

# THRILLIST



COURTESY OF BIBO ERGO SUM

FOOD & DRINK

## THE 21 BEST COCKTAIL BARS IN THE COUNTRY

By THRILLIST FOOD

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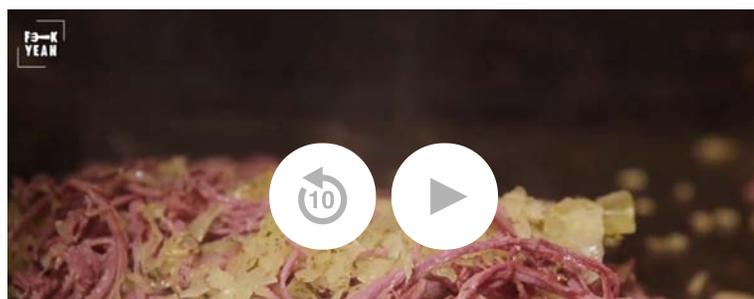
We live an age of craft cocktail singularity, one where many [dive bars](#) carry copper mugs to pair with bottom-shelf Moscow Mules, so-called [speakeasies](#) are hopping, and stocks in mustache wax have

skyrocketed thanks to the ascent of mixologists. You can walk into an Applebee's now and order an C Fashioned or into a fancy bar and get a craft Long Island Iced Tea. What a time to be alive!

But now that great cocktails are everywhere, finding the best of the best is even trickier. That's why we did the hard work for you. The bars on this list represent everything from old-school drinkeries shakir up Prohibition-era cocktails to the cutting edge of cocktail science and everything in between. More important, they're places where we love to hang out, places that take as much pride in experience as what's in the glass. These are the best cocktail bars in America.

## RECOMMENDED VIDEO

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FORK YEAH

## WHERE TO GET THE BEST WAFFLE FRIES YOU'LL EVER EAT

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ARNAUD'S RESTAURANT

## **ARNAUD'S FRENCH 75**

*NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA*

America's cocktail renaissance may finally be over, with even the most begrudging of dive bars able to serve a drinkable Old Fashioned, but don't bother telling the French 75 that a renaissance was ever necessary. Within The City that Care Forgot, the white-coated crew at the James Beard-winning bar have preserved a drinking culture that lesser bars let die after the heyday of boozy tinctures. That they're just as comfortable pouring the namesake sweet-yet-biting French 75 as they are experimenting with mezcal and tequila is certainly a huge part of it, but the atmosphere and service of the dim, tiled bar make the entire experience a throwback to old-school drinking. That this is just the expected norm for the decades-old bar, and not a planned style speaks the most to just how damn great a place it truly is.



CATHERINE OWI

## **BACKBAR**

*BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS*

Being at Backbar feels like you're hanging out in a garage converted into a living room, except instead being some shitty man cave it's a great bar. The mixology-intensive team offers a seasonal menu of classics, moderns, and mocktails -- this summer includes the Suffering Venture Swizzle with rum, arrack, mole bitters, and wine and the Bananakin Skywalker, an unlikely combo of Scotch, bananas, citrus, and maple that avoids easy prequel jokes by not being served in a jar (let that sink in). Drinks come together with fat-washed spirits, homemade brines and shrubs, and house-infused everything, but make no mistake: This is a high-end cocktail bar for people who don't want to feel like they're in a high-end cocktail bar, a place that keeps the inventive spirits without losing sight of the fact that cocktails are meant to help you wind down.



BIBO ERGO S

## **BIBO ERGO SUM**

*LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA*

Bibo Ergo Sum is fully dedicated to replicating the art deco Hollywood aesthetic of old. Walking in to the place you almost have to rub your eyes to prevent your vision from automatically switching to sepia: everything from the lights to the barback seems transposed from the frames of a classic film. In fact, with its stuffed stools and semicircle bar, Bibo Ergo Sum may be the most gorgeous new bar in LA which is no small feat. To add another layer of Tinsel Town mystique, the drinks are inspired by *The Prestige*, with the menu divided into three different sections: The Pledge, featuring simple twists on classics; the Turn, where stuff like smoke and other culinary science comes into play to dazzle; and *The Prestige*, where classic and new-age traditions collide. Expect a show. And maybe a couple dozen dear Hugh Jackmans in the basement.



