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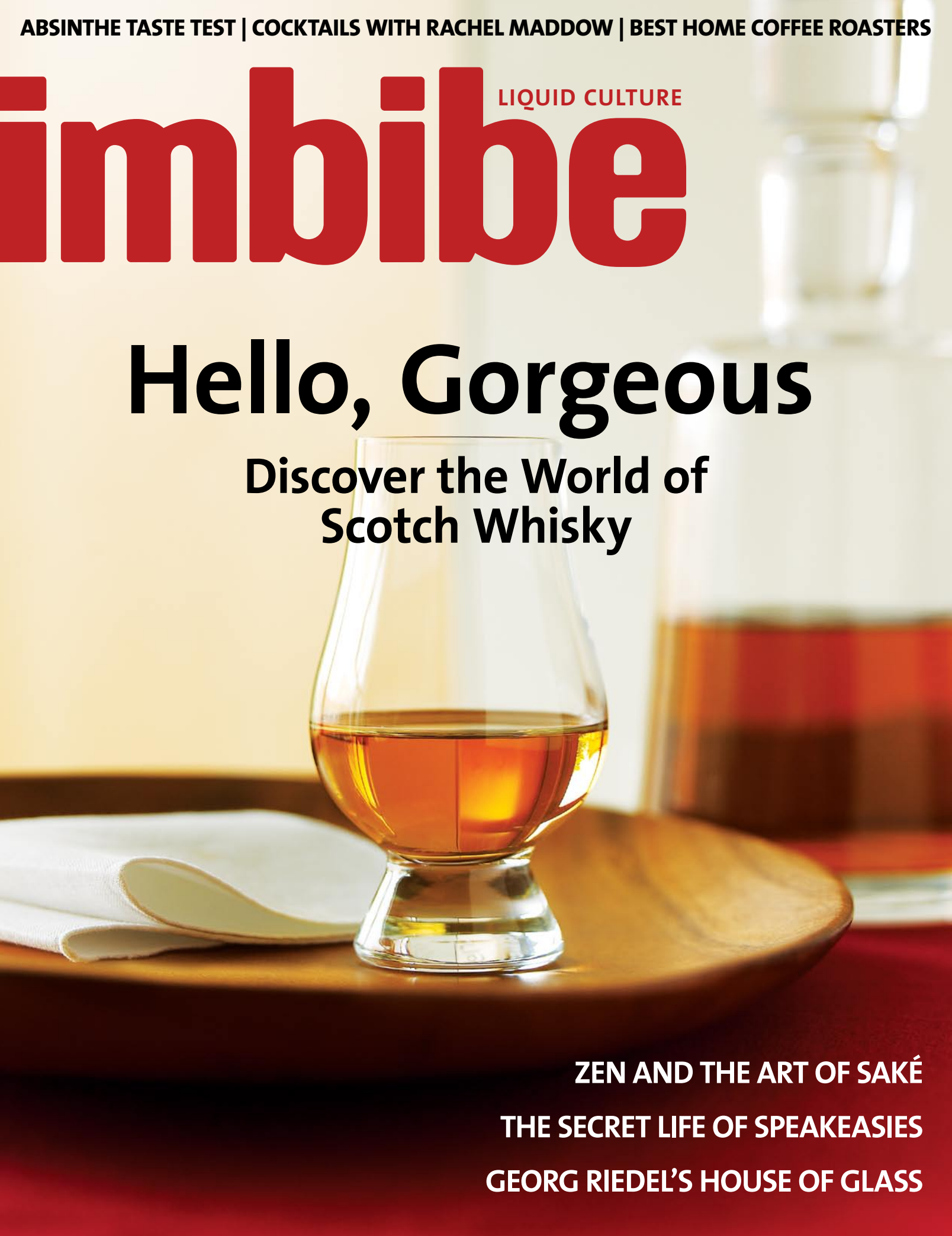
imbibe

LIQUID CULTURE



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ZEN AND THE ART OF SAKÉ

THE SECRET LIFE OF SPEAKEASIES

GEORG RIEDEL'S HOUSE OF GLASS


the Secret Society

Inside the shady, civilized world of the modern speakeasy

Story by AMY ZAVATTO
Photos by STEPH GORALNICK

It's 6:30 on a dusky, early-autumn evening as I stroll down St. Mark's Place. It isn't a demure thoroughfare; never has been. It's a street full of bars and inexpensive eateries, piercing parlors and guys selling incense from card tables, and as someone who's spent her entire adulthood in New York City, I know it like the back of my hand—or at least I thought I did.

