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# nightspots

weekly nightlife section in 

1993 Smelts team photo.  
Image courtesy of the Smelts



## Chicago Smelts: Three decades of swimming

BY CARRIE MAXWELL

Thirty years ago, a group of gay men (Mark Schoofs, Mike McGuire and Damon Mackert) formed a swimming club called the Chicago Smelts (Smelts). This was at the height of the AIDS crisis when many gay men were dying of the disease. They, like other LGBT swimming clubs across the country, did this for health and social reasons.

At first, the club was met with resistance by the Chicago Park District when they tried to schedule dedicated pool times to practice.

According to the team's website, "Gill Park in Chicago's Boystown neighborhood already had a practice time for Master's swimmers, and by winning over the sole swimmer who regularly utilized the time, the Smelts residency at Gill Park began. That sole swimmer, Ross Patronsky, still swims with the Smelts today."

"I saw that they were a good group so I joined up with them," said Patronsky. "Over time, the team has focused more narrowly on meet competitions over recreational swimming and now has a much broader range of ages—20s to 80s."

In order to keep their practice time at Gill Park, the team had to attend the Gill Park Advisory Council meetings, run for council leadership positions and meet with the Alderman at the time—Helen Schiller.

Due to the team's presence in the community, the Smelts were seen as fundraising leaders for HIV/AIDS and LGBTQ causes during the early

years of the organization.

"The grassroots volunteerism of the early years stands out to me," said 28-year member Bradley Dineen.

Bruce Wexelberg, who joined the team shortly after it was formed, said raising money during team hosted swim-a-thon's was a great contribution to LGBTQ and HIV/AIDS causes.

Outside of their activism, the team has spent time together socially at their annual Thanksgiving dinner that they call "Smeltsgiving."

"Over food we share our stories, experiences and just let go," said Le'Mikas Lavender. "When I moved to this city from Japan, I did not know anyone and now the team has become my family."

"I found the Smelts when I was looking online for an adult team sport," said Michael Cowen. "I arrived not knowing it was an LGBTQ swim team, but I have been swimming proud ever since."

"I learned about the team from a friend who was staying with my husband and me between overseas work assignments 20 years ago," said Ruth Giles-Ott. "He told me I should join. I said, 'But I'm straight. I do not want to make anyone there uncomfortable, they are probably glad to be away from straight people.' He said straight people were welcome, and invited me to join him at practice."

Giles-Ott explained that the coach allayed her fears immediately and now they are her extended family. She recently served as the team's co-chair and has officiated at six Smelts weddings—one

straight couple, one lesbian couple and four gay couples.

"These weddings were all extremely moving and precious to me," said Giles-Ott.

Smelts Co-Chair Emily Traw explained that she joined the team because they exuded happiness as they arrived for their practice at Gill Park. She observed this as she was finishing up swimming laps during the pool's individual lap swim time.

"The community and family I found was a complete surprise, and I have been grateful every day since," said Traw.

The Smelts other co-chair Anna Comella joined when she moved to Chicago in 2010 to make friends within the LGBTQ community.

"I wanted to get a good workout doing something I loved so I researched all the swim teams in Chicago and found the Smelts," said Comella. "I joined right away because it was the only team that was made up of mostly LGBTQ people. I was immediately welcomed and quickly learned the team was not just a swim team it was also a group of friends. My life would not be what it is today without the Smelts."

This family atmosphere has resulted in group camping trips, shared meals, informal 5K runs, holiday-themed workouts and dressing up in group costumes for Halloween. They have also had a contingent march in Chicago's Pride Parade since its founding.

Member Patrick Tranmer spoke about the team's mutual respect for each other attributing to everyone's close-knit relationships over the years.

Early on, the team started participated in local meets and later traveled to other cities to compete. They have competed in every Gay Games

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Smelts pose ahead of marching in the 2018 Pride Parade.  
Image courtesy of the Smelts



## BILLY Masters

"How you feeling, Birmingham?"—**Britney Spears** greets the audience at the final stop on her "Piece of Me" tour. Alas, she wasn't in Birmingham—she was in Blackpool. Oops, she did it again. And we won't even discuss the Madonna-esque British accent. But you'll hear it in action on BillyMasters.com.

