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# Dining at the four 'Old Ladies': Sam's, John's, Original Joe's and North Beach

By **Willie Brown** on March 27, 2014 at 3:00 PM

Because my back problems — and a couple of recent trips to the hospital — curtailed my activities, I had to figure out where I could go to dinner and be comfortable.

I chose to work it with the four restaurants I like to call the “old ladies.” **John's Grill** and **Sam's Grill** are two of these old ladies. **Original Joe's** and **North Beach** are the other two. All are very traditional restaurants, but none of them actually competes with the others when it comes to food.

Original Joe's food isn't exactly old, since it closed for a while and then moved from the Tenderloin to North Beach ... but it's close enough. This restaurant also has a real drinking component to it; the other three have bar space, but really not for bar use. Because of its new location, Original Joe's is often filled with locals and tourists.

Sam's has virtually no tourists; it's filled with San Franciscans from the Financial District, the types who packed Bardelli's when it was in business. I wasn't really an observer of that until the last month when I had to repeat and repeat and repeat. Now each of them are on my list of a once every two to three-week visit. That's how much I enjoyed them.

John Burton, my buddy for 50 years, took me to Sam's for my birthday. I was like I stepped back in time because we had a booth with a curtain and a bell to push to summon the waiter. For someone who enjoys people-watching in restaurants, it was an adjustment. But Sam's commitment to fresh fish demonstrates itself, and even if you don't eat bread you'll start eating it after Sam's because Boudin provides the sourdough. All the waiters are senior citizens, dressed in tuxedos.

At John's Grill, you find yourself coming back just to look at the photos that line the walls. It's literally a museum of well-known personalities, old and new. Then you instantly know you're in a classic when you order the Joe's Special. The quality of the cocktails are clearly designed to get you to come back. What's also impressive is the waiters at John's Grill are young and hip-looking with black shirts, ties, trousers and aprons. But you don't see any techies dining there; you realize right off that the crowd contains many tourists because you continually overhear questions about the city being asked and answered by the young staff..

So it was a good month, and even with minimal activity, I had some good times. This “slow down” also clearly reveals itself in the credit card use, because my companion Sonya Molodetskaya didn't buy into this style of dining, so it was just me.