BILTONG E

## **BILTONG BAR**

*ATLANTA, GEORGIA*

We love jerky. And we love cocktails. But outside of a belated wake memorializing the late Randy Savage, we never really thought to pair them together. Sean Gleason, on the other hand, thought about the pairing a lot. Biltong sells the delicious air-dried, charcuterie-ish, South African version of beef jerky, but in realizing that jerky makes you thirsty, Gleason had the good sense to pair it with a truly outstanding bar program. Even if you don't really drink much, you can't go wrong with cocktails like the unorthodox Celery Sour -- London gin, pineapple, celery, lemon, vanilla, and greek yogurt -- or one of the many absinthe-tinged concoctions, the standout being the frozen Un-Fuck Your Day, which kicks the green stuff with rye, brandy, and pineapple. Obviously, it pairs well with dried meat. It all does.



COURTESY OF BILLY SUNDAY

## **BILLY SUNDAY**

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Sure, naming a candlelit cocktail den after a prominent Prohibition advocate is clever and all, but a catchy name only gets you so far. Luckily, the libations within take Billy Sunday even further. This is the kind of place where you can take your friend who's a devout spirits geek and watch him nerd out over the esoteric spirits and ingredients while thumbing through *The Goodbook*, a leather-bound tome of rare amari and Scotch (among other things) that wouldn't look out of place in an *Indiana Jones* movie. Of course, it's also the kind of place where you could just as easily take your other friend who "really likes gin & tonics," and watch the proverbial cocktail light bulb go off in their head as they tip back the Kent made with Navy Strength gin and house-made tonic along with less-expected appearances from allspice, lemongrass, and cinchona bark.



COURTESY OF DAN BISH

## BUTCHER & THE RYE

The first Pittsburgh bar to score a James Beard nomination for Outstanding Bar Program, Butcher's actually two bars in one, both tucked into Richard DeShantz's charcuterie-heavy destination. The first is the main-floor bar, whose Whiskey Wall contains more than 600 different bottles of the brown stuff making it a serious candidate for a spot among the nation's best whiskey bars. But for the cocktail nerds, the second-floor Rye Bar is the place to be, perched on a loft lit by candles illuminating bespoke decor and, most importantly, slinging arguably the best cocktails in Pittsburgh, among them 12 on tap and signatures that include the spicy single barrel rum-spiked Gettin' Chile With It and the Forgive & Fernet, which turns the ol' Bartender's Handshake into something more like a complex handshake that gets you into a secret club. One with really great meat.



COURTESY OF CAN

## **CANON**

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

One of Seattle's most gorgeously designed drinkeries, Canon takes its booze seriously: It's a bar where cocktails are made in centrifuges, where each piece of wood is (intentionally) stained with Angostura bitters, and where a 94-page-deep boasts the largest selection of American whiskey in the world. So.. yeah, this was kind of a no-brainer. But despite all the pomp and circumstance surrounding this Capitol Hill destination -- and a massive and showy cocktail program that includes a truffle Old Fashioned and cocktails served in such crazy vessels as smoking glass pipes and lightbulbs. Just go with it. This is a place whose awards range from "World's Best Cocktail Menu," to "Best Bathrooms in Seattle." You're good hands.

