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The 23 Best Cocktail Bars In SF

by [Jay Barmann](#) in [Food](#) on [Jun 2, 2017 2:35 pm](#)

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...st decade or so, San Francisco has become one of the best — if not hands down the best, depending on who you ask — cocktail towns in the country. Sure, New York has its hip and cloistered cocktail dens that are impossible to get into, and New Orleans has some booze-mixing history to place a run for their money. But San Francisco has the seasonal, farmer's market-inspired cocktail game pretty well conquered, and there are a couple dozen top-notch bars where you can find perfectly mixed classics as well. We've left off some very fine hotel bars here, some great rooftop bars, and some very solid old-school hangs, as well as a few spots that are known for good drinks but also known for loud crowds who aren't really there for the drinks — meaning this list has you covered for your more modern, adult cocktail experiences. That doesn't necessarily mean these places are going to be easy to get into at prime time on a weekend. This is, after all, a city that loves to drink, and drink well. — Jay Barmann



The mezzanine bar within a bar that is now called Over Proof. Photo courtesy of ABV

[ABV / Over Proof](#)

The secret's out about ABV, and on a recent Thursday night the cocktail bar with food was packed with Missionites jostling for seats, many of them striking out. Founded a couple years back by alums of some of the city's best cocktail havens (Bourbon & Branch, Dalva Hideout, Beretta), the downstairs bar is a bustling spot that's good for a date on off hours earlier in the week, and good for meeting up with friends at prime time, especially

if you need to get some food in you. (The food is quite good, and the cocktails generally great.) And as of earlier this year, the mezzanine space is a bar-within-a-bar called Over Proof that's reservation-only, with two seatings a night, Wednesday to Saturday, and four to five "courses" of cocktails on a theme (the current one, Double Back, is all about whiskey), with just as many complementary bites to keep you from getting too hammered. — *Jay Barmann*

3174 16th Street between Guerrero and Valencia



Photo: Instagram

The Alembic

Now considered one of the OG modern cocktail spots in SF, a decade in, this Upper Haight bar-restaurant remains one of the most reliably good cocktail experiences in town, with a rotating selection of classic drinks and idiosyncratic concoctions on a tightly curated menu — as well as bar staff who can make you pretty much anything. It's also a bar that's not afraid to veer into the savory with their "new school" drinks, including one mainstay, the Southern Exposure, made with St. George Terroir gin and celery juice; and the Mount Aso, which is made with Japanese whiskey, mirin, kabocha spice, lemon, and a smoked carrot dashi. — *Jay Barmann*

1725 Haight Street near Cole



Anina's revamped patio beckons. (Anina's Instagram.)

Anina

One of SF's newest contenders on the cocktail scene ([it just opened in March](#)), Anina is already packing them in at both its long indoor bar and its picnic-tabled patio. But despite the crowds, the fast and friendly bartenders take a remarkable amount of care and attention with each drink — Jay and I were recently hypnotized during a busy evening by the swift and precise work of a bartender who juggled multiple complicated preparations at once. I'm a big fan of the Jinx Remover (rum, maraschino, absinthe, lime tincture), but those in a more savory mood should check out the Sierra Madre (rye, lemon, smoke, honey, hellfire bitters). And if you're young, dumb, and seeking to be full of rum, there are multiple types of cocktail "punch bowls," which are sure to leave you feeling delightfully punched well into the next day. — *Eve Batey*

482 Hayes Street



One of the many fine cocktails found at Bar Agricole. (photo: Amber Fox)

[Bar Agricole](#)

Bar star Thad Vogler's temple of elegant rum cocktails — with nods in the direction of gin, whiskey, and more — is aging quite well, six years into its run. Esquire just last week named it as [one of the best bars in the country](#) (the only SF bar on this year's list), and they note my favorite drink there that is always on the menu, the Ti Punch, made with the bar's namesake spirit, rhum agricole, from Martinique. It's a simple, delicious, vegetal cocktail made with just the rhum, lime, and sugar, and with its scents of fresh cut sugar cane, writer Kevin Sintumuang says, "It is good to be reminded, every once in a while, that booze is an agrarian product." — *Jay Barmann*

355 11th Street near Harrison



The cheekily named Member Tom Green cocktail, with Singani, Sotol, green tomato, vermouth, anisette, lime, and soda.