But here I am at my destination tonight, 113 St. Marks Place, and the only things I see are a nondescript, sub-level doorway that doesn't look like it opens (it doesn't) and, next to it, a storefront labeled "Crif Dogs." I stare at the numbers on the building, thinking maybe I got it wrong, until two guys munching on deep-fried hot dogs eyeball me and ask, quietly and not just a little bit shiftily, if I'm looking for PDT. I nod, and with mouths full, they point toward Crif.

Inside, it's disorientingly bright. A lady behind the counter in a baseball cap seems to quickly surmise that I'm not there for a hot dog and motions toward the wood-and-glass door of a ramshackle phone booth to my left. Looking nervously from side to side, I step in, shut the door and… what? It's just a phone booth. I have no idea what I'm supposed to be doing in here, except maybe fishing around for a quarter to call a cab and take me back home. I look up and see a camera aimed at my face and a very un-phone-booth-looking phone on the wall, which, lacking any better ideas, I pick up. To my surprise, someone asks my name, which at this point I find myself speaking as if it's a question (*"Amy Zavatto?"*). Suddenly, the seemingly solid back wall of the phone booth swings open into one of the coolest bars I didn't know existed on this street that I thought I knew so well.

This is just one example of the lengths to which some bar owners have gone in creating what can only be termed as modern-day speakeasies, with their secret entrances, no-name locations and mysterious reservation numbers. But instead of hiding from cops and axe-wielding Carry Nations claiming that liquor leads to the death of civilization, bartenders today find just the opposite: The secrecy, or appearance of it, affords the opportunity for well-mixed cocktails, a guaranteed seat, unbridled creativity combined with historical respect and accuracy, and well-behaved patrons—making it just about the most civilized thing you can do these days.

Jim Meehan behind the bar at PDT.

8:15 p.m.

Be-vested gentleman bartender Jim Meehan runs PDT—Please Don't Tell—with Brian Shebairo (who also owns Crif and serves the dogs in the bar). Shebairo is a burly, tattooed, sweet-faced former construction worker with arms as thick as telephone poles, and could easily double as a bouncer if Meehan weren't the Fred Astaire of handling violators. Case in point: Around 8:30, the hostess briskly walks to the bar and whispers something to Meehan. His gaze falls on one of the semi-circular booths full of well-dressed 20-somethings. A few of their friends stand hovering nearby. Meehan walks over and, in a voice that never rises above conversation level, appears to explain something. The group at the table stands, looking disappointed, and begins to file out, while one young woman continues to animatedly plead her case—arms waving and shoulders heaving. Meehan's face remains kind, but he stands firm on whatever is happening.

Turns out the group had a reservation for eight and decided to add a few friends to the fun. But places like PDT (and PX in Alexandria, Virginia; Bourbon and Branch in San Francisco; Violet Hour in Chicago; and Le Lion in Hamburg, Germany, among others) have rules: no loud talking, no name-dropping, no unwanted hitting on of customers who are trying to enjoy a nice cocktail in peace, no cell phones (although this rule varies in strictness from bar to bar) … and no standing. If all the seats are filled in this diminutive, 740-square-foot watering hole, well, you have to wait outside or come back another time. And so Meehan ever-so-politely buys this group their round, and motions them out.

