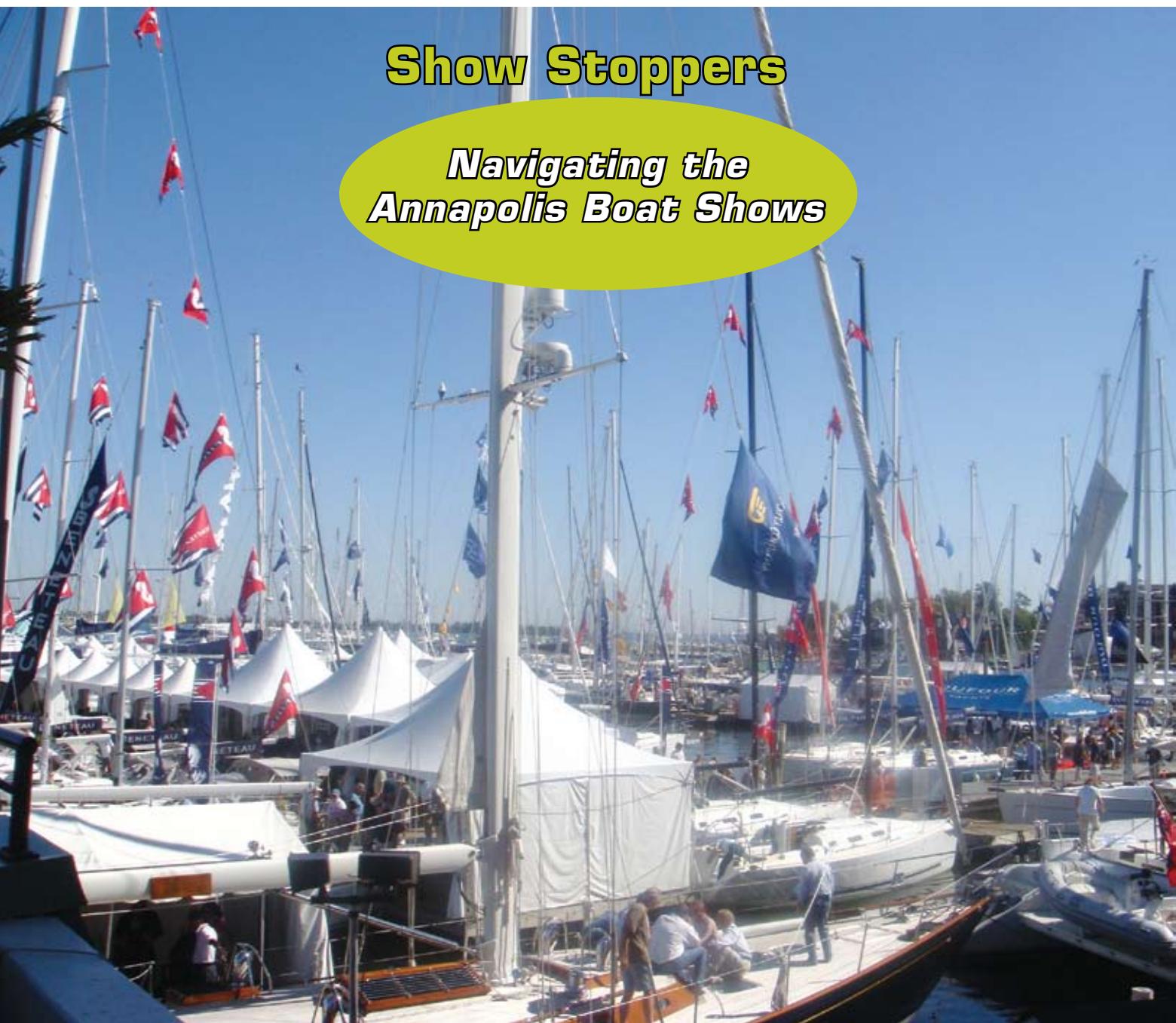


Show Stoppers

*Navigating the
Annapolis Boat Shows*



By Louise Wollman

Most people make the annual trek to the behemoth Annapolis Sailboat Show to scope out their next dreamboat. Or to wait, shoeless, on long lines to climb aboard the newest, poshest 82-foot Oyster or 70-foot Hylas—an exercise

in playing out your lottery-winning fantasies if ever there was one. Or to investigate the latest in electronics, buy new dock lines or attend the Caribbean 1500's free sundowner party.

