

Great Notch Inn, Little Falls, N.J.

It's the closest thing North Jersey has to a juke joint. Intimate and loud, The Great Notch Inn (located near the congested intersection of Route 46 and Route 3) has a capacity of about 100 if you include the outside front porch area. Not a stop for nationally touring bands, the venue offers straight-ahead blues from some of the area's best acts. There's never a cover charge, and you can stop in almost any night and soak up Delta blues, urban funk, rock or even Latin music. Bands are set up just five feet from the bar.

Owned and managed by Rich Hempel, this venerable roadhouse has been a family enterprise for nearly 60 years and has developed a cult following, attracting a mix of bikers, musicians and die-hard blues lovers. It's the kind of place you'd take an out-of-towner to see and hear real blues in an authentic setting. Even the music videos played during breaks are great. Be on the lookout for the compilation album on Silk City Records recorded here; it features several of the club's oft-booked bands.

— *Keith A. Mulhare*



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Blue Lamp Lounge, San Francisco

The funkier San Francisco blues dive is the Blue Lamp Lounge at 561 Geary. This downtown juke joint features regional acts like Edna Love, Faraway Brothers, Junior Watson and Little Johnny & The Giants, plus the best weekly blues jam in the Bay Area on Sunday nights. Located in the theater district, the Lamp is authentic — dig the tuck-and-roll walls! You'll find it packed with tourists, some of whom plan their sightseeing around frequent stops at the Lamp.

At night, fire-breathing barkeep Mike Shaw, with a mouthful of Bacardi 151 and a flaming napkin, keeps the

newbies hopping. (He's also legendary for yelling at impatient customers.) Factor in occasional guest shots by Coco Montoya, Boz Scaggs and members of Blues Traveler and you've got a great big-city blues room with just the right balance of class and grease.

Other top blues clubs in the area include Biscuits and Blues (401 Mason, one block from Union Square), which offers a killer sound system and down-home Southern-style food, and the Boom Boom Room (1601 Fillmore), which books acts like Oscar Myers, Brenda Boykin, Buddy Miles and Fillmore Sims — and sometimes even John Lee Hooker, a part-owner. Top-notch sound in a classy room.

— *Ed Ivey*

Blue Cafe, Long Beach, Calif.

A flower breaking through a crack in the concrete of this blue-collar town, the Blue Cafe draws fans from all corners. Patrons will even drive an hour in L.A. traffic to get to "the Blue." Why? As co-owner Vince Jordan put it, it's "good food, good booze, billiards and blues." The performers are top-notch: For the past seven and a half years, the Blue has featured the best of the touring pros seven nights a week, like Junior Wells, John Lee Hooker, John Hammond, Charlie Musselwhite and Honeyboy Edwards. But they've also offered front sets and midweek nights to the best local artists.

As a result, the 500-capacity club is brimming with fans every night. The spillover from the dance floor heads upstairs to the billiards rooms or out the door to the patio where California law allows them to grab a smoke. And the music fills the Promenade, drawing a constant stream of onlookers and walk-ins.

The Blue is just one of many fine venues. Babe and Ricky's in L.A., Cafe Boogaloo in Hermosa Beach, Cozy's in Sherman Oaks and others make the good times roll in quake country.

— *Rich DelGrosso*



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