Ten minutes later, my friend Laurie joins me at our reserved bar stools, excitedly plunking down at the copper-top bar and taking in the pretty, zigzag pattern of the wood-slat ceiling, the taxidermy wall décor and the handsomely dressed bartenders smoothly doing a multitude of things at once. "Wow, I'm so happy to be here—I've tried to get in twice before and was turned away," she says, looking nervous that she may get kicked out any second. This point seems to separate imbibers into two camps: those who don't mind speakeasies' rules and small spaces because of the obvious benefits, and those who find the whole set-up exclusionary and snooty. Visit a speakeasy's profile on any comment-friendly review website and you'll find plenty of complaints. *No Grey Goose, no Cosmos, no cell phones, no improper wardrobe, no ball caps*, runs a typical rant on the Violet Hour. *Are you f---ing kidding me with this place?*

Talk to any bartender, though, and they'll tell you the same thing that Meehan says: "I opened the bar I want to go

to." That means no thumping music drowning out conversation; no three-person-deep mosh pit of customers waving twenties to get a drink; and, most importantly, a menu of often seasonally changing, outstanding cocktails worthy of a James Beard Award. The speakeasy shenanigans? They're more about theatrics and fun than personal worthiness. PX owner Todd Thrasher initially didn't take reservations at his two-year-old, 30-seat cocktail lounge in Alexandria, Virginia, but he does now because some customers didn't understand how small the place was (and, thus, how limited the seating) and took the bar's surreptitiousness as a sign of social judgment. "I have a slide in the front door that comes across and the hostess plays coy with you to see if you know what you're doing," he says. "It was all a big schtick, but people were getting upset. We went to the reservation thing, but we still have the slide in the door and the hostess still plays the game. But we don't have any markings; there's no sign. I have a blue light outside the door—if it's on, the bar's open. "

All this modern-day secrecy started in January 2000 with bartender Sasha Petraske's Milk & Honey in New York, although if you ask him, he'll credit the bar Angel's Share—a second-floor, semi-hidden, sophisticated lounge with well-crafted drinks demurely located in the back of a sushi restaurant in the East Village. Milk & Honey is small and dark, and getting your mitts on the reservation number is akin to the quest for Bigfoot, but the in-the-know aspect of it gave birth to the trend. "Sasha set the model for the modern, young-person's cocktail bar. He's really the innovator in all this," says cocktail historian and author David Wondrich. "When he opened Milk & Honey, he was sick of the kind of bars that were just totally crowded and unsupportable. He wanted something quiet where he could control access. For him, the speakeasy model was good—it wasn't just retro, it had a practical side to it."

Petraske, who has opened several other similarly low-key (although less secretive) cocktail bars since, has managed to stay true to his original vision despite his speakeasy's wild popularity. "Milk & Honey has never been 'exclusive,' " he says. "Anyone is welcome once. Not everyone is welcome back."

What Petraske couldn't know was that his idea would foster a whole crop of bartenders eager to express their craft in a way that is all but impossible to do in larger venues. This particular night at PDT, I've had two outstanding cocktails so far. The first, gently set on a black cocktail napkin in front me, is named Against All Odds because its ingredients seem to defy good sense: Bushmills whiskey, mezcal, apricot liqueur, Creole Shrubb and a locally made un-oaked Chardonnay. It has a pleas-

witch's kiss

Jim Meehan says this cocktail was inspired by a recent stroll through the Tompkins Square Park Sunday farmer's market and "six dusty bottles of Strega in my basement." Strega, a complex, bittersweet herbal liqueur, is also the word for "witch" in Italian.

2 oz. platino tequila
¾ oz. lemon juice
½ oz. Strega
1 barspoon apple butter
Ice
Tools: mixing glass, shaker, strainer
Glass: coupe
Garnish: lemon twist

Shake all ingredients, strain into a chilled glass and garnish.

Jim Meehan, PDT, New York City

antly smoky aroma and a little fruitiness around the edges. The flavors separate like curling ribbons—orange, apricot, smoke, wood, vanilla—and then combine to make something so lovely, you simply give in to it.

The second drink is called the Judgment Day (inspired, Meehan says, by a fellow bartender's brief brush with incarceration). It's a pretty, puckery mix of pisco, St. Germain, lime and lemon juices, egg white, absinthe, and St. Elizabeth Allspice Dram. The perfectly foamy egg-white top smells like pie, and I hesitate before taking a sip. It's like that moment before you set foot into new snow so pristine, you almost don't want to ruin it—but it's so much fun when you do.