We come for none of these reasons. We go for the Fleet Reserve Roast Beef Sandwich. Which entails significant costs, coping with heady

logistical dilemmas—and sometimes even begging.

It wasn't always like this. Before we knew about it, when the Fleet Reserve Roast Beef Sandwich, wasn't even a glimmer of an alimentary treasure to chase after, New York to Annapolis was a mere five-hour drive. We were incorrigible power-boaters but thought nothing of a road trip for a *sailboat* event. It became our annual Columbus Day outing. A chance to laugh at our sailboating friends.

Sailing on Your Stomach—in the wake of an insatiable food sleuth

Now, Annapolis is a precious town, brimming with stores like Hats in the Belfry, Woofs & Whiskers, the Hard Bean Café. Fresh-faced, soon-to-be-shaving Midshipmen in navy and white dress uniforms roam gabled, spired, cupola'ed streets lined with small, authentic, preserved, restored Georgian or Edwardian homes—one after the adorable other, each paying homage to the gray-ed out Benjamin Moore Williamsburg Color Chart.

But committed (and even jokester) show-goers have little time for all that. We trudge miles of dock, slosh through vendor tents (it almost always rains), snake through cramped sailboats packed with strangers, and always emerge hungry with little more pig-out prospects than ho-hum crabcakes and non-Nathan's hot dogs.

Had someone said "Fleet Reserve" we'd have assumed it was a new Scotch.

CRUISING DISCOVERY

But no, we knew nada about The Fleet until some five years after we abandoned our stinkpot—and the entire East Coast—to head off—sails unfurled and wind unfailingly on our nose—into the Caribbean alongside those selfsame buddies. (Life laughs last.)

One day while carefully culling bones from our chicken rotis in some snack shack—coulda been Barbuda or St. Lucia, but for sure in some epicurean backwater—when one of the sandwich-starved among us started singing The Fleet's praises. (Actually she was more whining and pining than singing.)

Fortunately it was September; no grass grows on our hull before we're at the boat show and we finally sink our teeth into one.

A sandwich thoroughbred, a carnivore's godsend, this mountain of divine red meat trembles on an



Once you've had your fill of boats and gear, feed your appetite at one of Annapolis's many restaurants and boat show food stands

ethereally fresh bun, ready to be dressed with nearby onion slivers and heavenly horseradish sauce, as much as you can slather without incurring bun breakthrough. Ketchup too, but that's a sacrilege.

The Fleet rocketed onto my list of Long-Standing Eating Regrets. Thus, we're obliged to eat five and six of these babies on every show day. I call it Making Up for Lost Prime.

The Fleet's become an annual Must. But it's only available to outsiders—us uninitiated acolytes—during the two October weekends of Annapolis boat shows—Sail Boat the first, Power Boat the second—and the week sandwiched (if you will) in between. Only for those nine days does the Fleet Reserve Club of Annapolis—a private bastion for Naval, Coast Guard and Marine Corps veterans—throw open its doors to the eating public.

Thus, doing Annapolis has taken on the nature of a religious pilgrimage. Getting there requires the kind of planning normally accorded, say, a NASA moon shot.

First, long before most show vendors even make their booth commitments, we need to decide exactly



where in the Caribbean we'll make landfall, *regardless of the weather*, so as to use our American Airlines mileage over Columbus Day, no less.

Two long flights and a six-hour layover languishing in that igloo-chilled, food wasteland called the San Juan Airport, with its single, forgettable restaurant. (For the similarly stranded I advise only the chicken wing appetizer or the quesadilla.)

Plus, significant outlays, in the form of marina charges, Amtrak from New Rochelle to Baltimore, a rental car and, if we can't mooch rooms from not-so-nearby resident children or former cruiser friends, a two-night hotel stay. Sometimes three, if we're feeling really beef-stricken.

(Integrity demands I admit we also come to replenish our supply

BLUE WATER DISPATCHES



of custom-embroidered *Lulu* hats, veritable flocks of which fly off our heads annually during windy dinghy rides. But really, it's the Fleet Reserve Roast Beef Sandwich.)

THE BIGGEST KAHUNA

Despite our obsession, and in all fairness to other food venues, I'll try to give them some due.

With one and a half miles of dock to walk, 600 exhibitors and 250 to 300 boats in the water to visit, plus doubling back to maybe buy something, squeezing in decent

raises my hackles; Pusser's Nanny Cay (Tortola) makes a crunchy, spicy-but-not-incendiary, appetizer of plump wings that's ample enough to qualify as lunch.

