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November 2008

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PASSWORDS,
HIDDEN
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AND SECRET
INGREDIENTS
OF TOP-SHELF
SPEAKEASIES

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SCHOLAR, HEARTTHROB, ACTION HERO—
THE *LORD OF THE RINGS* STAR IS A **RENAISSANCE MAN**
TAKING THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED



Mixing drinks at PDT

COCKTAIL

CONFIDENTIAL

Speakeasies are creeping into cities across the nation, serving libations inspired by Prohibition-era recipes.

BY TONY WARE

If one specter could be said to have heavily haunted American spirits, it is that of Prohibition. In 1917, after years of pressure from temperance groups, the US Senate began considering the Volstead Act, or National Prohibition Act. And on January 16, 1920, the 18th Amendment went into effect, federally outlawing beverages containing more than 0.5% alcohol.

In the legislation's wake, organized crime took hold of distilleries even as more than 1,500 federal agents fought a losing battle against bootleggers. Those wishing to indulge in the Jazz Age were forced to seek out speakeasies—illegal bars that operated behind nondescript fronts—until the passage of the 21st Amendment, which repealed the 18th Amendment and ended Prohibition on December 5, 1933. (Whew, just thinking about it makes you thirsty.)

The tippler of the 21st century has far less hoops to jump through. It's quite the opposite, actually, since the market has become saturated with "infused" elixirs and sickly sweet cocktails tagged "tinis." This has given rise to a new breed of back rooms—virtually unmarked bars with unlisted numbers, reservations- and seating-room-only policies, word-of-mouth "advertising," plus an emphasis on hospitality and attention to detail. Some discerning drinkers are passing up the local watering hole to seek out these secret entrances, which recall the speakeasies of the past.

"Before Prohibition, tending bar was a noble profession that required years to master," says Jim Meehan, cocktail director of New York's PDT (www.pdtnyc.com)—short for "Please Don't Tell"—which is entered through a phone

booth in the back of East Village hot dog joint Crif Dogs. "The re-release of old books and the latest scholarship has brought attention to this, and prodded today's bartenders to take their responsibilities more seriously."

With antique shakers, boutique bitters and hand-cracked Kold-Draft ice at arm's length, this new breed of bartenders is paying homage to some of the biggest names in spirits—and that doesn't mean Jim Beam, Jack Daniel and Jose Cuervo.

Drawing from the writings of late-19th-century bartenders like Jerry Thomas and those who followed Prohibition such as Harry Craddock and W.C. Whitfield, they are building on recipes with seasonal inventiveness, using new ingredients with a reverence to the originals. And since much of the speakeasy concept is about reverse

marketing, what lures customers is the history found in each glass. Interaction with bartenders breeds an insider language and stokes a desire to explore "new" drinks and their backstories.

Despite the necessary subterfuge and often sub-standard booze, genuine "whisper rooms" flourished in New York in the '20s and '30s, as colorfully depicted in such books as Al Hirschfeld's *The Speakeasies of 1932*. Historically, though, only a handful—**Chumley's** (currently under renovations; 212-675-4449), **Fanelli's Cafe** (212-226-9412), **21 Club** (www.21club.com)—continued long-term operations.

New York City's current reputation for inconspicuous imbibing dates to the turn of the new millennium, when cocktail impresario Sasha Petraske opened tight-lipped **Milk & Honey** (www.mlkhny.com).



Bourbon & Branch

com), a members-only social club. This furtive, cash-only bar downtown goes out of its way to not be noticed (it's referral-based, and the phone number is regularly changed). Drinks offered come not from a list, but rather from what can be made with the ingredients on hand; its revival of the egg white-enhanced flip-and-fizz is highly commendable.

Throughout the Big Apple, refuge from the common quick pour has proliferated in the past eight years. In addition to PDT, **Death & Co.** (www.deathandcompany.com), settled behind slated wooden doors, and Petraske's own subterranean **Little Branch** (www.littlebranch.net) are a couple of other nouveau speakeasies.

