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*RYAN REYNOLDS BRINGS THE SWAGGER

(YOU WOULD, TOO, IF YOU WENT HOME EVERY NIGHT TO SCARLETT JOHANSSON)

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- > THE COOLEST GANGSTER MOVIE OF ALL TIME
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THE FOOTBALL HERO WHO EXECUTED ONE INCREDIBLY BALLSY BANK HEIST

*YOUR COMPLETE FALL GUIDE TO MEN'S STYLE

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DON'T LOG ON TONIGHT THE CHILLING CASE OF THE VIRAL SUICIDES

WHERE CAN A GUY GET A DECENT COCKTAIL?

THE 25 BEST BARS IN AMERICA



*Ranked in descending order

They are the great American invention. And there has never been a better time to drink them than now. We traveled 34,462 miles and sipped 400 gin fizzes, Manhattans, and Gibsons with one goal—to compile the first ranking of the nation's best cocktail bars
By **Kevin Sintumuang**

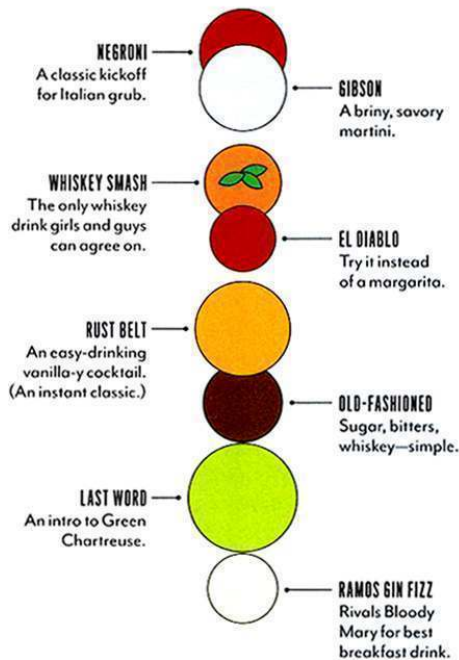


IF YOU HAVEN'T NOTICED,

we are in the middle of a cocktail revolution in this country. A wave of bitters and tinctures and hard-to-find spirits has spread so quickly and widely that no one has stopped to take its measure. Until now. A year ago, we at GQ decided to rank the nation's very best cocktail bars—in order. So we traveled. A lot. Enough miles to circle the earth, the moon, and then some. We explored New York and San Francisco, where the renaissance began ten years ago. But also Nashville and Houston and Decatur and Healdsburg, where it has washed up and settled. Recommendations came from bartenders, writers, blogs—anyone who knew the difference between a Gibson and a Vesper. In the end, we visited twenty-one cities and 102 bars. We drank no fewer than three cocktails at each,

DRINK LEGEND

There are thousands of new drinks these days. But the classics featured on the opposite page are just that, classic. Go to GQ.com to learn to make them yourself. No waistcoat required.



► **PHOTOGRAPH**
Mitchell Feinberg

but usually many more. Most we tried to limit ourselves to a few sips, but some we finished—the pull of a good cocktail was just too great. The winners are listed here (and in more robust form on GQ.com). But first, a few lessons learned after twelve months of serious drinking:

♦ Today's bartenders don't just pour drinks. They make their own tinctures and bitters. They scour eBay for out-of-print recipe books and antique glassware. They are alchemists and madmen.

♦ If you don't like cocktails, you've been drinking the wrong ones. Like jazz, another great American idea, they were built for riffing. For variation. They aren't just sweet like mojitos or boozy like martinis. They can be sour. Savory. Herbaceous. Bitter. Spicy. Dry. Smoky. There is nothing in a glass more versatile.

♦ Ice may be the most important part of a cocktail. In most drinks, it's the majority of what's in your glass. Any place that uses cubes with holes in the middle or with oversize dimples can't make a good cocktail—it's physics: The stuff just melts too fast. The best places carve ice out of huge blocks or use Kold-Draft machines, which produce perfect crystal-clear cubes.