9:00 p.m.

A couple of men in their late 30s sit next to my friend Laurie and me, filling up the last two seats. The now-full bar buzzes with conversation, classic jazz and the shaking sound of cocktails in motion. Our new neighbors are handed a menu and study it by the light of votive candles, until Meehan comes over. One man has been to PDT before—he sets down the leather-bound menu and puts his hand on top of it like it's a bible to swear upon. "I'll have an Up to Date!" he says, obviously very pleased with his choice. His friend, however, has never been here before, nor to any bar like it. "I'm not really sure what I want," he shrugs.

"Well, do you like sweet, sour, bitter, savory?" asks Meehan.

The man looks a little dubious, but answers bitter. Meehan looks to the ceiling, head gently tick-tocking from side to side, and says, "Okay, I know what I'll make you." He picks up a piece of ice in his left palm and a long spoon in the other and—*smack, smack*—breaks it up and tosses it in a shaker. The first friend turns to his rookie buddy and says, "Bitter, sweet, sour, all of it—he rocks it, dude."

A few moments later, Meehan presents the man with a White Negroni made with gin, Lillet blanc, and Suze (a French bitter)—the rookie sips, shakes his head affirmatively. His friend breaks into a broad grin. "I *told* you!" he crows.

I later learn from Meehan that the White Negroni is the invention of Nick Blacknell, British bartender turned brand director for Beefeater gin. That's a funny thing about this not-so-motley crew of cocktail crusaders and their hush-hush bars: They share. They swap recipes, often crediting each other on their menus, and some even engage in a sort of bartender exchange, with guest bartenders coming in for a night to show off their skills. This evening, Meehan has Kevin Martin behind the bar from Eastern Standard in Boston, a bar that, while not a speakeasy, adheres to the same kind of cocktail-making precision and principles. Of course, guest bartender or not, if you ask for a Cosmo, you're unlikely to get it here, or at any other

the V.O.C.

Philip Duff named this drink after the Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, the Dutch United East Indies trading company that was once the largest company in the world, with 50,000 employees, its own navy and army, and license to act on the Dutch government's behalf in foreign trade negotiations.

1 ½ oz. genever
¼ oz. apricot liqueur
1 barspoon freshly squeezed lemon juice
¼ oz. rich sugar syrup (2 cups sugar to 1 cup water)
½ barspoon Zen green tea liqueur
Ice cubes
Tools: zester, barspoon, mixing glass, strainer
Glass: cocktail
Garnish: orange peel

Shake all ingredients, then strain into a chilled glass. Squeeze garnish over glass to release oils, rub around rim, and drop into drink.

Note: Duff uses corenwijn, an aged genever, for this drink, but since that's currently unavailable in the United States, he suggests substituting with any genever with a strong malt-wine profile. Bols recently began selling a version domestically. Jonge or "young" genever is not a good substitute in this recipe.

Philip Duff, Door 74, Amsterdam

speakeasy. There are practical and personal reasons for this. First, as Meehan tells me, bars of this model are small, and he simply doesn't have the room behind the bar to have half a dozen different kinds of tequila or bourbon or gin. Second—and, really, foremost—asking for, say, a vodka-cranberry here is kind of like ordering a grilled cheese at Chez Panisse.

Meehan excuses himself to assist a new patron who has come from a party and isn't sure what he wants but doesn't feel like looking at the menu.

"What were you drinking?" asks Meehan.

"Beer."

Meehan thinks for a moment. "Do you like scotch?"

"Not really."

"Cognac."

"No."

"Tequila."

Bingo. Meehan picks up a shaker from the bottom, flips it low in the air, catches it and places it down on the bar—reposado tequila, honey liqueur and orange bitters deftly pass through his hands and into the shaker. He stirs rapidly, never losing the tempo or changing speed. Laurie and I pick up the menu next to us. "I wonder if this is really what it was like after the 18th Amendment," she says dreamily.

10:20 p.m.

