

The Impulsive Traveler

Boston's positively stirring cocktail scene

BY LIZA WEISSTUCH

It was just before 6 p.m. on a recent Tuesday when the bartender aimed the blowtorch at the fruit lying on a tiny hibachi grill and pulled the trigger. An orange slice and a cherry took on a glistening sheen as they burned. Then the bartender muddled the fruit into the Burnt Sugar Old Fashioned, a rough-and-tumble twist on the dignified classic.

Staff members were scurrying through Clio, James Beard award-winning chef Ken Oringer's flagship restaurant in Boston. Couples and small confederacies of businessmen settled in at tables in the dining room, whose neutral tones and unflashy decor lend it a coziness not usually expected from a restaurant that serves foie gras ravioli and black licorice roasted Muscovy duck and confit.

The unpretentiousness is also unmistakable at the bar, where paintbrushes, blackened Middle Eastern limes and blowtorches are just a few of the objects not commonly found beside shakers and strainers. Todd Maul, the bar manager, explained my next drink.

"We take Mayflower Porter and stick-blend it in an immersion blender with yellow beets and pink peppercorns, then spin it out in a centrifuge to give it the feel of an amaro. You just get the coffee and hoppy and chocolate notes of the porter," he explained as offhandedly as if he were giving directions to the restrooms. "Then it's cut with Carpano vermouth. I didn't want it to be too heavy, so I used Canadian whiskey to lighten it up. Instead of using beer as the forward part of it, I wanted the beer notes."

The burgundy-colored drink was baffling in the way that string theory or the Sistine Chapel are baffling. All I could do was marvel at this manmade thing of beauty. That was when Maul told me that chemistry students from MIT, a stone's throw away across the Charles River, have told him that they're impressed with his centrifuge, a device more commonly found in medical labs.

When it comes to drinking in Boston, the options have long fit the stereotypes. In the beating heart of Red Sox Nation, you have an excess of sports bars. And if there's a game on, you'd better believe that even higher-end bistros will have televisions playing to rapt imbibers at the bar. And as a historically Irish city, it probably boasts as many pubs as biotech labs.

But over the past years, the nefarious mob boss James "Whitey" Bulger has been caught, the "Big Dig" has been concealed by a welcoming greenway, and gleaming condos have been sprouting where punk-rock-era dive bars once reigned supreme. It has also become much easier to find bartenders who can wax esoteric about their drinks. Yes, this craze coincides with the cocktail renaissance that has emerged in major cities internationally, but in Boston, it's a delicious affirmation of a reinvigorated city stripped of many of its stereotypes.

One thing that's still guaranteed, however, is the flood of tourists every March. This month, the Guinness flow can probably be measured by river lengths; jaunty fiddle tunes and the Dropkick Murphys' "I'm Shipping up to Boston" play with the ubiquity of samba in Rio during Carnival. But for discerning drinkers, the true pots of gold are nowhere near the crowded Ye Olde Irish pubs.

The serene, sublime No. 9 Park, which overlooks Boston Common and opened in 1998, was James Beard award-winning chef Barbara Lynch's first endeavor. It features a lounge that's as much a destination for hipster cocktail nerds as the dining room is for the legions who come to celebrate graduations, anniversaries and done deals. On a recent Saturday evening, the two young, engaging bartenders greeted us with tavern-caliber casualness and nonchalantly explained such drinks as the Swamp Water Fix. "A couple on a hot day asked if we'd



PHOTOS BY LIZA WEISSTUCH FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Mixing it up: Above, oyster shuckers and bartenders work side by side at the bar at Boston's Island Creek Oyster Bar. Below, Mary Dunham, a bartender at Clio, torches fruit for use in intriguing, progressive cocktails.



ever heard of a Swamp Water. They said they used to drink them at the Rat in the '70s," explained bar director Ted Kilpatrick, referring to the Rathskeller, a Boston club that existed from 1974 to 1997 and hosted bands such as the Police and Talking Heads in their early days. "It was Chartreuse and pineapple juice over crushed ice in a Mason jar and based on an ad campaign that touted Chartreuse as higher proof than the rest. We dry it out by using Batavia Arrack and Chartreuse, and use pineapple juice, syrup and lime to make it a proper fix, the way it was made historically. It's more complex and funkier."

On the spot where the long-shuttered Rat once stood is Eastern Standard, in the Hotel Commonwealth. It's mere blocks from Fenway Park in Kenmore Square, a beer guzzler's Shangri-La. Garrett Harker, Lynch's former business partner, opened this gorgeous brasserie, where bartenders crank out exquisite cocktails with top-rate craft spirits, in 2005. It set off the rejuvenation of the long scrappy Kenmore and, with that, the democratization of craft cocktails.

