# Erik Piepenburg unveils the enduring sanctuary of America’s gay restaurants amid evolving LGBTQ+ culture



Erik Piepenburg's emotional recounting of the Napalese Lounge and Grille, a respected establishment in Green Bay, Wisconsin, highlights the profound significance of LGBTQ+ dining spaces. Known affectionately as “Naps,” the lounge serves as a sanctuary for a diverse group of transgender individuals who gather regularly to share meals and stories over comfort food. Many patrons travel considerable distances just to enjoy the welcoming environment, often supported by their loved ones, as illustrated by one poignant story of a young trans woman accompanied by her mother, who waited outside to ensure her daughter could enjoy herself freely. “It’s not political; everyone was having fun just being able to be themselves,” Piepenburg reflects, emphasising that gay restaurants have existed for generations, with roots tracing back to figures like Walt Whitman who sought connection in similar venues.

Piepenburg captured this essence at the Malibu Diner in New York's Chelsea, where the sounds of frying bacon and soft rock music create a comforting backdrop for conversations. His new book, *Dining Out: First Dates, Defiant Nights, and Last Call Disco Fries at America’s Gay Restaurants*, unfolds the rich tapestry of American gay restaurant history, showcasing how these venues provide essential refuge for LGBTQ+ communities. Amid ongoing threats to LGBTQ+ rights, Piepenburg argues for the enduring importance of these establishments, highlighting their role not only as dining locales but as crucial cultural hubs.

Piepenburg contextualises the evolution of these spaces, noting that their significance lies not in the sexual orientation of owners, but in the presence of a significant LGBTQ+ clientele. With historical anecdotes from venues such as Annie’s Paramount Steak House in Washington D.C. and Casita del Campo in Los Angeles, he illustrates a long-standing tradition of community through food. His explorations extend to Bloodroot in Bridgeport, Connecticut, a feminist restaurant that stands as a testament to inclusivity and activism.

In his own Cleveland, Piepenburg visits Flex, a gay sauna where patrons can enjoy homemade meals while mingling in towels. The culinary experience, he suggests, serves a broader social purpose beyond dining. He recalls the vibrant automat cafes of the early 20th century, where individuals could connect over simple meals, and highlights how establishments like the Tiffany Diner catered to the specific needs of the gay community, creating safe spaces for socialisation and healing.

The book further explores the activist spirit inherent in the culture of gay restaurants. Piepenburg recounts the landmark case involving Deborah Johnson and Zandra Rolón Amato, who faced discrimination at an upscale restaurant in Los Angeles during the 1980s. Such stories underscore not only the community-building role of these restaurants but also their historical significance in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights.

Despite their storied past, Piepenburg ponders the future of gay restaurants amid increasing social integration. While these venues may continue to thrive in urban centres, he acknowledges that they remain vital in less accommodating regions, particularly as young people seek "third spaces" to connect outside of bars and workplaces. Reflecting on meals shared with his long-time partner, he expresses hope that the essence of community, symbolised by the sizzle of a diner and the warmth of familiar faces, will endure.

As Piepenburg articulates, restaurants like the Napalese Lounge play an invaluable role as beacons of hope and remembrance in the LGBTQ+ landscape, preserving the history and culture of communities often overlooked. For many, these spaces are not just places to dine but sanctuaries where one can feel seen and celebrated, reinforcing the notion that joy and connection are universal, transcending the boundaries of gender and sexuality.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/jun/06/american-gay-restaurant-history), [[2]](https://www.napalese.com/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/jun/06/american-gay-restaurant-history), [[3]](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/28/books/review/dining-out-erik-piepenburg.html)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/jun/06/american-gay-restaurant-history), [[4]](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/28/books/review/dining-out-erik-piepenburg.html)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/jun/06/american-gay-restaurant-history), [[5]](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/28/books/review/dining-out-erik-piepenburg.html)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/jun/06/american-gay-restaurant-history), [[6]](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/28/books/review/dining-out-erik-piepenburg.html)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/jun/06/american-gay-restaurant-history), [[7]](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/28/books/review/dining-out-erik-piepenburg.html)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/jun/06/american-gay-restaurant-history), [[3]](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/28/books/review/dining-out-erik-piepenburg.html)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/jun/06/american-gay-restaurant-history> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.napalese.com/> - Napalese Lounge and Grille, established in 1982, is the longest-running LGBTQ+ bar in Wisconsin, located at 1351 Cedar Street in Green Bay. Known as 'Naps' to locals, it serves as a safe space for the LGBTQ+ community, offering live music, drag shows, and a diverse menu. The venue is also home to Green Bay's first outdoor LGBTQ+ mural, unveiled in August 2021, symbolising the community's resilience and pride. Napalese actively supports local LGBTQ+ initiatives, including the 'Our Voices: LGBTQ+ Stories of Northeastern Wisconsin' archive, preserving the region's queer history. ([napalese.com](https://www.napalese.com/?utm_source=openai), [napalese.com](https://www.napalese.com/lgbtq-mural?utm_source=openai), [napalese.com](https://www.napalese.com/fundraising?utm_source=openai))
3. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/28/books/review/dining-out-erik-piepenburg.html> - In this New York Times review, Erik Piepenburg's book 'Dining Out: First Dates, Defiant Nights, and Last Call Disco Fries at America's Gay Restaurants' is highlighted. The book explores the rich history of LGBTQ+ dining establishments across the United States, delving into their roles as safe havens and community hubs. Piepenburg's narrative spans various cities, showcasing how these venues have been integral to the LGBTQ+ experience, offering spaces for connection, expression, and resistance. The review underscores the cultural significance of these establishments in fostering community and identity. ([napalese.com](https://www.napalese.com/?utm_source=openai))
4. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/28/books/review/dining-out-erik-piepenburg.html> - In this New York Times review, Erik Piepenburg's book 'Dining Out: First Dates, Defiant Nights, and Last Call Disco Fries at America's Gay Restaurants' is highlighted. The book explores the rich history of LGBTQ+ dining establishments across the United States, delving into their roles as safe havens and community hubs. Piepenburg's narrative spans various cities, showcasing how these venues have been integral to the LGBTQ+ experience, offering spaces for connection, expression, and resistance. The review underscores the cultural significance of these establishments in fostering community and identity. ([napalese.com](https://www.napalese.com/?utm_source=openai))
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