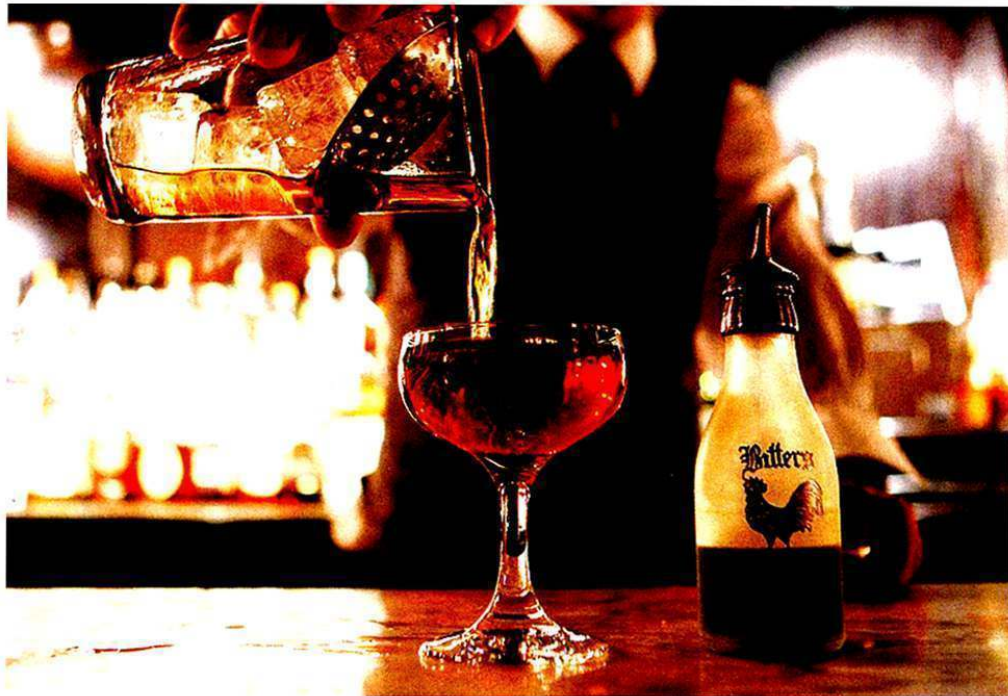
♦ Old-timey accuracy matters, but the drink matters more. Handlebar mustaches, arm garters, entrances with passwords—these things can quickly sour into preciousness. If a drink was good—balanced and true—we drank. If it wasn't, we didn't.

♦ Bartenders are better concierges to their cities than actual concierges.

♦ Charcoal pills do nothing. Sleep is the only hangover cure, and the noon checkout time at hotels, for that reason, is cruel.

♦ Most important: We learned that every city in this country deserves a bar that cares deeply about the craft of the cocktail. It brings the social fabric of a metropolis together and adds to the culinary allure of a town in a way that a good beer bar, wine bar, or dive bar just can't. There's no substitute for a well-made drink. There really isn't. If you don't believe us, let's discuss it one evening over a Gin Gin Mule. ►





▲ DEATH & CO.

The drinks invented at this spot in New York's East Village have a way of showing up on menus around the country.

No. 1 ZIG ZAG CAFE
Seattle

• Like anything worthwhile, a night at Zig Zag Café must be earned. From the fish merchants at Pike Place Market, you'll take stairs, worn wooden ramps, a skybridge, more stairs. Its location renders Google Maps useless. Still, people find it. By 5 p.m. the dozen barstools are almost always filled. Patrons come for the easy conversation and the drink-all-day coziness. Above all, though, they come for the cocktails of Murray Stenson. The man is effortlessly talented, a bartender superhero. In fact, he may be the country's best.

It's not obvious. Murray is not theatrical. He does not wear arm garters or shake things above his head. His endless energy is more about efficiency. Speed. Simplicity. We've seen him glance at a long recipe brought in by a guest, then leave. Did he blow that guy off? After forty-five seconds, he returned with the drink. "Good find!" he said. There is no way he memorized that recipe. There is no way he found the ingredients so quickly. There is no way the cocktail is any good. But then you sip. And you understand. Each drink Murray pours is a mini-revelation, an introduction to rare spirits and a bold use of common ones. Behold the Sayonara, whose slow, intense pepper-infused-tequila burn can only be soothed by the sourness from a sip of the same drink: fire and extinguisher in a single glass.

Still, if you ever have doubts about Murray's talents, do this: Sit near the end of the crescent bar. Peek behind it. Look closely at his workstation. Five drink racks. About twelve bottles in each. Artfully tiered from floor to torso, like a medieval organ powered by Dubonnet, kirsch, and Tuaca. If you think any ordinary bartender could play such an instrument, you'd be wrong.

No. 2 ANGEL'S SHARE
New York

• This is the closest you'll get to a Japanese cocktail experience without crossing the Pacific. The hushed conversation. The hand-carved ice. The drinks poured with an assertive snap of the wrist. There are a dozen temples like this in Tokyo, but only one Stateside.