No, in Annapolis, overpay for a Pusser's Painkiller, available in three levels of intoxication and peddled by peppy bartenders promising they're "chock full of vitamins and nutrients" and will "make you more attractive to the general public."

Try one because Pusser's has truly conquered this category, and to be charitable—because Pusser's offers

nourishment is serious business. You don't want to stray too far from the showgrounds or tarry too long over some trendy but ultimately uninspired cutesy café lunch.

There's always Pusser's, which now monopolizes most of Dock G's prime frontage and makes it a virtually unavoidable in-show choice. Pusser's, offering most categories of popular junk food—burgers, dogs, wraps, crab-cakes, chowdas, corn, wings—utterly fails food fussbudgets like me. Sorry to say, it's mostly junk: listless, expensive junk.

Lest I appear merely nasty, know that not every Pusser's

free, upstairs seating to the footsore and also wafts (or blares, depending on your point of view) music—happy, nautical tunes, sometimes even live—across the show.

CHARITY BEGINS AT...

Speaking of charity, the other best and nearest-by offerings can be bought at booths astride—or just outside—the show fences that are run by local charities. They're the fresh and different—the anti-institutional—choice, because they are made by church members or commissioned from local specialists.

So you can feel good while getting fat.

Stand *inside* the fence just outside Tent G5 (consult your Show Directory's map or simply look for a line-up of the parched and hungry juggling catalogs.) Glen Rotner, or another Annapolis Optimist Club volunteer, will hand you down a bowl of *hot* crab soup: tangy, \$4, and respectably chunky with fresh carrots, crab, peas and potatoes, cooked by "a lady in Baltimore." Or, a Nutty Buddie: a tall twist of vanilla ice cream, chocolate-covered and flecked with nuts, \$3 and specially made on nearby Kent Island. Glen says in 2007 the club sold 6,000 of them—and 8,000 bottles of made-in-Maryland Deer Park water—and usually raises about \$25,000 a year for sports and educational programs benefiting local youngsters. For 25 years, the Optimists have occupied this same spot, also reached just outside the show at the Main Street Circle.

Abutting the Optimists and running outside along the H Tent's fence is the Mount Zion Methodist Church booth, selling barbecue and chicken, and Hospice of Chesapeake, for the last 15 years hawking their special "Hot Dogs for Hospice," jalapeno-stuffed hot dogs as well as quarter-pounders, and pit barbecue sandwiches. Last year's take: \$5,000.

BLUE WATER DISPATCHES



The St. Mary's Church chuck wagon, parked across from Tent D out on Compromise Street, highlights Turkey and Beef Pit BBQ sandwiches—the shredded meat tasty and sweet-sour, possibly even spiked with bits of gherkin. There's a second Compromise involved, however: the presentation is goopy. And since St Mary's doesn't hand out wipes, you sort of reek of mesquite afterwards *and* run the risk of being booted off Oysters and Hinckleys for greasing up the matte maple joinery.

SECRET WEAPON IN RESERVE

Charity aside, my heart belongs to The Fleet. Apparently the world agrees. Marty Dresser, 2008 Pit Boss, said his team of 11 cooked some 9,000 pounds of top-round beef in 2008 and “tons of people—especially foreigners—tell us it’s their favorite sandwich ever.”

Seven dollars, every plump one of ‘em. Inside the Club building, Italian sausage, turkey, hot dogs, hamburg-

ers, chili, vegetable-and crab soup are available to buy. But why?

Not easily found, you enter through a tiny alley to Tent D's port side. You'll first sniff, then see, the mammoth 15-pound roasts smoking on the grill—20 at a time, 70 or more daily. And a buzzing hive of member/volunteers, identically garbed in powder-blue Club tees, sporting baseball caps and encased in aprons. Burly guys forking over dark, caramelized specimens to strapping women standing at industrial slicers, arms pumping and piles of pink meat mounding below. Sandwich makers grabbing half-pound clumps, slapping them onto buns, rolling them in foil and tossing them into aluminum bins marked Rare, Medium and Well.

On this topic, I must say scoring

rare Fleets was tricky last year: yet another reason our count climbed precipitously. To record levels—didn’t we have to keep trying? The right-hand tray sat chockablock with pre-wrapped Wells while the pan of Rares on the left was not only empty but flanked by an impatient line of holdouts like me. All too often we Blood-Lusters found ourselves grudgingly accepting Mediums in the middle.

But I’m philosophic: this year’s show is almost here.

You’ll know where to find me. See if you don’t agree:
The Fleet’s In. ≈