

No Money? No Problem

By Anna Jane Grossman and Gena Hymowech

August 7, 2004 — New York is a brutally expensive city to live in, but look on the bright side: This town abounds with free stuff, from haircuts to theater tickets and even free wine.

Here are some of the city's best.

Free booze

You can get a buzz on for nothing this afternoon from 2 to 5 p.m. at Union Square Wine & Spirits (33 Union Square West, between 16th and 17th streets; [212] 675-8100), one of the many fine wine stores in the city that offers free wine tastings. In addition to the Saturday afternoon tasting, they offer samples 5 to 7 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays.

If wine isn't your thing, go to the Chelsea bar Flight 151 (151 Eighth Avenue, between 17th and 18th streets; [212] 229-1868) on Tuesdays for "Flip Night." You can get a free domestic beer (read: Budweiser) if you call which way the bartender's coin lands. (You have to pay if you're wrong, unfortunately.) Thursday is "Trivia Night" at Flight 151, when the staff shouts out a Trivial Pursuit question every 15 minutes. The first customer with the correct answer gets a free drink.

And if your name is Michele, you'll get a free drink if you just show up tonight at No Idea (30 E. 20th St., between Broadway and Park Avenue South; [212] 777-0100). Every night, a different name gets a free drink, and this is Michelle's lucky evening. Check out the calendar on their Web site, www.noideabar.com. And expect a crowd on August 20, when Jennifer returns to the free list. Up until recently, this name was banned. "We had too many of them, and some that were really difficult Jennifers," says one bartender. "They trashed the bathroom."

Free food

There may not be such a thing as a free lunch, but free dinner is another story. The city's many branches of T.G.I. Friday's offer a free happy-hour buffet on weekdays from 4 to 7 p.m. And you can get free sandwiches every night of the week from 5 to 7 p.m. at German stalwart Rolf's (281 Third Ave., at 22nd Street; [212] 477-4750).

Customers have been known to smuggle in Tupperware in order to load up on the free all-you-can-eat rice pudding served alongside the tandoori chicken and hot lamb vindaloo (which you pay for) at Curry in a Hurry (119 Lexington Ave., at 28th Street; [212] 683-0900). They also have a free all-you-can-eat salad bar there, too.

And, for the wildly daring, there could be a massive free dinner awaiting you tonight at Mama's Food Shop (200 E. Third Street, at Avenue B; [212] 777-4425). They serve everything cafeteria-style and typically give leftovers to charity. But the charity pickup services take Saturday night off, and most of Mama's uneaten Saturday grub gets tossed. So if there's a nice person working behind the counter when the shop closes (around 10 or 10:30 p.m.), they'll pack you up some delicious mac and cheese and fried chicken.

Free sweets

If there's one thing better than getting stuff for free, it's getting high-end stuff for free. Some of the city's finer chocolatiers offer free samples, so if you're craving candy, pay a visit to Martine's Chocolates (Bloomingdale's, 1000 Third Ave., at 59th Street, 6th floor; [212] 705-2347), which promises one piece of free chocolate per customer, or 5th Avenue Chocolatiere (510 Madison Ave., between 52nd and 53rd streets; [212] 935-5454), which sometimes gives you a lot more than one truffle if you ask nicely.

Then there's Dylan's Candy Bar (1011 Third Ave., at 60th Street; [646] 735-0078), which has bins and bins of everything gummy, chewy and chocolatey. There are always free samples, but beware – the price for the freebies is having to listen to the store's theme song, New Edition's "Candy Girl," over and over again.

Free theater tickets

Forget standing in line at TKTS! If you're willing to spend a half-hour taking tickets or handing out Playbills, you can see a show for free as a volunteer usher. And we're not talking about the local drama club's staging of "Our Town" – although Broadway shows don't use volunteers, a lot of off-Broadway houses do. To get a gig, call individual theaters or check out Playbill's On-Line job listings (www.playbill.com).

Free karaoke

Sure, you can sing in the shower for free, but you'll get a mike and an audience at the free karaoke on Coney Island. Just get in line behind the Italian grandma singing "I Will Survive." Karaoke is gratis 7 to 11 p.m. Friday nights and 2 to 6 p.m. Sundays on the Coney Island Boardwalk at West 12th Street, right in front of Deno's Wonder Wheel.

Free museums

Few people know that there are actually two Whitney museums in Manhattan. There's the Whitney Museum of American Art, where you'll pay \$12 a ticket, and there's the Whitney Museum of Art at Altria (120 Park Ave., at 42nd Street; [917] 663-2453), where admission is nada. Currently on view is "Single Wide," a six-minute film by Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler.

Another oft-forgotten free gem is the Forbes Galleries (62 Fifth Avenue, between 12th and 13th streets; [212] 206-5549), which displays some of the quirky items collected by the late Malcolm Forbes, including writing exercises Abraham Lincoln did in kindergarten, the first Monopoly game ever and thousands of tiny toy soldiers. There's also a real cool marble maze in the foyer.

You can also get free admission to the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology (Seventh Avenue at 27th Street; [212] 217-5800), which will be displaying the work of 20 of its professors and other contemporary artists starting August 17th; and the National Museum of the American Indian, which is exhibiting a rare collection of American Indian artwork (1 Bowling Green, between State and Whitehall streets; [212] 514-3700).

Free haircuts

If you've never been to Crops for Girls (154 Orchard St., between Stanton and Rivington streets; [212] 677-2772), you're in for a treat. The 8-month-old salon offers a free haircut for first-timers. You have to want a short haircut, though – they don't do any other kind. The place offers a wide range of short styles; check out www.cropsforgirls.com.

You can also get a free cut by becoming a hair model for Bumble and Bumble University. Keep in mind, though, that to participate, you must be open to a complete style change. For more info, and to apply, go to www.bumbleandbumble.com.

Free shampoo

Anyone who lives in the East Village knows that Kiehl's (109 Third Ave., at 13th Street; [212] 677-3171) is the place to hit if you need a weekend travel-size shampoo. They give out tons of samples of all of their normally high-priced products. The sizes of the samples vary, but some could last you a week or more. If you're thinking ahead, they make great stocking stuffers for your out-of-town family members who aren't so in the know. Kiehl's says that each customer shouldn't take more than three samples, but we doubt they'll squirt hairspray in your eye if you walk out with five or six.

Free TV

Watching a television show being taped is way cheaper than cable. If you have a little luck, you can get a free same-day ticket for several local talk shows. Tickets to "LIVE with Regis and Kelly" can usually be had if you get to their studio in the ABC building at the corner of 67th Street and Columbus Avenue by 7 a.m. on weekdays.

For free tickets to the "Late Show with David Letterman," call the standby hot line at (212) 247-6497 at exactly 11 a.m. Mondays to Thursdays. If regular ticket holders don't show up – and it happens more often than you would think – you can get their tickets through the hot line, if you can answer a trivia question.