Back in 2005, a pair of **Judy Garland's** ruby slippers used in *The Wizard of Oz* were stolen from the Judy Garland Museum in Grand Rapids, Minnesota—which gives you a pretty good idea of the security at that museum. In a caper analogous to the famed Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum heist of 1990, the friends of Dorothy broke into the museum late at night through a window and purloined the pumps, which are estimated to be worth between \$3-5 million! Anonymous tipsters told the feds where to find the fancy footwear in a sting that lasted a year and crossed four states. The shoes were eventually recovered in an undercover raid in Minneapolis. Oh, the humanity!

And yet, somehow **Kevin Spacey**, **Steven Seagal** and **Anthony Anderson** are escaping the long arm of the law. After extensive investigation by the Los Angeles County District Attorney's office, the charges against all three men have been dropped. When it came to Spacey, the statute of limitations had passed. In the matter of Anderson, the wronged party refused to cooperate (and we all know what that means). As to Steven Seagal ... eh, who cares.

With all the drama going on with Harvey Weinstein, it's no surprise that **Project Runway** was lost in limbo. While the show will be returning to its original home, Bravo (after 11 seasons on Lifetime), there will be a major change—**no Heidi and no Tim**. Quelle horreur! "After 16 incredible seasons, I am saying 'Auf Wiedersehen' to Project Runway, a show that I was honored to host and help create," said the ever-modest Klum. She was less sad to announce she's starting her own competition fashion show on Amazon and that she's poached Tim Gunn as her sidekick. I guess that means more Milano and Mizrahi. What's getting lost in the shuffle is that **Zac Posen** simply took himself out of the equation.

It's the end of an era. After 63 years, **The Village Voice** is a thing of the past. Although the weekly print edition stopped last year, it remained an online entity. But recently, Peter Barbey, who bought the paper three years ago, gathered the staff and told them the news: "Today is kind of a sucky day. Due to, basically, business realities, we're going to stop publishing 'Village Voice' new material." And that's that.

It's easy to point fingers, but certainly online publishing, social media and hookup apps are contributing to the decline of print media. Interestingly enough, while one publication is shuttering, an app is expanding. According to filings with the Shenzhen Stock Exchange, Grindr is planning an initial public offering—meaning it will be on the stock market.



**Neil Patrick Harris** entertained, but also disappointed, Billy says.

Photo by Kevin Mazur/Getty Images for Tony Awards Productions

Do you want the good news or the bad news first? In an uncharacteristically charitable move, I will share the good news first. *Wigstock 2.HO* was a HUGE success. While I personally believe the show was stolen by the legendary **Lypsinka**, one must give credit where credit is due—**Neil Patrick Harris** slipped back into Hedwig's pumps effortlessly and put on a fantastic set, totally earning all plaudits he received for his interpretation. And earlier in the day, he, David and their kids manned the wig cannons and shot wigs out to the capacity crowd—which was super-cool.

That said (here comes that bad news), during an appearance on SiriusXM a few days before *Wigstock*, he pissed off quite a few people with what he felt was the downside of playing Hedwig: "The limping of the wrists, the cocking of the hip, the tits out and the ass out, and sort of walking with a sway and sort of the overt femininity of the characterization that I had—that was hard to get into my whole body without feeling like I was mocking it initially. I didn't want to feel like I was pretending." When asked if the transformation made him feel less masculine, NPH said, "for sure." At that point, Mrs. NPH (David Burtka) felt compelled to chime in, "I like manly guys." Yeah, because when I think of the epitome of masculinity, my mind immediately thinks of Neil Patrick Harris. Bitch, please. Be that as it may, I will post Lypsinka's and Hedwig's numbers on BillyMasters.com.