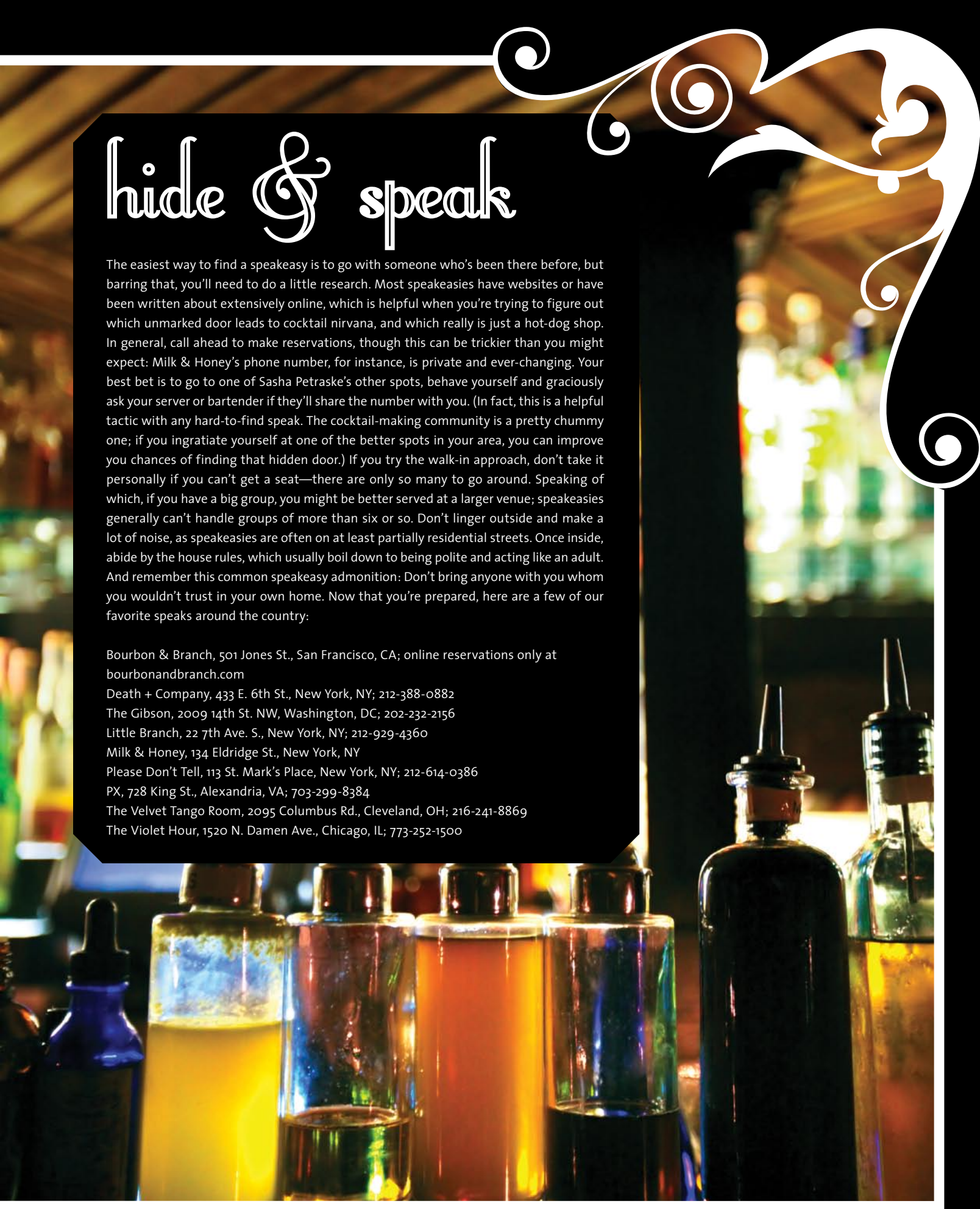
Actually, bars like PDT, with their elaborate menus and exhumed ingredients, are more akin to the years *before* Prohibition, when bartenders like Jerry Thomas—whose personality and recipes were re-introduced to a new generation by writers like Wondrich—laid the groundwork for the shaker artistry we have today. "In popular imagination, the cocktail was created during Prohibition, and there were a lot of lame cocktail books that always mention that, but it's totally false," Wondrich says.

