Peter, who'd sailed from St. Thomas in darkness back to his mooring.

As if our friendship dated back decades, the stranger launched an energetic monologue. Reducing the onstage performance to mere background buzz, he belted out the story of his "win" in a recent local regatta. Grand, sweeping arm flourishes made the contents of his Corona tremble at the brink, threatening to cascade all over us. A fluorescent flowered shirt, buttoned only at the very top, exposed an esoteric amulet and a mass of bare, molasses skin.

Underscore the "bare."

"Did it again! Came in at 10 p.m., DFL for the fifth year in a row! The committee boat's already closed down, so the judges can't see me crankin' the winch like a banshee, my bare ass flappin' in the breeze! I always race naked—'Keep it light,' I say. But the newspaper got the shot...came out today."

"DFL? What's DFL?" I asked as he paused, not to breathe but to swig.

"Dead f---ing last!" Again!"



The dinghy graveyard, top. Enjoying a Skinny's burger, center, and a hair fashion statement, above. Skinny Legs Moe, opposite

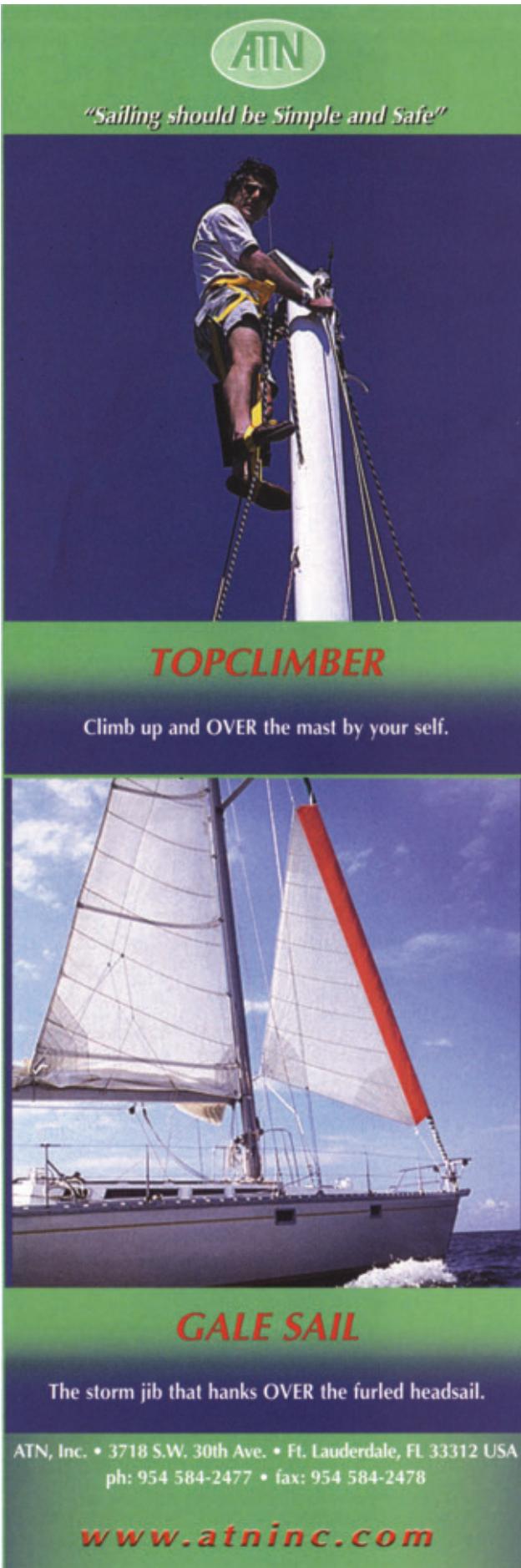
He's high as a noon sun. Beer or weed, dunno.

He learned we're cruisers.

"Been to Cariacou?" he demanded, then galloped into the tale of a bar he created there—from scratch, thatch and bamboo.

"Soon as I finish, the officials

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The advertisement features a green header with the ATN logo and the slogan "Sailing should be Simple and Safe". Below this is a large image of a man climbing a sailboat mast using a device called the "TOPCLIMBER". The text "TOPCLIMBER" is prominently displayed in red. A smaller image below shows a sailboat with its sails up, with the text "GALE SAIL" in red. The text "Climb up and OVER the mast by your self." is written above the sailboat image. At the bottom, the company address "ATN, Inc. • 3718 S.W. 30th Ave. • Ft. Lauderdale, FL 33312 USA" and phone number "ph: 954 584-2477 • fax: 954 584-2478" are listed, along with the website "www.atninc.com".



Playing the spoons



The Lost Soles

close me down. I'm a foreigner—no bar for me. That's what they think! So I change the name. Call it an 'Information Center and Snack Bar.' See, I can give information out free. 'Come around any time with your questions' I say to customers, 'but don't ask me for alcohol. Against the law...no license. But, say, how'd you like to buy a Coke or a bag of Doritos? Now that we're friends, no problema offering something free from my private stock. Beer? Painkiller? Margarita?"

"Never did sell any Doritos—seems I was always fresh out..."

And then this boating Brer Rabbit wandered off in search of a new audience. Or a refill.

Trust me...go! Even if you're burger averse, there's a refrigerator-long beer list. Skinny's is always worth the price of admission—pretty much an open smile and a curious mindset.