No. 3 THE VIOLET HOUR
Chicago

• Wrigley Field may be Chicago's best bar, but Violet Hour mixes the best cocktails in town. Out of the three dozen drinks, there's always a worthwhile variation on the sidecar, the Negroni, and the old-fashioned. The bartenders utilize five shapes of ice, and as the line grows outside this elegant haunt, their attention to detail remains the same; mint is carefully placed atop drinks, bitters dropped with painterly precision.



THE ANATOMY OF A \$15 COCKTAIL

Expensive, but in the hands of the right bartender, worth it.

THE BOOZE

A drink can call for two types of Chartreuse, a single-malt, a French vermouth, and an Italian liqueur. That's about \$200 of booze you'd need to make a single drink.

THE BITTERS

Many bars make their own, which require high-proof spirits plus a blend of things like square vine, prickly-ash berries, and tree bark. You can't pick any of that up at the supermarket.

THE FRUIT

Real cherries, not the neon-glow kind, cost twenty-five cents each. Fresh berries, citrus, and mint also add up.

THE LABOR

You pay for quality. In the time a bartender makes a well-crafted cocktail, the dive bar next door could have made a dozen vodka sodas.

No. 4 CLOVER CLUB
Brooklyn

• They got the old-timey part down. The étoile wallpaper, the pressed-tin ceilings, the astute devotion to classics like the Atholl Brose (a whiskey drink from 1475). But what makes Clover Club better than other turn-of-the-century-style joints is that all of that oldness never overshadows a Brooklyn-style casualness, which feels just right for right now.

No. 5 The Alembic
San Francisco

• There's a kind of poetic humor to the drinks at this pubby cocktail bar on the Haight, where the minimum tattoo requirement for employees must be five, maybe six. The smoky and sweet Vasco da Gama, our favorite whiskey drink in the country, is served on the rocks with global ingredients: Buffalo Trace bourbon, masala-spiced apple syrup, Islay scotch. The Gilded Lily is a sparkling Chartreuse-and-gin cocktail topped with edible gold dust. It's perfect for Dubai, and perfectly ironic on a street where the homeless mumble Ginsberg's "Howl."

No. 6 DEATH & CO.
New York

• Death & Co. should be flattered: Their drinks are the most widely imitated in the country. Our pick, the Oaxaca old-fashioned, is a south-of-the-border version of what many consider the original cocktail, but with mescal and tequila instead of bourbon or rye, and agave nectar instead of sugar. Why did it take a century for someone to invent this?

No. 7 PDT
New York

• It's easy to focus on the gimmicks: The entrance is a phone booth inside a hot-dog joint; they serve Tater Tots. But bartender Jim Meehan is a master at updating classic cocktails and inventing new ones. The Benton's old-fashioned uses bourbon infused with bacon. It's one of the only constants on the menu. The other, God bless, is Tots.

No. 8 PX
Alexandria, Virginia

• It's a shame more people from D.C. don't come here—something about Alexandria being in the suburbs. Oh, well. Their loss. PX is the finest farm-to-glass bar in the country. Put another way, no one uses fresh berries, herbs, and roots quite so expertly. So don't be fooled by what looks like the most ho-hum drink on the menu, the gin-and-tonic. It includes a housemade tonic infused with lavender and lemongrass. You won't find a better one anywhere.

No. 9 COMSTOCK SALOON
San Francisco

• Only months old, Comstock feels like it's been here since the gold rush. The delft tiles. The antique glassware. The vintage bamboo

ceiling fans, slowly cutting the air like primitive steamboat paddles. As worn-in as this place appears, it really is the next phase of the American cocktail bar. An evolution. A quality spot that's less about ice and bitters and more about why we come to bars in the first place: hospitality and conversation. The vintage drinks (try the pisco punch, the John Collins, and the Martinez), superbly made and without fuss, are a bonus.

No. 10 HOLEMAN & FINCH Atlanta

• Co-owner Greg Best is either nuts, a genius, or both. Consider the Pig-Pik Sour, a drink made with bourbon, bacon sugar, and smoked egg whites. It's one thing to smoke brisket; it's another to smoke something that is dangerously just a few degrees away from turning into a gallon of quiche. There is a cocktail on the menu that uses "beet soda." Beets are as juicy as potatoes. Set in Buckhead, where former frat boys live, the bar has a manly workshop vibe. On one visit, a bro grabbed the menu from us, tossed it aside, and said, "That's not what it's about, man. Just tell them what you like. Trust them." We do completely.