[Benjamin Cooper](#)

Easily one of my top three cocktail destinations in the city, this bar from the original bar team at the short-lived Big, a few blocks away, is a cozy, comfortable, and impressive place. Though it's not a complete secret and can get busy, it's never overwhelming in this tucked-away, second floor space with no sign, and the folks behind the bar know what they're doing. Don't see anything on the eclectic menu that strikes your fancy? They're well stocked with hard-to-find and sometimes house-made ingredients, and the bartenders are happy to mix you up something with whatever they've got — which could include things like ripe strawberries from the market, or a recently whipped up habanero tincture. Also, at certain hours, should you require an aphrodisiac, they serve oysters. — *Jay Barmann*

398 Geary Street, entrance on Mason



Beauty abounds at Blackbird. (Photo: Blackbird/Facebook)

Blackbird

Some claim Blackbird is located in the Castro, others insist this art-filled spot is in Duboce Triangle. Either way (because they're the same thing), it is at this very popular Market Street bars that many of my friends — both gay and straight — claim to find hot dates. Blackbird also has a mighty fine cocktail menu of seriously crafted specialties like the Femme Fatal with tequila, spiced orange shrub, aperitivo, and lemon, or the very timely Laura Palmer, (named for the fictional *Twin Peaks* murder victim) that consists of St. George Terroir Gun, Lillet, and Benedictine. These cocktails take forever to make, so think twice before saddling an extra-strapped bartender with your hipster order during prime time — and make a new friend while you wait. - *Beth Spotswood*

2124 Market Street



Image: Marivic D. via Yelp

Bourbon & Branch/Wilson and Wilson Detective Agency

An island of exquisite luxury in an ocean of Tenderloin sketch, the combo arrangement of Bourbon and Branch and “Wilson and Wilson Private

Detective Agency” (a.k.a. Wilson Bar) nails its 1920s Prohibition-era speakeasy theme perhaps as well as any vintage motif interior in San Francisco. Hidden passages and secret rooms abound, and the Wilson bar entrance is a legitimate bookshelf hidden door that feels straight out of [stately Wayne Manor](#). But the flights of Scotch whiskey and artisan craft cocktails match the meticulous design. It seems the “password required” rule has been relaxed (I’ve walked right in within the last few months), but despite the [hundreds of photos posted to Yelp](#) it’s still technically a house rule that photography is forbidden on the premises.— *Joe Kukura*
501 Jones Street at O’Farrell Street



Photo: Facebook

Comstock Saloon

At the intersection of North Beach, Chinatown, and the Financial District, drinkers will find the Comstock Saloon, a modern San Francisco take on a Barbary Coast saloon. Featuring big post-work happy hour crowds and nightly live-music, Comstock is a worthy stop for drinkers and diners alike. \$7 shot-and-beer combos are particularly popular here, like the Boot to the Head, a shot of Four Roses Bourbon and short pint of Anchor Steam. Try the \$12 Scofflaw Cocktail, a mix of Rye, dry vermouth, lemon, house grenadine, and orange bitters. Comstock's kitchen also serves up a full menu, with an app list that includes Barbecue Chips and Ranch Dressing and old cozy school wooden booths. Pro-tip: This is a particularly good rainy night bar, with a touch of the ambiance of the long-gone Washington Square Bar & Grill. - *Beth Spotswood*
155 Columbus Avenue



Photo: Facebook

Coqueta

Because they serve some of the best gin and tonics in town in one of the cuter waterfront bar spaces in town, I couldn't leave Coqueta off this list. Inspired by Barcelona-style *gintonic*s, the G&Ts here are all delicious and different, but you should start with the elaborately garnished Barca Gintonic, made with Fever Tree Mediterranean tonic water. Also, they serve a nice sangria, and it all goes great with some pintxos or tapas if you can snag a window seat. — *Jay Barmann*

Pier 5, The Embarcadero



Photo courtesy of Dalva

Hideout at Dalva

The local pioneer of the bar-within-a-bar concept, Dalva's Hideout, which keeps different hours and serves different drinks than the main bar, is a great, dimly lit date spot tucked behind the popular 16th Street bar. Originally conceived by a Bourbon & Branch alum, the Hideout isn't exactly a secret, and with just one person typically behind the bar with a somewhat complicated menu of drinks, you can find yourself waiting 10 minutes for a drink when the place is slammed. But get there at an off-hour, or right when they open at 7, and it's great, quiet place to unwind. — *Jay Barmann*

3121 16th Street between Guerrero and Valencia



Photo: Facebook

[Hog & Rocks](#)

In its seven years in business in the Mission, Hog & Rocks has consistently kept standards high with their cocktail program, making it a standout for top-notch drinks in the 'hood. Lately they've been doing a "Barrel to Bottle" program, offering exclusive whiskeys from barrels bought direct from distillers, sold by the taste or by the bottle — current offerings include an 8-year-aged barrel-strength rye from Old Scout, and a 10-year-aged Henry McKenna bourbon. And the cocktail menu always keeps things fresh with things like the Thai Me Down (lime gin, cardamomo, ginger liqueur, almond milk, thai chili), and the Sippable Feast (bourbon, applejack, pear, cinnamon, lemon). — *Jay Barmann*
3431 19th Street at San Carlos, between Mission and Valencia