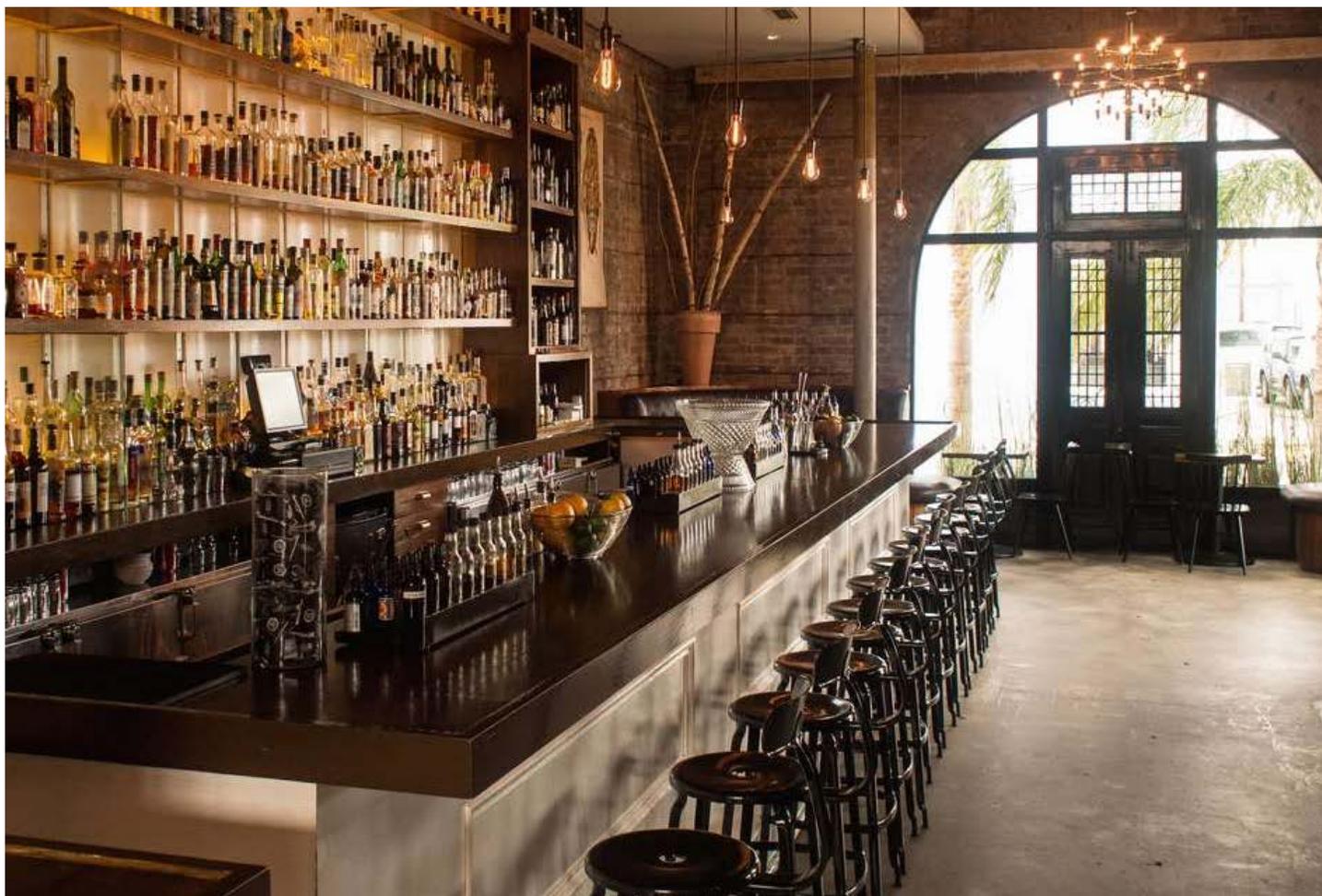


BRIAN OH/THRILL

## COLUMBIA ROOM

WASHINGTON, DC

Columbia Room is a little like a Wes Anderson film: whimsical, playfully ornate, crafted with an attention to detail, and very likely to make a Wilson brother say "wow." In its previous life down the street, Columbia Room was an unassuming, snug 10-seat bar in the back of The Passenger. Since the concept reopened in Blagden Alley, it's become something much grander. Namely, it's expanded to not just three spaces, but also three different concepts: The Punch Garden, an outside deck that offers bottled cocktails and punches; the Spirits Library, a regal room rich with leather chairs, woodwork, and antique cocktails; and the Tasting Room, which offers visitors a prix-fixe menu of three or five cocktails. If you don't find something for you here, perhaps it's time to buy a book and start drinking alone.



KEVIN O'MA

## **CURE**

NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

It's impossible to overstate the impact Cure had on cocktails in a city that arguably does them better than any other. Cure rolled into Uptown's Freret Street corridor in 2009, simultaneously kicking off the revitalization of an area still recovering from Katrina two years after the storm and bringing the new-school mixology movement to a city that has never lacked in quality 'tails. The [minds behind this brick walled spot](#) now have a mini-empire, but the OG is still a winner thanks to a spacious patio that's wall in by vines of jasmine, a subtly sexy indoor vibe, and creative combinations that riff on classics, from a low-proof fizzy take on the Hurricane called The Next Episode to a mutant Old Fashioned called the Picard loaded with smoked black tea, rhubarb, chocolate, and caramel.



GREGORY J BL

## DEAD RABBIT

NEW YORK, NEW YORK

Smack in the middle of New York's bustling Financial District, the Dead Rabbit has more awards than James Joyce, and is filled with nearly as much booze. It's an ideal Irish pub and peerless cocktail spot in one fastidiously appointed space. Grab a pint of Guinness downstairs before ascending to the cocktail sanctum on the second floor, where Irish coffees flow like liquid velvet and a 24-page cocktail menu is part cocktail guide, part ultraviolet graphic novel. As the name implies, there's a strong Tamany-era *Gangs of New York* vibe here. Only here, the drinks are great and the bartenders' Irish accents don't disappear mid-sentence. That whole "best bar in the world" thing might actually be spot on.