What Prohibition *did* establish was 13 years of underground, and oftentimes downright dangerous, drinking. According to Edward Behr's *Prohibition: Thirteen Years That Changed America*, hundreds of thousands of people were paralyzed or blinded by bad booze, and more than 50,000 people may well have died. Any mixing going on was to mask the flavor of the swill being served in illegal lairs that required whispered passwords to enter—the original speakeasies. In some ways,

hide & speak

The easiest way to find a speakeasy is to go with someone who's been there before, but barring that, you'll need to do a little research. Most speakeasies have websites or have been written about extensively online, which is helpful when you're trying to figure out which unmarked door leads to cocktail nirvana, and which really is just a hot-dog shop. In general, call ahead to make reservations, though this can be trickier than you might expect: Milk & Honey's phone number, for instance, is private and ever-changing. Your best bet is to go to one of Sasha Petraske's other spots, behave yourself and graciously ask your server or bartender if they'll share the number with you. (In fact, this is a helpful tactic with any hard-to-find speak. The cocktail-making community is a pretty chummy one; if you ingratiate yourself at one of the better spots in your area, you can improve you chances of finding that hidden door.) If you try the walk-in approach, don't take it personally if you can't get a seat—there are only so many to go around. Speaking of which, if you have a big group, you might be better served at a larger venue; speakeasies generally can't handle groups of more than six or so. Don't linger outside and make a lot of noise, as speakeasies are often on at least partially residential streets. Once inside, abide by the house rules, which usually boil down to being polite and acting like an adult. And remember this common speakeasy admonition: Don't bring anyone with you whom you wouldn't trust in your own home. Now that you're prepared, here are a few of our favorite speaks around the country:

Bourbon & Branch, 501 Jones St., San Francisco, CA; online reservations only at bourbonandbranch.com
Death + Company, 433 E. 6th St., New York, NY; 212-388-0882
The Gibson, 2009 14th St. NW, Washington, DC; 202-232-2156
Little Branch, 22 7th Ave. S., New York, NY; 212-929-4360
Milk & Honey, 134 Eldridge St., New York, NY
Please Don't Tell, 113 St. Mark's Place, New York, NY; 212-614-0386
PX, 728 King St., Alexandria, VA; 703-299-8384
The Velvet Tango Room, 2095 Columbus Rd., Cleveland, OH; 216-241-8869
The Violet Hour, 1520 N. Damen Ave., Chicago, IL; 773-252-1500



those establishments far more resembled a modern-day frat party or college bar, where the point isn't to relish flavor or talent, but to get drunk.

The modern speakeasy's model is instead what was going on behind the bar before the Volstead Act, when bartenders achieved celebrity status and their drinks were the topic of story and discussion. "It's funny, I think in part we're in this slow-food versus fast-food world right now, and people are looking to do something small and exclusive and retro," says Wondrich. "They're trying to rediscover their roots."

Allen Katz, director of mixology for Southern Wine & Spirits, agrees. "From my personal standpoint, I think there are two authentic American slow foods," he says. "One is barbecue and one is cocktails. I think there's been a real pleasure and passion to not only capitalize [on], but really rejuvenate, the cocktail as an American gastronomic gift."

This may be the thing that customers enjoy most about bars like PDT—not the secrecy, but the opportunity to taste flavors and products that were practically unheard-of after the Repeal: pisco, genever, rye, crème de violette, sloe gin, even egg whites and bitters. So, three-quarters of a century after Prohibition, when we can get whatever we want, why revive something that was created out of necessity to hide from conservative attitudes and laws? Why not celebrate great mixology on a grand scale? And are the great lengths some bars have gone to maintain secrecy pushing this whole thing too far? At press time, Milk & Honey was considering going members-only, as its London branch already has. "Vibrant social scenes hide not from the authorities, but from the press," says Petraske. "Journalists inadvertently destroy the places that they spotlight. A plant will die from too much sun, after all."