Photo courtesy of Horsefeather

[Horsefeather](#)

One of several bars on this list to come from some Bourbon & Branch alums, Horsefeather debuted last year on the Divisadero corridor, finally bringing a high-end adult cocktail spot to the vicinity. It's a casual place, decked out in wood paneling, and they've got a full food menu too with a great burger and solid brunch. The drink menu ranges from the classically inspired, like the Buckfast (Bank Note blended scotch, Lo-Fi amaro, chai syrup and coffee tincture), to the elaborate and savory, like the California Cooler (celery juice, lime, thyme, sauvignon blanc, horseradish, sparkling

wine, and gin). And on sunny days, the partially covered front patio is a calm haven on an otherwise chaotic street. — *Jay Barmann*
528 Divisadero Street near Hayes



The Interval, via [their website](#)

The Interval

Tucked in a 1930s-era building toward the back of Fort Mason, The Interval is basically where the League of Extraordinary Gentlemen would hang out were they called to present-day San Francisco. Chock full of wacky mechanical marvels, books, and art, you might brush The Interval off as a steampunk Ruby Tuesday's, but you'd be doing yourself a disservice, as its pursuit of the esoteric arts is appealingly earnest. It doubles as the home of the [Long Now Foundation](#), so you might also get to hear some smarty-pants seminar as you down one of their "earliest cocktails ever made" or "time-shifted concoctions that take hours to make but are ready whenever you arrive." But unlike a lot of places that take pride in their cocktail program, The Interval also keeps non-drinkers in mind, with a great list of booze-free drinks and Sightglass coffee.—*Eve Batey*
2 Marina Blvd Bldg A, Fort Mason Center



See what I mean about Jardinere feeling Vegas-y? Photo: [Robert B/Yelp](#)

Jardinere

Is Jardinere the hippest, most cutting-edge cocktail bar on this list? No, it is not, and I likely would have argued against its inclusion on this list if I hadn't recently [revisited the bar to check out their version of the vaunted Impossible Burger](#). Unusually for me, I arrived early, and had plenty of time to check out the slightly Vegas-y splendor of the bar area, with its impeccable service and low-placed lighting that makes everyone look like an affluent version of someone about to tell ghost story at camp. I tried the somewhat uncomfortably named "Golden Sombrero" (Tapatio reposado tequila, Cocchi Americano, Suze, orange bitters) and really liked it, and on a return visit my companion had the Roaring Meg (Sipsmith gin, fennel shrub, lime, dry vermouth, fennel bitters) and declared it "dangerously good." All in all, it's a sexy grownup-feeling bar with perfect service, solid

drinks, and a clientele that makes people-watching an Olympic-level sport. — *Eve Batey*
300 Grove Street at Franklin Street



Photo courtesy of Nightbird

[Linden Room](#)

This tiny cocktail bar attached to Nightbird in Hayes Valley is focused on creative seasonal cocktails, sometime taking inspiration from what's coming out of the restaurant kitchen. The current menu features a drink made with pisco, rum, and gin (with black tea and cinnamon) called the Golden Era, and since they opened they've been mixing a drink called the Ralphie Boy which is a seasonally varying take on a whiskey sour. — *Jay Barmann*
330 Gough Street, entrance on Linden



Photo: Facebook

[Maven](#)

The only craft cocktail spot in the Lower Haight until very recently (Black Sands Brewery also makes a fine drink), Maven continues to be very popular for its food (that burger!) and its booze. The cocktail menu rotates on the regular but always aims at originality, with current selections including the Zelda Fitzgerald (gin, lemon, lavender, aquavit), and the Broken Spanish (blanco tequila, Campari, orgeat, lime, nutmeg). And the bar with its vertical garden backdrop is a pleasant place to sit, day or night. — *Jay Barmann*
598 Haight Street at Steiner



Photo courtesy of Oddjob

[Oddjob/SRO](#)

When the team behind Big parted ways, a couple of the bar guys started Benjamin Cooper, and a couple of the owners opened this place in SoMa. The front bar is more bustling with a solid craft cocktail selection, and in back is the one-man show known as SRO (Standing Room Only) where currently barman Aaron Kelley slings bespoke cocktails to a small, waiting audience. Like Benjamin Cooper, there's a lot of homemade stuff going on here, from bitters to infusions to tinctures, and the real art gets made when the audience is open to anything. The bar-within-a-bar only has room for about six people around it, and each drink takes a minute or two, so if you're in a rush, head up front. — *Jay Barmann*
1337 Mission Street between 9th and 10th