Elsewhere on the air, kooky **Alex Jones** is under fire. It seems that he had his phone in hand while doing his radio show, which also broadcasts live-streaming video. According to an eagle-eyed viewer, while Alex was promoting his line of health and wellness products, his phone was on a page titled "Naughty tbabe Marissa Mi," a reference to Marissa Minx, an Australian transgender

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porn actress. But, wait—Alex can explain this all away as only he can. And he did it on live radio, so there's no question what he said: "I saw a couple of news articles about that, it's ridiculous. I was, like, looking for some reporter we're trying to hire today and punched in some number and porn popped up on my phone. Everybody has had porn pop up on their phone hundreds of times. I probably had porn menus pop up 500 times on my phone. There's two types of people: people who look at porn and people who lie about it. But I wasn't looking at porn on my phone. I don't take phones on air that I look at porn on. Thank you for your call." All I got out of that is that he sometimes enjoys trans porn on his phone—but not necessarily while working.

When Jones was expanding his repertoire, it's time to end another column. Of course, you'll always find the best gossip (and pretty pictures) on BillyMasters.com—the site that's telling you it's not going. If you have a question for me, send it along to Billy@BillyMasters.com and I promise to get back to you before Alex Jones hits on NPH! So, until next time, remember: One man's filth is another man's bible.

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# the DISH

Weekly Dining Guide in  
WINDY CITY TIMES

## SAVOR

### Vinny's Pizza Bar; Publican Anker

BY ANDREW DAVIS

If you want to spend some time (whether family or post-work) in a funky place with some delicious items, check out **Vinny's Pizza Bar** (at the French Market, 130 N. Canal St.; <http://www.vinnysbar.com/>).

The year-old concept is based on "Vinny," an old-school Italian owner who aims to bring the fun while being serious about the quality of the food. For example, the decor includes portraits of celebrity lookalikes (including impersonators of Michael Jackson and Angelina Jolie as well as presidents Trump and Obama). Telegenic Director of Operations Nick O'Meara told Windy City Times: "The portraits are about satire. Some people don't get them, but Vinny's is about fun [as well as] being low-key and casual."



Assortment of Pizzas at Vinny's Pizza Bar.  
PR photo

As for the food, the crush of pedestrians clustering around the restaurant as the server presented free samples provided my initial clue. Chef Jose Ramirez—who heads Vinny's as well as Ovie Bar & Grill next door—has concocted some dishes that run from solid to spectacular.

The pizzas are unique in that the crusts are combinations of Neapolitan and New York styles. The smoked pork-shoulder pizza is basically a Cubano in pie form, and it was very satisfying. However, the version that brings everyone in is the brie-and-apple version, with white sauce, brie

cheese blend, Gala apples and balsamic roasted shallots. It was amazing—and I'd certainly return for this.

Soft breadsticks came with smoked tomato sauce and goat-cheese marinara, and the capicola and cheese fondue made for a tasty combination. Also, feel free to ask for the cheesecake—although, interestingly, it started okay and became better-tasting as we went through our slices.

By the way, another reason has emerged to check out Vinny's: the spot's Progressive Happy Hour, in which drinks are \$4 each at 4-5 p.m., \$5 at 5-6 p.m., and \$6 at 6-7 p.m. Bottoms up!

### Publican Anker

Appearances can be very deceiving.

Judging by its name, Publican Anker (1576 N. Milwaukee Ave.; <https://www.publicananker.com/>) might be a gastropub that concentrates on seafood, as "anker" is German for "anchor." However, there is much more to this year-and-a-half-old Wicker Park spot (formerly Francesca's Forno/Glazed and Infused)—and those items provide surprises of their own.

Bar snacks are anything but ordinary. For example, there's burrata, which might be standard at some places; here, however, it comes with honeycrisp apples, walnuts, farro and watercress, with a drizzle of honey. Addictive chicken wings are prepared with ingredients such as burnt chile

and yogurt, according to the menu; however, the server said that there are additional items like fish sauce that are used to give the wings their unique taste. (I guess that would be deception by omission.)