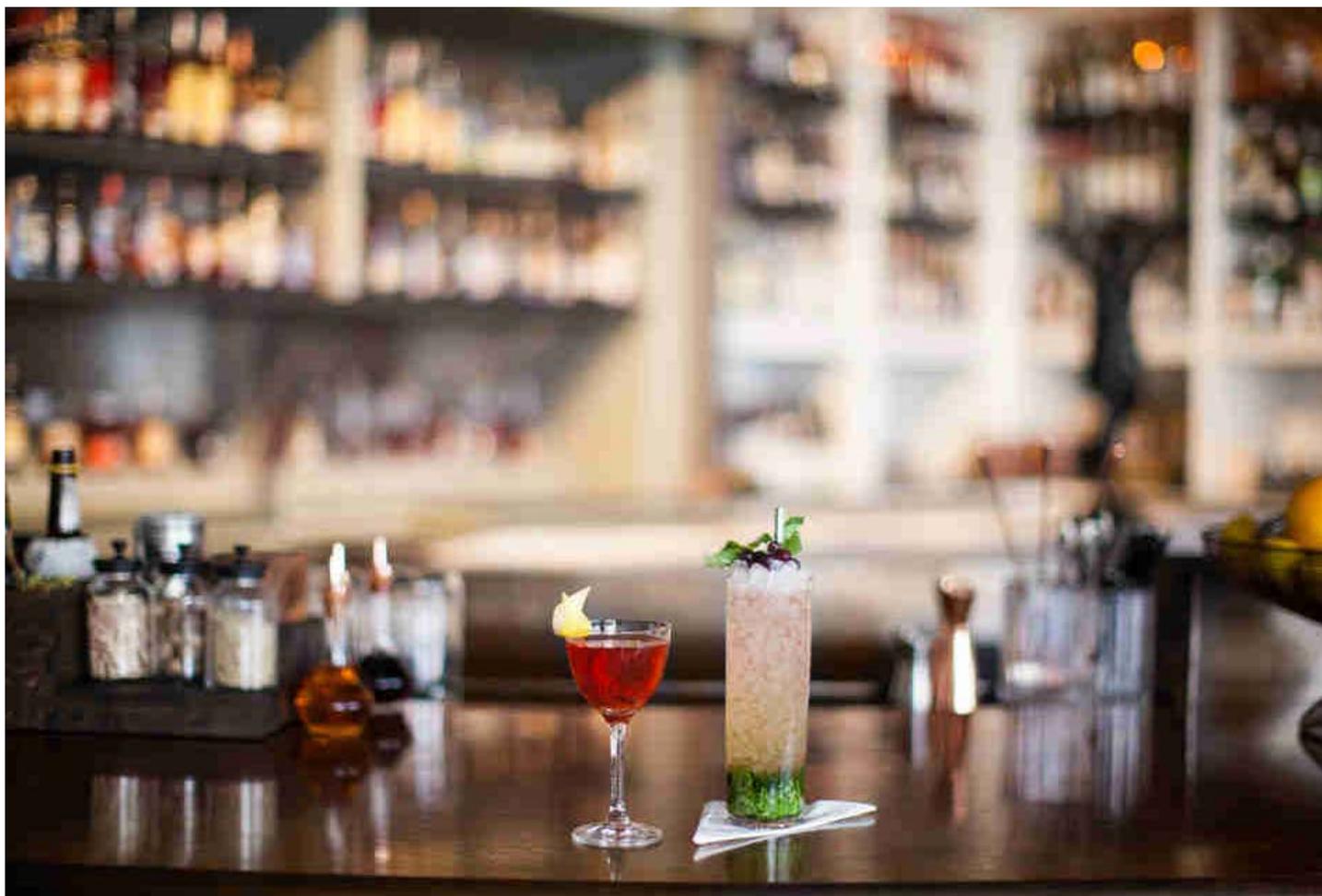


COURTESY OF MICHAEL DAVID RO

## THE INTERVAL

*SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA*

Jennifer Colliau may know more about drinks and their histories than anyone we've ever met, essentially making her the Ken Jennings of cocktails. She is the person whom other noted bartenders call up when they want questions answered. She also has put together a menu that also exists as a story about the history of drinks, and takes you on a bit of a knowledge journey. She's like the Mary Poppins of mixology: she reaches into her bag and oh it's a draught gin & tonic! Or a hot caustic with cinnamon shortbread! Or a Gin Daisy! Or a Wisconsin Old Fashioned! And each of these drinks is impeccable and comes backed by full character development. Oh, and if you have at least four people and go into the little room in the back, it feels like you're drinking on a boat.



