

# TOP BARS & PIONEERING BAR HISTORY

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHY  
by VIRGINIA MILLER

## **From Hotaling & Co. to Osocalis to Oakland Spirits and Proof of Vaccination, the City by the Bay Is All About Innovation**

How does one summarize the drink history and current status of a city that has pioneered in every drink category from beer (Anchor Steam) to cocktails? It's not easy. San Francisco — alongside New York and in some key areas, New Orleans — were the cities that introduced the world to cocktails in the mid-1800s, birthing countless legendary bars including those run by legends like Jerry Thomas and Bill Boothby, who also wrote some of the world's first cocktail books (the first when it comes to Thomas; his SF years were also when Thomas invented the flame-throwing Blue Blazer cocktail at SF's El Dorado saloon). SF is also flush with pioneering bartenders who for the past 30 years have been crafting and reviving classic and forward-thinking cocktails long before the rest of the world got their first trendy "speakeasy."



From the Irish Coffee in the 1950s to Pisco Punch in the 1800s, on to Trader Vic's (and thus Tiki) in the 1930s, SF and the Bay Area has birthed countless movements and trends that have reached around the globe, changing the world of drink forever. Many decades to century-old bars remain, including treasures like Zam Zam (since 1941), Tosca (1919), Tonga Room & Hurricane Bar (1945), Vesuvio (1948), Specs' Twelve Adler Museum (1968), Trad'r Sam (the U.S.' oldest continuously running tiki bar since 1937), Tony Nik's (1933), Elixir (1858), The Buena Vista Cafe (1916), Shotwell's (1891), Bus Stop Saloon (1900), The Homestead (1906), Mauna Loa Club (1939), Little Shamrock (1890s), House of Shields (1912), Old Ship Saloon (1851), Mr. Bing's (1967) and even Chinatown dive greats like Li Po (1937) and Buddha Lounge (1952). Then there are live music bar gems like The Saloon (since 1861) and Club Deluxe (since 1949, it's *the* best jazz bar in the city).

SF has led the way in gay rights, with Twin Peaks Tavern (opened in 1935) being the first known gay bar with massive windows revealing patrons within. Then there is the great Tommy's, opened by the Bermejo family in 1965, which launched a fresh lime juice margarita revival globally: the famed Tommy's Margarita can be found on menus around the world. The one, the only Julio Bermejo created this version in the 1980s and has schooled us all on the joys and purity of tequila, assembling one of the largest agave collections in the world — and world's biggest vintage collection. This is just for starters when talking historic SF bars.

Now let's talk about the last 30 years. Not only was SF one of three cities birthing cocktail bars, it was one of two — alongside NYC — leading the cocktail renaissance of the last three decades. Since the 1990s, bars like Absinthe and 15 Romolo have been going strong (the latter a sherry pioneer — from their annual Sherry Christmas cocktail menus and sherry on draft, to sweeping Copa Jerez in 2015, the ultimate international sherry competition). Given SF's longstanding and deep Peruvian population (Domenico Ghirardelli was an Italian-Peruvian who immigrated from Peru to open his eponymous chocolate store in 1850), pisco bars proliferated in SF even in the 1940s. Starting in 2000 and through the aughts, one could find multiple SF pisco bars, still hard to find in most cities: Duggan McDonnell's Cantina, Destino, Pisco Latin Lounge, La Mar.

Though cocktail pioneer Thad Vogler's Trou Normand sadly closed in 2020, it showcased brandy



in a way few bars ever have, going to France to select house barrels of Cognac, Armagnac and Calvados. Still-open Gaspar Brasserie has an upstairs bar dubbed the Cognac Room, housing a deep collection of brandies and a cocktail menu featuring cocktails in every category of brandy, from eaux de vie to Calvados.