No. 11 TIKI-TI Los Angeles

• The menu lists fifty-two rum drinks, most of them potent and delicious. The best include mysterious homemade syrups far better than the high-fructose nonsense that gave tiki drinks a bad name. There are also two beers available. Literally two cans—one cold, one warm. They cost \$20 each.

No. 12 THE PATTERSON HOUSE Nashville

• More than any dive or honky-tonk, the Patterson House reminds drinkers that when you're in the South, you're on sacred ground: America's Bourbon Belt. The library-themed haunt is named after the saintly governor who fought Prohibition. Shame he never got to try Vincent's Ruin, made with Bulleit bourbon, elderflower liqueur, lemon, and an absinthe rinse, or the Reelfoot, a Manhattan variant using both sweet and dry vermouth.

No. 13 EASTERN STANDARD Boston

• A few blocks from Fenway, this is (perhaps unintentionally) the most elegant sports bar in the country. A bit of Paris by the Citgo sign. Around midnight, a waitress gracefully hops atop a marble bar to write the specials. Look for the whiskey smash: Its crushed ice and mint sprig make even foam-fingered fans look sophisticated.

No. 14 RICKHOUSE San Francisco

• First words you'll utter at Rickhouse: "Give me a minute." The menu is twenty-eight pages long. It opens with a table of contents. Skip it and try our favorite: the Laphroaig Project, a strange yet pleasant mix of tropical flavors, herbaceousness, and peat.



▲ PDT
The name of this Manhattan gem stands for "Please don't tell." Oops.



◀ CLOVER CLUB
CC's bartenders take drink accuracy—but not themselves—seriously.

▼ HOLEMAN & FINCH
With a fearless menu, H&F has converted the boys of Buckhead (bottom left).

▼ VIOLET HOUR
Wicker Park's drink temple is hushed, civilized, sensible.





▲ **RICKHOUSE**
Located in San Francisco's financial district, Rickhouse draws a big crowd. The good news: It opens at noon.

▶ **COLE'S**
Smack in the middle of downtown, Cole's is an L.A. institution.



▼ **THE FRANKLIN MORTGAGE & INVESTMENT CO.**
Just off Philly's Rittenhouse Square, this joint goes through 300 pounds of hand-cut ice a week making old-school drinks like this (left).



THE BEST RESTAURANT COCKTAIL BARS

#1 **CYRUS**,
HEALDSBURG,
CALIFORNIA

Bartender Scott Beattie is credited with starting the farm-to-glass movement (i.e., fresh stuff in your drink). Good idea.

#2 **IRIS**,
NEW ORLEANS

Don't come to this place and order a Vieux Carré. Iris makes the bravest, most untraditional cocktails in New Orleans.

#3 **HEAVEN'S DOG**,
SAN FRANCISCO

Slanted Door's Charles Phan brings you a Chinese restaurant specializing in pre-Prohibition cocktails. Try the Biarritz Monk Buck.

#4 **FINO**,
AUSTIN, TEXAS

The only spot in Austin where you can consistently get a proper cocktail.

#5 **PRIME MEATS**,
BROOKLYN

The Manhattan flavored with housemade Buddha's-hand bitters is the perfect starter to the porterhouse.

No. 15 **ANVIL** Houston

• The list of classics at this converted tire store is two dozen drinks long—all of them well executed. But Anvil's culinary high jinks are even better. We sampled an experimental concoction labeled "bzzzz." Rum infused with chilies, it numbed our senses for a minute. What's on the menu is tamer and tastier. One suggestion: the Garden Variety, a margarita that mixes tequila, mustard, and coriander and has the refreshing properties of cucumber.

No. 16 **ARNAUD'S FRENCH 75** New Orleans

• New Orleans is a great drinking town with terrible drinks (Hurricanes, Hand Grenades). French 75 is the exception: a historical bar (monkey lamps, varnished wood, 1920s French music) with perfect cocktails. Our favorite, the rum-based Bywater cocktail, is off-menu. But this is the Big Easy—they'll oblige.

No. 17 **ELIXIR** San Francisco

• The lineup at San Francisco's second-oldest saloon (est. 1858) changes faster than a Mission District microclimate. This being California, you can always count on something fresh getting smashed in a glass. Elixir also hand-selects a barrel of Buffalo Trace bourbon. Makes a killer Manhattan.

