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## HOW'S YOUR DRINK?

# Speakeasies With a Twist

 By **ERIC FELTEN**  
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Chumley's, in New York's West Village neighborhood, was a rarity -- a Prohibition-era speakeasy that survived into the 21st century nearly unchanged. The bar claimed an illustrious literary clientele over the years, including Theodore Dreiser and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Alas, early this month a minor renovation went awry and a chimney gave way, taking part of a wall with it. For a while it looked like no small part of the building would take a tumble too. No one knows when Chumley's will reopen.

There's little left of New York's once-famous speakeasy world, but over the past year or two a raft of nouveaux speakeasies have turned up to keep the concept alive. In New York there are Little Branch, Blue Owl and the Back Room; San Francisco has Bourbon & Branch and Slide; PX opened last year in Alexandria, Va. The trend got its start in 2000 when New York bar entrepreneur Sasha Petraske opened Milk & Honey. The small, conspicuously inconspicuous place combined artfully made cocktails with an anticelebrity aesthetic. Milk & Honey rejected Manhattan's glam velvet-rope club scene, replacing it with the exclusivity of being in the know.

"To be sophisticated, or 'in the know,'" Michael A. Lerner writes in "Dry Manhattan," a recent history of Volstead-era New York, "one had to master the art of dodging the manifold prohibitions." The speakeasies of New York legend were hidden behind toy stores, or entered through fake phone booths. Now that alcohol is perfectly legal, the new speaks have to contrive hurdles and restrictions to test the knowingness of would-be patrons. They adopt the furtive practices of the originals -- unmarked doors and peepholes.

### THE REVOLVER



*(Adapted from  
Bourbon &  
Branch)*


2 oz bourbon  
 ½ oz Tia Maria  
 1 dash orange  
 bitters

*Stir or shake with  
ice and strain into  
a stemmed  
cocktail glass.  
Garnish with a  
slice of orange  
peel.*

Make a reservation at Bourbon & Branch and you'll be given a password to whisper at the door. Getting into PX usually takes a password too. But to get one, first you have to find the club's Web site -- just a link on the front page of Eamonn's, the Irish fish-and-chipper that fronts for PX.

During Prohibition, many clubs would provide "set-ups" -- exorbitantly priced trays of glasses, ice and ginger ale. Patrons supplied their own flask-borne liquor. San Francisco's Slide (one enters the basement room down a wide wooden chute) has revived the set-up, though it does provide the spirits to go with the

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fixings. The Back Room in New York relives the era by pouring its drinks into innocent little teacups.

There is one way in which the new breed of "whisper lows" differs from its ancestors. Prohibition-era watering holes weren't exactly famous for the quality of their cocktails. The liquor was "so unutterably vile," wrote David Embury in "The Fine Art of Mixing Drinks," that "the primary object in mixing a cocktail became the addition of a sufficient amount of sweetened, highly flavored, and otherwise emollient and anti-emetic ingredients . . . to make it reasonably possible to swallow the resultant concoction."

But where jazz-age drinks were rarely anything more than efficacious, the nouveaux speaks are at the center of the modern handcrafted-cocktail cult. Following Milk & Honey's lead, Bourbon & Branch and PX abjure prepacked mixers like sweet-and-sour. All the fruit juices used are fresh-squeezed. Once you get used to cocktails made with fresh ingredients, you'll never settle for the squirt-gun substitute. However, if I have one quibble about the otherwise excellent drinks at PX, it is that the commitment to using fresh juices can lead to cocktails overwhelmed by the taste of citrus.

Speakeasies so-named were born in Pennsylvania in 1888, when the Brooks High-License Act raised the state fee for a saloon license to \$500 from \$50. The number of licensed bars promptly plummeted, but not all the barkeeps unable to get a license shut their doors. Kate Hester had run a saloon in McKeesport, just outside of Pittsburgh, for years; she refused to pony up the new license fee and wanted to keep from drawing attention to her newly illicit joint. When her patrons got too rowdy, she hushed them in a hoarse whisper: "Speak easy, boys! Speak easy!" It wasn't long before Hester's "expression became common in McKeesport and spread to Pittsburg," noted the New York Times in 1890. "Some day, perhaps, Webster's Dictionary will take it up."

Pittsburgh may have pioneered the concept, but it was in Prohibition New York that the speakeasy came into full flower and fame. It's been guesstimated that Manhattan boasted as many as 32,000 illegal bars and nightclubs, some swanky, some louche, and many in between. In the waning days of Prohibition, artist Al Hirschfeld drank and drew his way around Gotham with scribbler Gordon Kahn, producing a wry, illustrated guide titled "Manhattan Oases," reprinted a few years ago as "The Speakeasies of 1932." They visited everything from "The Mansion" at 27 W. 51st St. ("The most pretentious place in New York, or it will do until the most pretentious place is built") to O'Leary's on the Bowery ("the sight and smell of a score of sodden derelicts is none too pleasant"). They pop in at Jack and Charlie's, an upscale speak at 21 W. 52nd St. that remains in business today as the 21 Club. At Club Simplon, "admission is not easy," Hirschfeld and Kahn wrote. "A nonchalant manner, with a touch of imperiousness, will get you by, here as elsewhere." Words to live by.

By and large, the new speaks feature classic cocktails. But the bartenders are not without ambition: They wish to add to the canon. Bourbon & Branch mixer Jon Santer has a contender, The Revolver, a house special with the simplicity one finds in the best cocktails. Made of bourbon, the Jamaican coffee liqueur Tia Maria, and orange bitters, the drink gets its name from the brand of bourbon -- Bulleit -- used. But you should use any bourbon you like. Bourbon & Branch's recipe calls for a little less than three parts bourbon to one part liqueur; I found I preferred a 4:1 ratio.

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