NYC launched the speakeasy-style bar craze when Milk and Honey opened on New Year's Eve 1999 (although one of my youthful NYC faves from the 1990s, Angel's Share, prefigured M&H since 1993). But years before even cities like LA or Chicago jumped on the trend, Bourbon and Branch opened in SF in 2006. The same year Alembic opened from original owner Dave McLean and bar manager, the late Daniel Hyatt, creating a stellar cocktail bar that predated the return to mainstream obsession with a properly made Old Fashioned, and at time offering the biggest American whiskey selection in the West. Since the 1990s, Jon Gasparini and Greg Lindgren pioneered stellar neighborhood bars: 15 Romolo, Rye, Rosewood and Cordial.

I could go on listing the influential, world-class bars that line this small 7x7-mile city. Unlike cities 6 to 10 times its size (NY and LA respectively), SF bars often go quietly under the national or global radar, leading trends others make more famous later. Whether inventive Baiju cocktails or molecular drinks or reviving forgotten cocktail classics, in the 20 years I've been studying and writing about the world's restaurants and bars, I've often seen it here in my home city well before it "trended." SF's laid back, deeply connected and communal bar community isn't one for claiming the spotlight nor is the city big on a "scene."



...SF is a city of geeks and boundary-pushers, who study, deeply know and love their drink and history, ever seeking obscure and “acquired taste” flavors.



Above — Trick Dog; Below — 15 Romolo

Rather, SF is a city of geeks and boundary-pushers, who study, deeply know and love their drink and history, ever seeking obscure and “acquired taste” flavors. Thus, it’s no surprise that categories like sherry and amari thrived here first or that for a couple decades, more Fernet is drunk in SF per capita than anywhere in the world. I frequented Chartreuse Karaoke Gong Shows at 15 Romolo in the aughts where copious shots of Chartreuse flowed, again, before the historic herbal liqueur became a drink geek favorite.

If you want to know what will be happening next in drink, look to San Francisco. Bar excellence lies in just about every ‘hood, well beyond the bars the rest of the world has heard of, like Trick Dog (which has long crafted some of the most creative cocktail menus globally). So though I sadly cannot list even a fraction in these top ten, there are many others of high caliber I’d include if I could. Here are but a few to seek out in addition to the historic bars previously mentioned: Rye, Smuggler’s Cove, Blackbird, ABV, Pagan Idol, Linden Room, Last Rites, Horsefeather, Liholiho Yacht Club, Absinthe, Elixir, The Treasury, The Vault Garden, Mosto, Nari, The Sea Star, Nopa, Hard Water, The Beehive, Aziza, Trick Dog, Mourad, The Morris, The Snug, Padrecito, The Devil’s Acre, Flores, Junior, Burma Love, Marianne’s, Zombie Village, Anina, Rickhouse, Lost & Found, Novela, Beretta, Holy Water, The Tailor’s Son, and the truly one-of-a-kind, tiny Horsies Saloon inside Royal Cuckoo Market, to name but a few.

SF and the Bay Area’s distilling history is also packed with pioneers, from one of the world’s most inventive and best distilleries, St. George Spirits since 1982 in Alameda, to superb family-run Charbay in Napa Co. since 1983. In SF proper, Fritz Maytag predated the craft beer renaissance in the 1960s reviving Anchor Steam beer, but in the 1990s, he did the same with Anchor Distilling, now Hotaling & Co., creating Junipero Gin and quality whiskies with distiller Bruce Joseph before the craft spirits movement swept the world. Likewise, other local pioneers include Arne Hilleland of 209 Gin (now distiller at Hotaling & Co.); world-class Cognac-style brandies since the 1990s from Dan Farber of Osocalis Distillery (technically part of the Santa Cruz area but not far from SF); and Bryan Davis of Lost Spirits since it was first opened in the Monterey area in 2010 before moving to LA and Las Vegas. Oakland Spirits Co. pre-dated the seaweed gin craze with their Automatic Sea Gin. I could go on naming many newer and flourishing distilleries in and surrounding SF.



In continued pioneering form (and in true SF-spirit, also controversial), SF has been the first U.S. city where over 500 initial (and growing) bars have banded together to require proof-of-vaccination cards to enter as the pandemic and COVID variants rage on... a true example of their progressive spirit, forward-vision and industry and customer care.

