

A Cozy Modern Day Speakeasy

The restaurants and shops of Old Town Alexandria like to advertise their international origins. Wander along King Street, and you'll see the flags of Spain and Scotland, the United Kingdom and the United States, Ireland and Greece all waving proudly over doorways and from windows, trying to lure customers in for a pint of Guinness or a selection of tapas. But the place I'm looking for on King Street this Saturday night is flying a different standard: the Jolly Roger.

Finally, I see it, hanging from the second story of Eamonn's, an Irish fish 'n' chips spot at King and Columbus streets. My date and I make a quick left onto South Columbus, take a few steps down the block and climb three stone steps to a heavy wooden door. There's no sign or address -- just a plain brass plaque and an iron grill that reminds me of a prison cell. We know we're in the right place, though, because a blue light glows in the lantern next to the stairs.

I ring the doorbell. After a few seconds, we hear boots clomping down a flight of stairs. A slat behind the grill slides away, and the wood is replaced by the eyes and forehead of a young woman. I can feel her looking us up and down.

"Yes?"

I pause, not sure what to say.

"We're here for the PX."

Another pause while she gives us a final once-over.

"Okay, come in."

The grill closes, a heavy lock slides, the door creaks open and we step into a foyer.

"This way," she says, heading for the stairs. (At this point, we notice she's wearing a black dress and white go-go boots.) She leads us to the second floor, where we find three small rooms that resemble a set from the "Thin Man" movies: dark wood, mirrors covering the walls, gorgeous cut-glass chandeliers, shelves holding a museum exhibit of vintage cocktail equipment. Classic jazz and acid jazz play on the stereo, though it's quiet enough to allow conversation with people sitting nearby. At the short wooden bar, drinks are being vigorously shaken and poured into retro glassware.

We find seats in a small nook called the Couch Room, decorated with more mirrors, some low, comfortable white leather ottomans and a pair of couches upholstered in blue velvet. The fancy cocktail menus are full of Prohibition-era names -- Gibson, Sazerac, flips, champagne cocktails -- that reward exploration.

Welcome to the PX, a 21st-century speak-easy. Cont....

Well, it's not a speak-easy in the gangsters-and-bootleg-liquor tradition of "The Roaring Twenties" and "Little Caesar," but the postmodern "We're not going to advertise so only the select few know we're here" manner favored by the likes of the Eighteenth Street Lounge.

It sounds over-the-top, and maybe even silly, but the attraction is twofold: a chance to drink some of the best cocktails around, created by Todd Thrasher, the resident alchemist at Restaurant Eve, in a classy, laid-back setting.

"It's always been my dream to open a bar like this," says Thrasher, who has spent the past few years as Eve's resident Willy Wonka, making his own tonic water from scratch for the house gin and tonic, offering foie gras to accompany a pear-puree concoction and topping another drink with whipped pickle foam.

When he was given the chance to open his own place above Eamonn's, though, he decided to go in a completely different direction, inspired by such places as New York's Employees Only and Milk & Honey, which has an unlisted phone number for reservations and admission. The PX "was always going to be a speak-easy," Thrasher says. "I've always dug that vibe."

It started with classic drinks, though most include some sort of twist. The Gibson is a simple staple: gin, vermouth, onions. At the PX, this means top-shelf liquor and a selection of onions that Thrasher pickles himself. (Flavors have included garlic, jalapeno and sweet, though the smoky saffron is the best of the lot.)

Flips, or cocktails made with cream and eggs, disappeared from fashionable bars long ago, but Thrasher is trying to bring them back. The Irish Flip shakes Powers Irish whiskey, cream, sugar and a dash of nutmeg to create a frothy milkshake of a cocktail that smells of fall and never fails to please. Its lighter companion, the Chicas Flip, takes on a more floral, citrusy flavor, thanks to the herbal Hendrick's gin and lemon juice mixed with cream and topped with a swirl of rose water. Hendrick's is one of the most potent, explosive gins on the market, full of pungent aromas, but here it's simply the perfect complement, blending seamlessly with lemon and milk.

"I like people not to taste alcohol," Thrasher says. It sounds like a crazy idea -- why order a gin cocktail if you can't taste the gin? Why not just drink fruit juice? -- but Thrasher insists that "the art of the cocktail is to have everything in balance. I try to wipe [all the flavors] off the map."

He couldn't fly a pirate flag without a pirate drink, so Thrasher offers his own take on pirate grog: a smooth, summery mix of spiced rum with lemon tea and lemon juice, which arrives in a silver tankard with a see-through bottom -- the easier to see an enemy trying to attack while you're sipping.

What's especially nice are the little touches: Large-mouthed "Marie Antoinette" champagne glasses -- allegedly modeled after the queen's breasts -- are used for flips, while some cocktails arrive in martini glasses with delicately carved stems. And the classic vodka-and-ginger-ale Mule comes in a huge copper mug that grows colder as you drink. The Gibson's olives are speared on solid metal cocktail picks, not plastic swords. But all this luxury comes with two catches: drinks take a few minutes to make -- you're encouraged to relax and 'listen to the ice' in the shakers -- and it's not a cheap night out. Basic cocktails cost \$11, and the fanciest versions go as high as \$16.

Having to ring a doorbell or be buzzed in may seem like jumping through hoops just to get one of those satisfying Bittersweet Gin Fizzes -- which include Thrasher's homemade sweet vermouth and a touch of orange -- but it also serves to keep the crowds under control. It's hard not to stress how small the PX is. There are seats for about 34 and room for 40 total. Groups larger than six probably can't sit together comfortably unless they rent the entire front room.

While the intimate vibe is an asset, PX's size may also be its biggest limitation. The staff is serious about limiting the number of people allowed inside at one time. "It's been a little busier than we'd like it to be," Thrasher admits. "We don't want it to be crowded, people standing at the bar. I want people to be able to sit down, enjoy themselves, have conversations and a great cocktail. If you've got people leaning over you to order a drink, you can't do that."

While he's not ready to go the same route as Milk & Honey, Thrasher says they've considered a few perks for regulars, including a VIP card that would allow access to the lounge via a "secret passage" from Eamonn's, though that won't launch anytime soon.

In the meantime, don't take it personally if the eyes in the door tell you that you can't come in -- when the lounge is full, it's really full. (On weekends, a few couches can be reserved for a set two-hour period for no charge.) Anyone who makes it in agrees to abide by the house rules, which are posted in the entry hall and the bathroom. The list contains such reminders as "When a lady says 'no,' she means it" and "To stay in our good graces, never order just a vodka tonic."

The first rule, which has been generally ignored so far, states that men must wear a jacket. Enforcement is going to begin soon, though, because the PX expects its guests to "make an effort" for a night on the town. "I don't want people to feel like they have to put a suit and tie on or a tux on," explains Thrasher, who admits that when he's not working, he's a "jeans, flip-flops and white V-neck" kind of guy. "I don't mind jeans -- it's a fine line to walk. It's just the jacket. I think I want to distinguish myself. I want people to give some thought into going out."

Well, if he's looking to thin out the crowds, this is one way to do it. If I'm out for dinner with friends in Old Town, I'm less likely to suggest we stop by the PX -- not because we'll be dressed poorly, but because I know at least one guy in the party inevitably won't want to deal with wearing a jacket.

Not to worry, Thrasher says with a smile: "We're going to start stocking retro jackets for guys who aren't wearing one -- we'll be the 1789 of bars!"