"People respond to something that's well made and handcrafted," Harker told me. "I watched the cocktail become exclusive. . . . We wanted to do something

that's accessible at any level and give it the same attention the chefs give to the food in the kitchen."

The democratization continued when Harker opened Island Creek Oyster Bar at the other end of the sprawling Commonwealth in 2010. It was with a voracious midwinter craving for seafood that a friend and I arrived at this very modern re-imagining (lobster roe noodles, oysters, drop ceilings, a wall of 37 oyster cages, each densely packed with thousands of polished oyster shells) of the very classic New England seafood joint.

As we sat at the bar watching oyster shuckers at work, a bartender asked us what spirit we were in the mood for. In keeping with our warm weather longings, "tequila" was my nearly reflexive response. He reappeared minutes later with a thrilling off-menu concoction. He strained it into my glass and explained the piquant mix: tequila, muddled cucumber, agave syrup, cinnamon syrup, fresh lime and grapefruit juice. A trace of Sriracha curbs the sweetness. The finale? A few quick twists of a pepper mill. The margarita-like underpinning was familiar and comforting; all the embellishments made it an imaginative thrill, and a delightful aperitif before a plate of lustrous oysters arrived.

When we finished, we were escorted next door to the Hawthorne, the third of Harker's tipping trinity at the hotel. This subterranean den is decked out with plush couches and chairs, dark wood furniture and glass tables, to give it a snug yet classy living-room feel. And the surgeon-caliber attention that the spiffy barkeeps give to the most ethereal gin fizz I've had since my last visit to New Orleans seals the deal, making anyone feel like the guest of honor.

Most Bostonians wouldn't consider O Ya an option for a casual sip, but this swanky (and pricey) nouveau sushi boite has a laid-back charm. This is where the gracious Nancy Cushman, sake guru and co-owner with her husband, chef Tim Cushman, another Beard winner, will regale you with the nuances of the sakes in her collection — from earthy varieties and delicate fruit-forward types to unfettered styles with a "cooling effect," all served in your choice of ceramic vessel.

This is where she'll warn you of the "googly-eye effect" caused by the gem-size sushi bites, especially when paired

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE

JetBlue offers nonstop flights from BWI Marshall and Reagan National to Boston. US Airways flies nonstop from Reagan National, and United Airlines flies nonstop from Washington Dulles.

WHERE TO STAY

Nine Zero Hotel
90 Tremont St.
617-772-5800
www.ninezero.com
Sleek boutique hotel just paces from the Boston Common, with spectacular city views. Complimentary wine reception daily. Rooms start at \$249.

Hotel Commonwealth
500 Commonwealth Ave.
617-933-5000
www.hotelcommonwealth.com
Elegant hotel near Fenway Park. Top-rate eateries Island Creek Oyster Bar and the Hawthorne occupy the ground floor. Rooms start at \$279.

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

No. 9 Park
9 Park St.
617-742-9991
www.no9park.com
Iconic French- and Italian-inspired restaurant featuring a lounge where congenial barkeeps mix cocktails as historically rooted as they are cheeky. Bar menu items start at \$7; drinks start at \$12.

The Hawthorne
500A Commonwealth Ave.
617-532-9150
www.thehawthornebar.com
One of the newer cocktail-centric dens, with attentive service and meticulously constructed drinks. Cocktails start at \$11; menu items start at \$9.

Island Creek Oyster Bar
500 Commonwealth Ave.
617-532-5300
www.islandcreekoysterbar.com
A terror-centric menu of bivalves and stunning twists on a classic New England oyster shack make fine accompaniments to the complex yet simply delicious drinks. Cocktails from \$10; appetizers from \$4, oysters from \$1.50 each.

O Ya
9 East St.
617-654-9900
www.oyarestaurantboston.com
High-end bites and a comfortable atmosphere define this zenlike modern sushi boite with an impressive sake list. Sake starts at \$9 (glass); nigiri from \$8.

Clio
370A Commonwealth Ave.
617-536-7200
www.cliorestaurant.com
Science meets art at the bar of James Beard award-winning chef Ken Oringer's flagship restaurant. Cocktails start at \$13; bar menu items start at \$5.

INFORMATION

www.bostonusa.com
www.bostonchefs.com

—L.W.

with the right sake. This is where she'll try to explain the elusive flavor of umami, and you'll conclude that umami is best explained the way Justice Potter Stewart famously defined pornography: You know it when you see it.

This is where you'll sit at the sushi counter and watch the sushi chefs prepare morsels such as hamachi with banana pepper mousse and a sprinkling of truffle oil. The delicate fish gets its gloss and rich flavor after being flamed with — you guessed it — a blowtorch.

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