2015 was the last year I featured San Francisco in multiple articles and interviews in *Distiller Magazine* (<https://distilling.com/distillermagazine/san-francisco-cocktail-bars>), so we're due for an update. In addition to the few dozen historic and best bars I've already mentioned, here is a top 10 — a small cross-section for one of the world's best and pioneering bar towns — but each a local treasure:

### Kona's Street Market, SoMa/Downtown

I've been writing about PCH since opening, easily one of SF and the world's best bars. I've been writing about owner Kevin Diedrich long before PCH opened, truly one of the world's best bartenders due to his honed cocktail creativity and humble, welcoming service. After suffering a tragic fire on the heels of pandemic in early 2021, PCH closed, though it's set to reopen down the block by end of 2021.

That same week of the fire, Diedrich and Brian Means (with business partner Andy Chun) opened their long-awaited Kona's Street Market (<https://konastreetmarket.com>) a project years in the works, which was immediately a destination bar. Evoking street and night markets, the colorful bar is lined with film posters (think films starring SF native Bruce Lee or John Waters' *Female Trouble*) and a marquee sign over the bar with drinks inspired and grouped by Middle East, Africa, Europe, the Americas and Asia-Pacific. The Boracay Old Fashioned (gin, pandan, bay leaf, coconut water, blanc vermouth, calamansi lime) is quintessential Diedrich: a lesson in exquisite balance, creativity, deliciousness... cocktail perfection. Diedrich and Means' menu is packed with playful goodness, whether the Red+Blue (Appleton Estate Rum, Smith & Cross Rum, ube-coconut cream, citrus, salted jackfruit whip) or Milk Was A Bad Choice (gin, Calvados, Italicus Bergamot liqueur, sumac, makrut lime, cold brew coffee, kefir fermented "milk").

### True Laurel, Mission District

As I've said since it opened in 2017, True Laurel ([www.truelaurelsf.com](http://www.truelaurelsf.com)) is not only a best SF bar, but one of the best in the world (*Esquire* dubbed it a best new bar in the country in 2018). This is due, in part, to top-notch food from David Barzelay of nearby two-Michelin-starred restaurant Lazy Bear and executive chef Geoff Davis. Bar director Nicolas Torres' inspired cocktails combine subtle innovation with elegant drinkability. Here I've tasted drinks unlike any in roughly 20,000 bars I've visited globally. In the early days, it was drinks like Top Dawg, a low proof mix of rancio wine, fermented tonic and a black sudachi and smoked salt rim. Or a Paloma Prieta where Torres infused mezcal with floral California-grown guavas, combined with Dolin Blanc Aperitif, lime and his house pampleau made from fermenting grapefruit rinds, gentian and grapefruit juice. Currently, a drink like Melons Triple Lindy — weaving together mezcal, three melons, clarified citrus, aloe, shiso and dill — is a prime example of signature, complex flavor profiles. But it's all so seamless, you don't have to geek out to enjoy at this laid back bar. For spirits aficionados, TL is also home to rare and vintage spirits, just like at its parent restaurant, Lazy Bear.

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[ Clockwise from top left ]

*Kona's Street Market Save me a piece of that corn! Cocktail with Blanco Tequila, falernum, Averno, atole de elote, horchata, orange juice*

*Kona's Street Market Boracay Old Fashioned*

*Kona's Street Market's Inan So Far Away cocktail with Calvados, Gin, quince, celery salted melon seed, pear, basil, bitters*

*Kona's Street Market Red+Blue cocktail*

*Kona's Street Market interior*





## Lost Resort, Mission District

As this quality of neighborhood bar is common in San Francisco, it's easy to forget about bars like Lost Resort ([www.lostresortsf.com](http://www.lostresortsf.com)) amid the long list of SF greats — but in many cities, this would be one of their *best*. Opened by Brad Burt, Nate Valentine, Jeff Jurow and Britt Miller, Lost Resort's retro-nautical vibe, outdoor patio lined with colorful vintage lawn furniture, wood, seafaring painting and rope, all delight. But it's crushable-yet-crafted cocktails, delicious food — and bartenders like Gilberto Uribe, who make it feel familial and inviting — that confirm LR as the quintessential-yet-exceptional neighborhood bar. Fill up on seasonally-changing dishes like Dungeness crab rolls, esquites nachos or hot chicken and waffles for brunch. Cocktail signatures include the Holy Diver (coffee-infused mezcal, rum, lime, pineapple, OJ, coconut milk, and cinnamon, over crushed ice) or a Disco Daiquiri where lime and a house rum blend are mixed with seasonal elements like a strawberry black pepper cordial.

