

SPEAK EASY

For those in the know, hidden bars represent a novel and more exclusiveway to imbibe. BY DANNY BRODY + ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHRISTIAN ALEXANDER



Although the Roaring Twenties refer to a period of social and cultural upheaval in the United States, perhaps some of that so-called “roaring” was indeed due to the lack of (legally-available) alcohol during Prohibition. Yet Americans, clever as they are, not only found a way around the petulant tight-asses, but figured out how to make illegal “bathtub booze” glamorous. Bootleggers like Al Capone and Arnold “The Brain” Rothstein ran one step ahead of the government and Canadians made fortunes piloting “blended whiskey” across the waterways to outlaws like the Purple Gang in Detroit. And speakeasies, as they were known, began popping up in major cities as well as small towns across the country. Red hot jazz was the music of choice, and, often, a password was required to enter. Of course, when prohibition was repealed in 1933, these speakeasies became anachronisms, yet, some 75 years later, discriminating bar-goers are again seeking out novel and more exclusive ways to imbibe. Hence the emergence of “hidden bars” from coast to coast, where a sophisticated appreciation of drink-making has been revived.

“If the blue light is on, and the pirate flag is flying, all are welcome.” These are the words that describe whether or not PX, a bar hidden above a fish and- chips joint in Alexandria, Virginia, and run by celebrity “bar chef” and liquid savant **Todd Thrasher**, is open. The entrance is actually around the corner from the restaurant **Eamonn’s/A Dublin Chipper**, through a red door that may as well be the entrance to someone’s Civil War-era home. You must have reservations or wait until you’re recognized through a small slot in the door, for the room is small and there’s no packing them in as at the Irish bar down the street. In fact, there is an Irish heritage to PX as well,

which comes not just from Thrasher, but from co-owner and perennial Beard Award favorite, **Chef Cathal Armstrong**, whose **Restaurant Eve** and **The Majestic** have put Old Town Alexandria on the international culinary map. As for PX's libations, come for the grog, a Thrasher specialty, served in a traditional pirate's mug with a see-through bottom – a mix of lemon verbena tea and spiced rum. Or his Eamonn's Cocktail, which includes, yes, Powers Irish whiskey, but also yuzu air (which is made from a yuzu solution – yuzu is an Asian citrus fruit – and soy lecithin). Thrasher also makes his own bitters, tonic, and vermouth.

The “rules” of PX, which are similar to NYC's groundbreaking Milk & Honey, are more tongue-in-cheek than steadfastly enforced, according to Don Rockwell, founder of DonRockwell.com, DC's largest restaurant and bar community board. “Anyone can make a reservation,” he says. “The image of exclusivity is a shtick – actually an amiable farce and a darned good one. Really the only ‘house rules’, other than a list of humorous ones, are the dress code and also the electric shock mechanism that's wired under the barstools for when people get impatient while their drinks are being prepared.” Rockwell's favorite cocktail of Thrasher's is the Sweet Basil, a “finesse” drink composed of Lillet Blanc, orange water, and basil infused simple syrup – a light and aromatic way to start your evening, especially after a long day of decision-making on Capitol Hill.

At NYC's popular but hidden PDT (which wittily stands for “Please Don't Tell”), the patrons are never three-deep at the bar because there is no standing allowed here. And, mind you, don't be yelling across the bar either because that will get you a dirty look or, perhaps, a stern warning from the bartenders. But, first of all, how on Earth can one find this hidden bar, with no sign and no street entrance? Look no further than Crif Dogs, according to Mitch Weinstein, a New York City specialist for eGullet, an influential New York-based foodie board. According to “Weinoo”, as he has been known for years, it's a little hot dog spot located a couple of steps below street level on St. Mark's Place, between First Avenue and Avenue A. You'll need a reservation and you'll also need to know that you enter PDT through the old-fashioned phone booth in the hot dog joint, just like Maxwell Smart, Agent 86. Pick up the phone, give it a buzz, and a lovely hostess will escort you into a dark-paneled room, where, no doubt, you will also leave with a buzz, as these are some of the finest cocktails to be had in NYC. Try to sit at the bar, where PDT's bartenders, including Monday night stars John Deragon and Don Lee (whose Benton's Old Fashioned – bacon-infused bourbon, Grade B maple syrup, and a dash of bitters – has already become a speakeasy classic), put on a show that entertains as much as it educates. They measure all the booze (after all, a cocktail that may contain five or six ingredients, in quantities like half a teaspoon, needs to be measured), hand-crack your Kold-Draft ice, stir or shake, and then pour the resulting concoction into an ice-cold glass. You can order a beer, although the off-duty celebrity chefs and other restaurant insiders who fill PDT usually stick with cocktails. If you're hungry, to boot, they'll even bring you a hot dog (for a low fee), like the Chang dog, named after Momofuku's David Chang, or a John John Deragon dog, named after the bartender and slathered with cream cheese, delivered directly through the pass from Crif Dogs right next door. After all, this is still the Lower East Side. Another great hidden bar in New York is Death & Co., which is (slightly) concealed behind a great wooden door on East 6th Street. In May, they had a bartender from the Lonsdale in London mixing here. They call it the “bartender exchange” program, which meant that usual ‘tender Brian Miller was behind the stick in London. They each brought their respective

cocktail menus with them to serve at their new, temporary homes. The crowd-pleaser, called the Depth Charge, contains gin, Lillet blanc, orange international crowd here always seems so damn relaxed, albeit a tad bleary-eyed. Across the country in San Francisco's Tenderloin district, Bourbon & Branch sits on the corner of Jones and O'Farrell Streets, where you must whisper your password to the unseen person on the other side of the door. You will then be quickly ushered into the dark bar of this speakeasy to sample bartender Yanni's delicious concoctions. There's also "The Library", a separate room that truly recalls, in its music and ambience, a 1920s speakeasy. The term "speakeasy", by the way, supposedly originated with some old Irish woman who sold liquor without a license. She told her customers to be quiet and "speak easy" if they wanted some booze. And, after a few Bourbon & Branch cocktail originals, like founding mixologist Todd Smith's Aperol Sour, you'll probably believe anything. Even Cleveland has its own speakeasy, which, in the words of famed food writer Michael Ruhlman, may be the best bar between Chicago and New York. The Velvet Tango Room, whose signature drink is the dark and sultry Spicy Chica (think ginger and cinnamon flavors), has a private area that is only accessible via a key-card swipe to open door number one or through a second door that is disguised as a mirror. Of course, a password is also required, for even in the heartland, the speakeasy intrigue has people lining up for a shot at exclusivity. And also for cocktails that may be crafted from Goslings Rum, Disaronno Amaretto, ginger syrup, and fresh juices. Getting tipsy, in fact, has become sophisticated again all over the U.S., but with the right password, anyone can start their own Rat Pack. Now, when is Miami going to catch on?

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