In this sense, it's tough to argue that the speakeasy model does not hold some bit of exclusivity in its breast pocket. Still, while it may take some tenacity to get into these places, it's a pretty great time once you do. Bartenders and waiters are polite, the atmosphere is lively and fun, and you can hold a conversation without using a megaphone. What's more, drinks cost about the same as at a chi-chi hotel bar or upscale eatery. "They want you to have a good time here," opines a PDT customer named Chris. "They don't just want your money."

It's true, profit margins are limited in this model (a likely reason why consulting is popular with the bartending set, and why many places limit the time you can take up real estate without buying another drink). But it also allows—in fact, encourages—proprietors to set up shop in less-expensive, off-the-beaten path areas. "A speakeasy-type bar is just common sense," says Philip Duff, who recently opened Door 74, a 10-seat

ginger cocktail

2 oz. gin
¾ oz. ginger juice (see below)
½ oz. lime juice
Ice cubes
Tools: shaker, strainer
Glass: cocktail
Garnish: candied ginger

Shake ingredients, strain into a chilled glass and garnish.

To make ginger juice, run enough fresh, unpeeled, washed ginger through a juicer for 6 ounces of juice (about 1 ½ pounds of ginger). If you don't have a juicer, grate the ginger and squeeze the juice through a double layer of cheesecloth. Combine juice with 8 ounces of sugar in a sealed glass container and shake. Will keep refrigerated for up to two weeks.

Sasha Petraske, Milk & Honey, New York City

bar in Amsterdam. "Got a location that's not on the main drag? Then you need to offer ultra-good service, which means limiting the number of guests and, consequently, increasing the average spend-per-head, which means nudging them towards high-margin drinks—i.e., cocktails."

12:40 a.m.

I order my last cocktail of the evening. It's a Benton's Old Fashioned—bacon-infused Four Roses bourbon, Deep Mountain Grade B maple syrup and Angostura bitters. Around the bar, the faces have once again changed—there are posies of friends telling stories to each other and laughing; at a small table near the back, a couple speaks quietly to each other; food writer Steven Shaw chats with some buddies at one of the big booth tables in the front; a woman wearing a hounds-tooth cap and a "Made in Bklyn" T-shirt at a three-top engages her two new-to-PDT friends in a discussion about a *New York Times* article on cocktails.

Meehan sets my drink in front of me. It's a beautiful, rich brown color that glows a kind of golden auburn by the glimmer of the tiny candles on the bar. Laurie picks it up and sniffs. Her eyes widen: "It smells like brunch!" she exclaims, then passes the glass to me. I take a sip—not only does it *smell* like brunch, it *tastes* like it, too, like having pancakes and bacon when the meat gets syrup on it. Meehan proceeds to tell me, in detail, how to infuse bourbon with bacon, while Laurie flips open the menu to the Benton's description. All the ingredients are listed, and I jokingly ask him why he doesn't try a little harder to keep them a secret. He shrugs and gives me the least exclusionary answer possible: "I hope someone makes these drinks in 20 years."

I sip my cocktail slowly, relishing its unusual decadence, and sway a little on my stool to the music, the hum of conversation and the buzzing of the secret door, that endless stream of people wanting in, their magic time just beginning as mine is coming to an end. Down low behind the bar sits a TV screen feeding images from the phone-booth security camera. I watch those with reservations get buzzed in, while others without a secured seat get turned away, some only to return a little while later to see if, finally, they'll make it in. The trick is kind of like a call-in radio show: You have to be tenacious enough to pursue the one-in-a-million chance that you'll win.

It's time to let someone be a winner. I wave goodnight to Meehan, and with his hands too busy to reciprocate, he smiles and nods. The hostess buzzes us out into Crif Dogs, where some innocent hot-dog eaters look mildly surprised to see a couple of gussied-up gals stepping out of a phone booth. Back out on St. Marks, I call my husband to describe everything I just tasted and saw.

"Hey, you're not going to believe where I've been," I say excitedly to his sleepy voice on the other end.

"Please," he says, "do tell…"