## Wildhawk, Mission District

Wildhawk ([www.wildhawkssf.com](http://www.wildhawkssf.com)) is that ideal kind of neighborhood bar. Black and white floral wallpaper and vintage furniture feel both seductive yet lived in, the welcome is warm and the crowd convivial. Open since 2016, Karri Kiyuna ran the bar for most of those years, assembling a stellar crew of bartenders who imbue the bar's familial spirit with well-crafted cocktails. In summer 2021, Christian "Suzu" Suzuki-Orellana became bar manager and Marguerite Regan bar supervisor, both having been bartending there and other notable places around the Bay for the better part of a couple decades. Suzu was a national finalist in Bombay Sapphire's "Most Imaginative Bartender" competition in 2020, and both collaborate on cocktails on their initial menu. The new menu keeps Wildhawk classics like the Breakfast Negroni infused with cocoa puffs, created by Jacques Bezuidenhout, who originally opened the bar with Ken Luciano. It also showcases Suzu and Regan's winning collaboration in easy-to-drink creative concoctions like Mekong Sleepwalker (Highland Park 12 year Scotch, Rhum JM Blanc, ube coconut milk, hazelnut, orange) or Cranes in the Sky (Chuko Awamori, vodka, pisco, watermelon, Chateau aloe liqueur, lime).

## White Cap, Outer Sunset

As mentioned, SF is flush with pioneering bartenders... and Carlos Yturria is one such bartender, a sherry expert, surfer and cocktail master since the 1990s. He's manager and co-owner of both The Treasury (in a historic space downtown and also a destination-worthy bar), and White Cap (<https://whitecapsf.com>) (with owner Matt Lopez) an intimate, chill neighborhood bar a couple blocks from the ocean. With surfing on the flat screen and reclaimed driftwood walls, the bar is intimate, relaxed yet casually chic. On a recent menu, expect inspired fun like Surfer on Acid (Uruapan Coconut Coffee Rum, Th. Kramers echter "Aromatique" Feinster Gewurz Bitter liqueur from Germany, Lustau PX sherry, pineapple, house falernum) or Silent Disco (vodka, Tio Pepe fino sherry, roasted beets, Meyer lemon, honey, rosemary).

## Third Rail, Dogpatch

Just off the Bay in the Dogpatch 'hood, Third Rail (<http://thirdrailbarsf.com>) has been a neighborhood gem since 2013, opened by Jeff Lyon and Phil West with current bar manager Andi Miller. Marked by a vintage French train station clock and wrap-around bar, with the Third Street (hence the bar name) Muni train/rail passing by outside. This is the kind of neighborhood bar where all feel welcome, pretense is nill but quality is high. In recent years, think drinks like Lyon's Godzilla, mixing Oakland Spirits Co.'s seaweed-infused Automatic Sea Gin with manzanilla sherry, elderflower, egg white, lime and sesame. Current delights include Pressure Drop, a Jaimaicain and Mexican spiced rum "creamsicle," or the spirituous Mt. Tam, "like a Negroni stirred with a pine tree," showcasing St. George's Terroir Gin with Tempus Fugit Gran Classico and Quinquina liqueurs and Dolin Rouge Vermouth.