Photo: Facebook

Pacific Cocktail Haven

Bar maestro Kevin Diedrich bounced around a bit to some of the city's finest bars before settling at this new Union Square-adjacent spot (formerly Cantina) last year. True to form and similar to his work at the Burritt Room and Jasper's, the menu is inspired and original without veering into pretentious territory, with drinks like the Miso Old Fashioned (finished with a PCH-branded ice cube), or the ginger beer-based Monk's Buck made with Cognac and yellow Chartreuse. — Jay Barmann

580 Sutter Street at Mason



Image: Eric J. [via Yelp](#)

Smuggler's Cove

The over-the-top Tiki madness of Smuggler's Cove gets a lot of press and is typically packed, but barman Martin Cate's ode to kitsch and tropicalia is more than meets the eye when it comes to sophistication and sheer dedication to its theme. Drinks are served unusually strong and some of them are even [served on fire](#), and the place has a library of some 400 rums — the most aged of which, you'll find, taste like fine bourbon. Whether one finds

Tiki to be tacky or just unpretentious is in the eye(patch) of the beholder, but the rum cocktails of Smuggler's Cove are one of the town's top "party in your glass" options and do not skimp on the cocktail umbrellas, real flowers, and culturally appropriating cocktail stirrers. — *Joe Kukura*
670 Gough Street at McAlister Street



A drink from last summer's menu, the Sundial, featuring 209 gin, Sungold tomatoes, Armenian cucumbers, celery bitters, lemon and agave nectar.
Photo: Facebook

Third Rail

This welcoming three-year-old cocktail spot in Dogpatch grew out of Range (RIP) in the Mission, and a partnership between the restaurant's chef-owner Phil West and longtime bar manager Jeff Lyon. Lyon became well known for his culinary twists and seasonal creations behind the bar, and he continues, along with his staff, to bring playfulness and imagination to the menu here — his New Year's Eve drink this year was dubbed [Apocalypse Punch](#). The menu is divided into "refreshing" and "boozy" categories, with the former including things like the Hoopsnake (rum, kumquat, lime, elderflower, absinthe), and the latter including the Rhinoceros (rye, bonal, ginger liqueur, bitters). And food-wise they keep things simple: All that's served is [beef and mushroom jerky](#), by the half ounce, chicharrones, and pork sticks. — *Jay Barmann*
628 20th Street, at Third Street



Image: Kimberly H. [via Yelp](#)

Tosca Cafe

Coppola could make a movie about the fascinating saga of Tosca Cafe, the throwback North Beach institution that was [nearly evicted by its shady strip club landlord](#) in 2012, was [bailed out by Sean Penn](#), [reopened in 2013 as luxury restaurant](#) and is now the [dining choice of Beyonce and Jay-Z](#) when they're in town. (Coppola will not make that movie, as he owns the nearby Cafe Zoetrope.) While the place is now better known for its [celebrity chef cuisine](#), old school North Beach inebriates still love the place for its red leather booths, impressive wine list, and elderly male-style martinis. And it's one of the best places in town to catch a glimpse of celebrities like Joe Montana, Willie Brown, and (ahem) Sean Penn or a Coppola.

— Joe Kukura

242 Columbus Avenue at Broadway



[Trick Dog via Facebook](#)

Trick Dog

Nestled in between Salumeria, a kung-fu place, and a very sleek Sightglass Coffee lives Trick Dog, a wildly popular cocktail spot on the Mission's

burgeoning 20th Street. Run by the folks from Bon Vivants, Trick Dog is one of the places that is [so cool](#), there's no business sign posted outside. Better though, they have murals, and cocktails inspired by said murals. The city-wide [Trick Dog Mural Project](#) even has its own coffee table book. But onto the drinks - which are very crafty and feature giant single cubes of ice. Each cocktail on the current menu is named after a mural artist, like the \$13 Jeremy Fish which contains Banks 5 rum, chai liqueur, Dolin dry vermouth, Luxardo Bianco bitter, acid phosphate, and mango bitters. Hungry drinkers (and non-drinkers) *must* note that Trick Dog serves a full food menu and their Trick Dog Dog is basically a Big Man on an artisan hotdog bun. It is spectacular. - *Beth Spotswood*
3010 20th Street



Photo: Facebook

[Whitechapel](#)
Leave it to the man who built the city's finest temple of rum and Tiki to build the most elaborate temple of gin. Smuggler's Cove guy Martin Cate debuted this gorgeous bar in 2015, drawing inspiration from London for the design, specifically a kind of steampunk, movie-set version of an abandoned Tube station. Like Smuggler's has for rum, the menu is an encyclopedia of 115 mostly gin-based drinks, and the bar reportedly has 400 hundred gins and genevers to try, meaning you could go back to this place every day for a year and (assuming you only had one drink each time) never have the same gin twice. There's also a food menu (the *bitterballen* are pretty great), and it's a swell place in which to impress a date or just chill in a booth with friends. — *Jay Barmann*
600 Polk Street at Turk

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