And there are a lot more than bar snacks. Vegetable dishes include toka plums (with crescenza, radish, urfa peppers and cashews) as well as slightly kicky sweet corn (accompanied by potatoes, peppers and parmesan).

However, even the standard burger is elevated at Anker. The Super Pub Burger may look like a regular sandwich, but somehow the combination of American cheese, caramelized onions and tangy "special sauce" make this one of the best burgers I've had since the hallowed masterpiece I consumed at Mott St. But if you want something a little different for an entree, Anker caters to every taste (pun intended) with dishes like swordfish sausage, bavette steak and half-roasted chicken (and I'm sure even THAT tastes different from your regular bird).

Regarding desserts, the bakewell tart was prepared and presented beautifully, overall, although it was slightly crumbly. But if almond shortbread isn't your thing, Anker has other offerings, such as strawberry shortbread ice cream and chocolate mousse.

**Note: Restaurant profiles/events are based on invitations arranged from restaurants and/or firms.**

## Coming 'Out in the Park'

Out in the Park at Six Flags Great America celebrated its seventh year on Sept. 8, with a private four-hour event that raised money for Lakeside Pride Music Ensemble. DJ Adam Joseph provided some additional beats. Photos by Jerry Nunn



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## Hundreds take part in Ride for AIDS 2018

The 15th Annual Ride for AIDS Chicago—the signature fundraising event of Test Positive Aware Network (TPAN), and which had a new route this year—took place Sept. 8-9, drawing nearly 200 riders, according to the organization.

The event brings together cyclists, those living with HIV and related illnesses, health advocates

and their supporters to raise funds as well as demonstrate the strengths and resilience of an often-overlooked community. Since its inception, the Ride has raised more than \$4.5 million and continues to serve TPAN's mission: saving lives and empowering those affected by HIV/AIDS and related illnesses.

For more about TPAN, see <https://www.tpan.com/>.

Photos by Julie Supple



Above: TPAN Board Chair Michael Murphy and TPAN CEO Christopher Clark. Upper right: Group with the riderless bike (which represents all who have passed away from HIV/AIDS). Far upper right: State Rep. Greg Harris. Right: TPAN's James Craig and Andrew Miller.

Photos by Julie Supple



## SMELTS from page 18

since 1990.

In 1992, the team joined the International LGBT+ Aquatics (IGLA) and two years later hosted the annual IGLA swim meet at the University of Illinois, Chicago. When the Gay Games came to Chicago in 2006 the team grew with more gay men, other queer folks and straight people joining the team to compete at the games. Now there are about 130 members.

"When we hosted the annual IGLA swim meet the team was small so pretty much everyone was

involved in some way in making it a very successful weekend," said long-time member Chris Layton.

The team has been the Illinois Masters State Champions for the past four years, most recently at the April 15, 2018 meet. They also hold the distinction of being the only IGLA team to win a statewide United States Masters Swimming championship meet across the country.

A number of Smelts said these victories are a direct result of how hard the team works. Giles-Ott explained that in years past some straight teams would smirk at the idea of an LGBTQ swim

team but no one smirks now.

In terms of the role that these LGBTQ masters swim teams play in today's world, Lavender said that despite the many victories the community has made over the years many people still face hate and negativity and the Smelts provides a safe space for them in the sporting world.

"I thought it was ground-breaking to have gay swim meets in the early years and was thrilled to participate," said Wexelberg. "It is wonderful that gay sporting events are now just part of the norm."

"I think the challenge for every sport in the coming years is going to be finding just and eq-

uitable ways to accommodate athletes who are gender non-conforming, intersex or transgender in our practice and competition spaces," said Bolf. "Right now, one must be either 'female' or 'male' for purposes of competition, and using the public park district locker rooms and showers can be socially, if not legally, stressful for people outside of the gender binary. So that is a place for us to grow as a team and hopefully lead the way."

**For more information about joining the team contact the board at [info@chicagosmelts.org](mailto:info@chicagosmelts.org) or visit [ChicagoSmelts.org](http://ChicagoSmelts.org).**