Just outside Washington, DC, in Old Town Alexandria, is **PX** (www.eamonnsdublinchipper.com), located above a fish-and-chips shop and marked only by a blue light. The limited seats and lack of refrigeration (save one tiny unit) follow the limited-access trend, as do the drink offerings.

"What's driving this artisanal bar movement is going back to basics, not using a sour mix that's so lime green, it looks like an alien brought it down," says bar manager Todd Thrasher. "There was lime juice even without plastic bottles or soda guns in the '20s, so that's something to consider when deciding whether to go for a 'Prohibition-era' thing."

Capacity control allows for quality control at PX, where the only thing muddled is the glass-by-glass ingredients. A similar tact works at Chicago's **The Violet Hour** (www.theviolethour.com), which is marked with a yellow light bulb. Inside, bartenders in waistcoats measure out rose water, grapefruit bitters and ginger syrup amid cornflower curtains and high-backed leather seating. It's certainly a contrast in a city where Al Capone once doled out blended "whiskey" and other highway hooch behind the doors of front shops posing as "candy" and "grocery" stores (some of which are operating taverns today).

A "cigar shop" is what the space housing San Francisco's **Bourbon & Branch** (www.bourbonandbranch.com) was in the last years of Prohibition. Now, it's a logical extension of the new American speakeasy, with its time-blocked, online

THE APPEAL OF REPEAL

December 5, 2008, marks the 75th anniversary of the 21st Amendment's ratification. Since passage of the amendment once again allowed the civic consumption of alcohol, here are a few more spots in which to indulge a commemorative quaff of delicious freedom.



BOSTON EASTERN STANDARD KITCHEN & DRINKS

www.easternstandardboston.com

At this Kenmore Square restaurant, mixologist Jackson Cannon has spent the last year offering a special menu of 12 Prohibition-era cocktails, available as a flight of 2-oz. tastes for \$75. And on Thursday, Dec. 4 until midnight on Dec. 5, there will be a Roaring Twenties-themed, multicourse costume dinner and party.



ATLANTA HOLEMAN & FINCH PUBLIC HOUSE

www.holeman-finch.com

An intimate gastropub backed by James Beard-recognized Restaurant Eugene, this glass-lined science lab showcases the hand-crafted tinctures of bar manager Greg Best. A regard for vintage techniques, housemade alchemy and the perfect serve makes for cocktails where tradition is a prime component. They'll be showcased by period-appropriate food pairings the week of Repeal Day.



SAN FRANCISCO ELIXIR

www.elixirsf.com

Continually serving San Fran for 150 years, this saloon and renowned craft cocktail corner in the Mission Dolores area has several anniversary parties planned this month. The festivities culminate in a Repeal Day celebration themed around the 13 years (1920-1933) it was a "soft drink parlor." A city-certified green business, Elixir does cocktails' Golden Era proud, offering only freshly produced mixers and local and organic artisan spirits.

reservation system, required password, no standing/cellphone policy and library of pre-1939 books. Additionally, the era-appropriate metal/glass stylization nods to the bars of the grand 1920s hotels—places where people would never speak loud enough that they couldn't hear the drinks being shaken.

In Los Angeles, the scene is more energetic—but equally steeped in intrigue. Located in the former boiler room of a private power plant, **The Edison** (www.edisondowntown.com) is an Art Deco-meets-post-industrial lounge that tucks historic glamour down an alleyway, offering jazz bands, burlesque shows and a happy hour of "classic cocktails at vintage prices." The cavernous space houses a grand concept, but people still applaud its anti-scene. Even in the neon-glow of Hollywood, the environment promotes the same sort of civil subculture as Prohibition, but without the stigma.

Whether your tastes run to modernist flourishes or original cocktails like the Sazerac, modern American speakeasies certainly offer a lot to talk about. ✂