No. 18 **COLUMBIA ROOM** Washington, D.C.

• Derek Brown honed his craft in Japan, home of the world's most precise bartenders. Using a cleaver, he breaks down large chunks of ice and stores the cubes in a basket, where they melt as slowly as glaciers. Ask him nicely and he might carve one into a diamond. The private, narrow space is open just three nights a week. Your reward for getting in: the best martini in America. The process entails gin stored in a medical freezer, a crystal glass, and a thermometer (thirty-one degrees is optimal). It's an expensive privilege to drink here. But just like in Tokyo, the receipt is prettier than a college diploma.

No. 19 **Cole's** Los Angeles

• Cole's looks a lot like it did when it served the first French dip, in 1908—the mahogany bar, the penny-tile floors. Even its old kitchen, where Prohibition-era patrons would sneak a nip of hooch, is now a speakeasy, the Varnish. Excellent drinks back there, but we prefer the casualness of Cole's proper, with its small TV screens for Lakers games.

No. 20 **THE WHISTLER** Chicago

• It's a music venue, sure, but it's an evolved music venue. A place where skinny-jeaned hipsters put down PBRs and pick up boozy rye drinks like the Blue-Collar Cocktail.

No. **21** *Drink*
Boston

• Don't cringe when the bartenders at this dark, narrow hideout in Boston's Fort Point hood ask for your "flavor profile." They mean no harm. And, well, no one is better at nailing what you think you'll like. We asked for something molasses-y. The gentleman made a 1919, a cocktail of Old Monk rum and Rittenhouse rye named after the historic molasses flood of North Boston. It was spot-on.

No. **22** *PEGU CLUB*
New York

• This East Asian-styled bar helped reintroduce drinking to New Yorkers at a time when most thought a night out involved bottle service. Today, Pegu is still an ambassador for the cocktail, converting vodka drinkers to gin and pouring anyone a solid Gin Gin Mule (it was invented by the owner) and endless Manhattan variations.

No. **23** *THE EDISON*
Los Angeles

• In an old subterranean power plant, the Edison is the largest bar on this list. It's also, in a way, the most impressive—because even when the place is filled to capacity, which is often, its bartenders manage to churn out cocktails like the classic Brown Derby (bourbon, clover-honey syrup, grapefruit) that rival those poured at twelve-seat speakeasies. Even better, the cocktails come with a show: Regulars arrive in trench coats and aviation goggles like characters in an Alan Moore comic. Women dressed as fairies serve vials of absinthe drinks from pushcarts. The pixies look as real as the defunct turbines in the back corner. Or maybe that's the absinthe talking.

No. **24** *THE FRANKLIN MORTGAGE & INVESTMENT CO.*
Philadelphia

• So railcar-narrow that the bar itself can seat only four people, Franklin has an ambitious menu divided into odd categories like Required Reading, Rebellious Spirits, and most direct of all—Booze in a Glass. They all provoke curiosity, and they're all good. The European Oils was a favorite, though our notes are gibberish. (It has rum, apparently.) This one was from the Booze in a Glass category.

No. **25** *NEEDLE AND THREAD*
Seattle

• "I spend all day on a tractor. Make me a drink that reminds me of the farm. You know, of dirt and diesel." This is how an organic farmer from Portland ordered his drink here, because that is how they encourage drinks to be ordered. Get poetic about it; you'll wind up with something like the Dirt 'n' Diesel. The bartender at this hidden room above Tavern Law (enter through the bank vault) wrote its ingredients on a coaster: 2 ounces Cruzan Black Strap Rum, ½ ounce Fernet-Branca, ½ ounce demerara-sugar syrup, ¼ ounce Cynar, and ¼ ounce lime juice. We make it at home.



THE BEST
SPIRIT-SPECIFIC
COCKTAIL BARS

#1 MAYAHUEL,
NEW YORK CITY

Scarred by bad tequila? Never had mescal? These guys can help.

#2 SMUGGLER'S COVE,
SAN FRANCISCO

Home to the country's best rum selection. Ignore the fake waterfall and enjoy the serious Caribbean drinks.

#3 LA DESCARGA,
LOS ANGELES

You'll drink enough rum cocktails here to be fooled into thinking you're in Havana.

▲ COLUMBIA ROOM
The bartender here once served the Obamas. You're no sweat.

▼ DRINK
Boston's booze-obsessives admire antique glass and tools (bottom right).

▼ ARNAUD'S FRENCH 75
A rare bastion of well-made drinks in the Quarter.