[ Clockwise from top ] A message from Lost Resort; Lost Resort Holy Diver cocktail; Lost Resort cocktail



## Palette, SoMa

Palette's (<https://palette-sf.com>) dramatic space weaves from light-strewn outdoor parklet to expansive dining room to lofty art gallery bar. One is initially drawn by chef Peter J. Hemsley and chef de cuisine Parker Brown's memorable food (like a half Maine lobster in lobster head sauce, vibrant with horseradish and lime, or elevated bar snacks like broccoli kimchi dip scooped up with beef tendon chicharrones). Then bar manager Trevin Hutchins' cocktails — drunk in the sleek gallery lounge, surrounded by art, comfy velvety couches and chairs — recalls creative, elegant bars in London, Berlin or Singapore set to rotating art exhibits and an extensive absinthe collection. Far too uncommon outside New Orleans, greats like an Absinthe Frappé get fine treatment in the welcome absinthe cocktails section, alongside a killer Reverse Green Swizzle, mixing La Clandestine Absinthe, falernum, menthe-pastille, Rhum Agricole, lime and mint. The house cocktail list pleases with stirred, foraged or shaken drinks like Daphne's Downfall: coconut-washed rum, pineapple gum syrup, miso maple syrup, tart orange and egg white.

## The Interval at Long Now, Marina

Home to the forward-reaching Long Now Foundation headquarters, The Interval (<https://theinterval.org>) feels like a thinkers and readers bar, lined with floor-to-ceiling books of all subjects ("to restart civilization with"), though it welcomes all stripes. An all-day bar, café and museum in Fort Mason right on the Bay, the space boasts a planetary display of mechanical clock prototypes meant to last 10,000 years and a robotic chalkboard drawing machine. Snag a bar seat or with a few people, pile into the cozy, tiny back room overlooking the Bay, and savor beverage director Ty Caudle's cocktails — alongside favorites from opening crew Todd Myles Carnam and Jennifer Colliau, like Colliau's now-iconic Navy Gimlet, silky with lime cordial, made via a three-day process. Expect changing gems from the current bar team, like Early Retirement (pommeau, brown butter-blended Scotch, ginger, lemon, nutmeg) or Tehrangeles (yogurt, cucumber, mint, beetroot, salt, seltzer, optionally with aquavit — I would opt *in* on that aquavit).

## Stookey's Club Moderne

Like stepping back into the 1930s (though open in 2015), Tim Stookey, wife Leslie Cole and her cousin Aaron Cole share their passion for the era at Stookey's Club Moderne ([www.stookeysclubmoderne.com](http://www.stookeysclubmoderne.com)) via art deco decor (including neon marquee sign and porthole door windows) and white-jacketed, black bow-tied bartenders. They also host live jazz, record-listening nights, fashion and other historic talks about the era. While you would be entirely at home here in a vintage dress or fedora, the bar is equally welcoming and relaxed if you aren't a history buff or retro-lover. Classic cocktails reign and to-go cocktails and an outdoor parklet continue since pandemic. Expect uncommon (should be more popular than they are) classic cocktails like the 20th Century (gin, Kina Lillet, creme de cacao, fresh lemon juice) or Louisville classic, the Pendennis Club (gin, apricot liqueur, lime juice, Peychaud's bitters).

## Cold Drinks Bar

Hidden upstairs above China Live (<https://chinalivesf.com/best-bars-in-san-francisco>) and down the hall from one-of-a-kind Chinese fine dining destination Eight Tables, Cold Drinks evokes China's upscale whisk(e)y bars and would fit right in in Shanghai or Hong Kong. The fascinating wall tiles recall Blade Runner, the marble bar top, velvet gray couches and metallic black-and-gold bar chairs exude chic, yet the vibe is unpretentious, with downtown SF highrises and the Transamerica Building looming through big picture windows. Scotch dominates the rare spirits selection and many of the cocktails (ranging from light and breezy to spirituous), though you'll find an array of spirits in cocktails from head mixologist Yong Xu (down the hall at Eight Tables, Cindy Liu's cocktails are likewise exquisite). Expect delights like a Peking duck fat-washed Old Fashioned or the refreshing Peruvian Satchel, combining Capurro Pisco and Piggyback Rye whiskey with lemon, Chardonnay syrup and celery bitters.

END





*Left — Palette gallery bar  
Above — Palette absinthe fountain  
Below — Cold Drinks bar*

