

The New York Times

HEADS UP

In San Francisco, the Revival of the Hotel Bar

A wave of recently opened hotels featuring high-profile cocktail bars is drawing local savants in a city known for its lively bar scene.

By Lauren Sloss

June 14, 2019

San Francisco has long had an excellent bar scene, but, until a few years ago, many of the city's hotel bars left something to be desired. Overpriced and outdated, they also had a noticeable lack of locals.

Lately, though, San Francisco hotel bars are having a revival, with a wave of cocktail-centric spots featuring creative, accessible drinks and the city's top bar talent. These high-profile destination cocktail bars have become places that locals and visitors alike are seeking out.

The growing presence of hotel bars with buzz has the attention of industry insiders. "Often, the arrangement is a good financial one for potential bar owners," said Maggie Hoffman, drinks writer for The San Francisco Chronicle and author of the cocktail book, *Batch Cocktails*. "These spots are convenient for visitors and give tourists an opportunity to see what San Francisco is capable of, cocktail-wise. But locals definitely go to these places, too."

One of the first signs of this turnaround was Benjamin Cooper, a speakeasy-style spot that opened at Union Square's Hotel G in March 2015.

"I have a hard time calling that a hotel bar, and that's a huge compliment to them," said Morgan Schick, creative director of BV Hospitality, a company that has opened a number of local bars and designed their bar programs. Best known for the award-winning cocktail bar, Trick Dog (still one of the city's hippest spots), Mr. Schick and his partner, Josh Harris, are behind the bar programs for Charmaine's and Villon at Proper Hotel, a trendy boutique property that opened on Market Street in the summer of 2017.

Charmaine's opened in the hotel that November, and immediately attracted attention from local savants thanks to the duo's stellar reputation, and for the bar's rooftop location with views of downtown San Francisco and the bustling, warehouse-filled South of Market district. With its plush seating, fire pits and well-heeled clientele, Charmaine's caused lines to form down McAllister Street.

The al fresco setting influenced Charmaine's cocktail menu. "Let Me Touch Your Mind," a coconut-rich Piña Colada layered with a Negroni when served, best sums up the menu for Mr. Schick.

"You think, 'I'm in a classy-looking place so I'm going to drink a Negroni. But I'm also

on vacation with this tremendous view, I want to drink a Piña Colada, but I don't

A more recent addition to San Francisco's rooftop bar scene is Evermore, which opened this April in the new, five-story Hotel San Francisco. Besides taking it from the heroine of Thomas Harris' *The Girl on the Train*, the bar features a lush, garden party vibe that feels far removed from the crowd in SoMa. The drinks program consists of brightly colored, flora-heavy sippers (tequila-based, the city's Pleasure with cucumbers and snap peas, a local early favorite), courtesy of the lead bartender, Tommy Quimby at Trick Dog. Mr. Quimby also designed the drinks program for the downtown bar and restaurant Commons Club, which features spirit-forward drinks named after original Virginia Records artists.

Over by Union Square, the cocktails at Gibson, which opened in October 2017, the Hotel Bijou, use familiar flavors but in unfamiliar ways, and the beverage director, Adam Chapman, said while you'll find genre-bending, flavor-packed wonders like the "Clear Bloody Mary" (not menu, but available by request, made with clarified tomatoes, three types of hot sauce, and mented ponzu, Mr. Chapman does not list the drink menu's language.

"Instead of saying 'sous vide this ingredient,' we may just say, 'Herbaceous,'" Mr. Chapman said, adding that guests interested in learning more about the happy go deep.

Gibson's elegant, Art Deco-inspired bar, with its gold detailing, mirrors and high ceilings, set it apart from the more understated Mr. Chapman said outside guests, many of them locals, make up the vast majority of Gibson's clientele.

Laureate Bar & Lounge, at The Langham, a cozy, low-key property in Pacific Heights, feels even more like its own entity. Monday night saw a solid crowd of sipping wine and martinis around the minimalist Mid-Century Modern bar cut directly into the terrazzo tile.

"We're a neighborhood bar," said Sam Ginnis, Laureate's bar supervisor. "We want you to feel like you're walking into your friend's living room."

Mr. McGinnis cited the bar's relatively affordable prices — all cocktails are \$12 — and

Tucked in a stunning remodel of a classic Japantown hotel, **The Bar at the Hotel Kabuki** in Japantown, located between Pacific Heights and Fillmore, has also made price point a means of reaching a local clientele — it offers a daily happy hour with \$7 Highballs, alongside spiked tea-centered cocktails for two, and a large selection of Japanese whisky. The Bar is accessed directly from the hotel's modern, light-filled lobby, but has a cooler, upbeat vibe than a typical hotel bar, complete with curated stacks of books and records.

The main cocktail menu, designed by Stephanie Wheeler (formerly of Three Dots and a Dash in Chicago), centers on Japanese Hanakotoba, the language of flowers. The Chrysanthemum is a popular choice, and a worthy order — the herbaceous, Negroni-like gin drink features local St. George gin infused with goji berry.

The bartenders are knowledgeable, and agile, too; when a menu item was unavailable, the bartender asked a few questions about my spirit and flavor profile preferences, whipping up a nicely balanced, mezcal-based version of a classic Penicillin, typically made with Scotch.

"Every night, it's like a who's who of chefs and bartenders coming in," Mr. Cox said.



Above: The Bar at the Hotel Kabuki in Japantown has made price point a means of reaching a local clientele.



Left: A "Forget Me Not" cocktail at the Bar at the Hotel Kabuki in San Francisco's Japantown.

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