Good Times at Frank’s

Devotees agree: The fundamentals are right.

Okay, you can strap on your credit card, go to Grill 23 in Boston, and have placed before you a 24-ounce (yes, 24 ounce) porterhouse steak ($44) and side orders that would feed multitudes of the famished, plus a bottle of red with a high opinion of itself, and you might not regret any of it. Or you can go to Frank’s.

This correspondent has been going to Frank’s Steak House on Mass. Ave. in north Cambridge for decades, since before the time in the 1960s that nemesis walked in on the street and shot the piano player, if the correspondent remembers such an episode correctly. William Ravanis bought Frank’s in 1974 and straightened things out. No one knows for certain the identity of Frank. According to the restaurant’s website, legend has it that the restaurant originally had no name, although it did have a regular customer at the bar, a friendly lush named Frank. Eventually, management honored him.

Even though Frank’s is a neighborhood restaurant, always full of locals, it is also esteemed by outsiders of all stripes. See that fellow in tweed dining alone at the Early Formica table not far from the piano, putting onion rings into his mouth and reading the Journal of East Asian Studies? Why is he here instead of at the Faculty Club? Maybe he lives around the corner, of course. We asked a number of farther-flung fans why they like Frank’s.

“Because I always feel welcome there,” says a history professor. “Moreover, most of the seating is in booths, and you can actually hear well enough to have a conversation with your companions, a rarity these days.”

“Because within its price range, or even at considerably higher prices, it’s the best steak in town,” says a retired Harvard University Press editor. “If you order medium rare, that’s always how it comes. The waitresses are nice. You don’t need a reservation, although they’ll take one. The parking isn’t too horrible usually, and there is a small lot. I’ve never had seafood at Frank’s, but recently I tried the day’s special, veal Oscar. I wouldn’t recommend it. I usually have steak; sometimes the sirloin ["Frank’s Famous N.Y. Sizzler," $15.95], sometimes the filet mignon [with tarragon butter, $17.95]. I’ve never had a steak there that wasn’t great.”

“Because the petit filet mignon [$9.95] is just the right size for me,” says an academic administrator.

“Because Frank’s is a place where Harvard professors and the working folks of Somerville and Cambridge are equals—entirely—at the trough,” says an historian and political commentator. “It’s one of the last centers of egalitarianism in the United States and definitely the last within shouting distance of Harvard Square.”

No respondent seems ever to have had dessert at Frank’s, but such things as grapenut custard ($3.50) are on offer. The priciest wine on the list is a Pinot Noir at $31, and 18 wines may be had by the glass. Many beers and ales are on draught. A note on the onion rings: Some years ago, Frank’s began to press their rings into a loaf before frying. If you prefer your rings loose, just ask. The kitchen will be happy to oblige.

FRANK’S STEAK HOUSE
2310 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge
617-661-0666
Open for dinner every day except Christmas, and on Sundays from noon to 9. Entertainment in the lounge on Saturdays, 9 P.M. to 1 A.M.

Co-managed by the owner’s sons, George Ravanis, above, and William Jr., Frank’s may be Greater Boston’s oldest steak house.