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AFTER DARK // It's a rare happy-hour bargain

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Byline: BARRY KOLTNOW

What if I told you about a great **happy-hour** bargain?

You'd probably be ecstatic because most of the great **happy-hour** bargains in Orange County are gone. They don't make **happy** hours like they used to in the old days (the '80s). I have found a great **happy-hour** bargain, but like so many other great things in life, it comes with a catch.

The catch is that it starts at 3 p.m. and is over by 5:30 p.m., which is the time that most normal people are just leaving work and ready for a drink.

I was curious to know what kind of people could take advantage of a **happy hour** at 3 p.m., so I headed to the Yard House in Costa Mesa and found an available bar stool. And it wasn't that easy to find. There was a pretty sizable crowd for the middle of the afternoon.

Yes, this is a popular **happy hour**. It is operational Monday-Friday, and all appetizers and martinis are half-price. That's right, those oversized \$8.50 martinis are just \$4.25. And, if you're as big a fan of the Yard House's appetizer menu as I am (the coconut shrimp is amazing, and the California roll is a work of art), then you can understand why I'm so excited.

Anyway, I ordered a Ketel One martini and a California roll, and started eavesdropping.

The trio next to me (two men and a woman in their 30s) were discussing the end of "Frasier."

I was glad they weren't discussing the end of "Friends." They earned my respect. Then they ordered another round - two foreign beers and a fruity martini.

Two stripper types walked in and were met by two young men who apparently like being seen with stripper types.

They sat in a booth and quaffed beer.

Sorry, I couldn't make out the conversation.

Four businessmen on the other side of me seemed enraptured over their round of golf. It was only then that I noticed they were all wearing polo shirts with tiny reptiles on them. Obviously, an early **happy hour** fit right into a day that

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started with early tee time.

Sitting on a stool beyond the four men was a man sitting alone. He was middle-age, bald and drinking a martini. He was writing furiously on a notepad.

At first, I thought it was me. Then the bartender handed him a plate of nachos, so I knew it couldn't have been me. I don't like nachos.

Farther down the bar were three young blond men who seemed to be oblivious to the stares of the three blond women sitting to their left. All six were in their 30s. I don't know why they weren't at work.

The three women fascinated me.

Once they accepted that the men weren't interested, they threw their own party. It was only then that I noticed that they were all drinking Cosmopolitans. Now I got it. These women were living the "Sex and the City" fantasy, only without the nice shoes. I could only imagine the body parts they were discussing.

I enjoyed watching them laugh. Even if they were a little loud.

They lost me, however, when a song came on the sound system and one of the women leapt from her bar stool and screamed, "Iggy Pop rules!"

That was the first indication I had that anyone in the room was even remotely aware of anything going on in the bar except their own conversation. All the television sets were tuned to an NBA playoff game but no one was watching. I thought I was the only person who knew that music was playing in the background.

But others were cognizant of the music. And apparently Iggy Pop rules.

I should note that if you are a serious vodka martini drinker, there is a secret to ordering. The half-price offer is only for the "Chilled Martinis" listed on the menu. There are about 20 of them, but most are silly concoctions with names like "Bikini Tini," "Chocolate Kiss" and -- ugh -- "Vanilla Cheesecake."

If you want a straight-up Ketel One martini, which is not listed on the menu, ask the bartender for a "Dirty Martini," without the dirty. He'll understand.

Yard House, 1875 Newport Blvd., Costa Mesa, (949) 642-0090. The Irvine Spectrum Yard House offers the same **happy-hour** bargain.

Barry Koltnow's After Dark column runs Fridays in Show. Reach him at (714) 796-5051, Ext. 1110, or bkoltnow@ocregister.com