COURTESY OF JULIE SOEFER PHOTOGRAPHY

## **JULEP**

*HOUSTON, TEXAS*

There's a seductive charm to Julep, whose atmospheres takes the elements expected in great cocktail bars in NYC or San Francisco and subtly, yet distinctly makes them Southern. Every detail, from the back porch that practically insists that drinkers sit and stay, to the homey lace curtains, hints at a bit of the region's history. And Alba Huerta, Texas's bourbon queen, made her drink menu the grand flourish in this reminiscing. Obviously there are masterful odes to the bar's namesake drink, but the list runs on into a boozy Southern history book with classics born in the region, like the Ramos Gin Fizz, and a seasonal lineup that plays with Southern inspirations. Trust the queen.



JOSH MERED

## **META**

*LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY*

Meta is a wonderful world of contrasts -- a marble-barred, copper-penny-floored temple of swank drinking lodged next to a strip club. A spot whose duality includes jazz on Thursdays and Wu Tang Wednesdays, and where they once converted their allotment of precious Pappy into lowbrow Jell-O shots. But it's not just bravado and balls that make Meta the best damn cocktail bar in a city that was doing craft cocktails long before they were trendy. The signatures are all grounded in tradition, but with a nice kick in the knickers. Take, for example, The High Pant, which augments some Old Fitzgerald with fernet and ginger to transform the Old Fashioned into something completely new. And hey, with cocktails this good, that strip club next door just keeps getting less lurid by the sip.



MILK ROOM CHICA

## **MILK ROOM**

*CHICAGO, ILLINOIS*

Upon first glance, Milk Room just seems like too much fuss, hidden away in a small section of the Chicago Athletic Association's second floor, the bar has only eight seats. The drinks cost upwards of \$50 each, and in order to visit, customers have to purchase a ticket in advance through Tock. For the masses, going through all this hassle is, as you can imagine, quite unimaginable. Yet, it's worth it if you have a taste for the uncommon, because the bar stocks spirits that are, in some cases, not even replaceable. Drinks are made with decades-old bottles that have been acquired at estate sales and such, allowing cocktails to transport patrons back through time. If you love cocktails, this is one of the bucket list experiences that's fully worth the hurdles.



COURTESY OF RON MANVI

## **THE PATTERSON HOUSE**

*NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE*

While Nashville's food and drink scene has undeniably exploded, thanks in huge part to the Goldberg brothers (Catbird Seat, Pinewood Social), when in Music City, we can't break away from The Patterson House, one of their first bars, which they opened in 2009. One of the reasons is the atmosphere and its very strict rules -- don't use your cell phone, and no seat... no drink -- that lets us pretend we're in an old-school gentlemen's club, but one with less grandfatherly white dude and far better drinks. Oh, and those drinks: the list changes quarterly, but it always includes house-made syrups and tinctures and essences. And don't sleep on its tater tots that come with a side of horseradish-dill-crème fraîche and have developed a following all their own.



RUMCI

## RUM CLUB

*PORTLAND, OREGON*

Rum Club boasts a murderer's row of some of Portland's best bartenders -- and we're not just talking about the folks behind the bar. The best mixologists from throughout the city can often be found sitting at the dim, packed horseshoe bar, slugging back dealers' choice rum cocktails or the kind of daiquiris that Hemingway dreamed of, probably while drinking slightly-less-delicious daiquiris and writing spare prose. Considering you're likely to spot the face of a mixologist who's written a book among the thirstiest happy patrons of this no-bullshit spot, that's a pretty good sign. Even better, it's a stone's throw from one of Portland's best dives, The Slammer, which also counts half the service industry as its groggy patrons at last call.



ROKC NEW YORK COCKTAIL | ZENITH RICHAI

## **ROKC**

*NEW YORK, NEW YORK*

Acronymed for Ramen, Oysters, Kitchen, Cocktails, ROKC had hours-long lines when it opened up two years ago. Things have relaxed since then, but expect (far more manageable) 30-plus minute wait times for the deceptively simple sounding cucumber cocktail served in a frozen bell pepper, and the social media favorite, smoke: bourbon, ancho reyes, cynar, and bitters, under a smoky dome. If that seems a little excessive, well, that's kind of the point, but go ahead and have a classic like a Hemingway daiquiri first. As you sip, you'll likely spot people drinking lychee cocktails out of upturned light bulbs, order one out of curiosity, and be very happy you did.

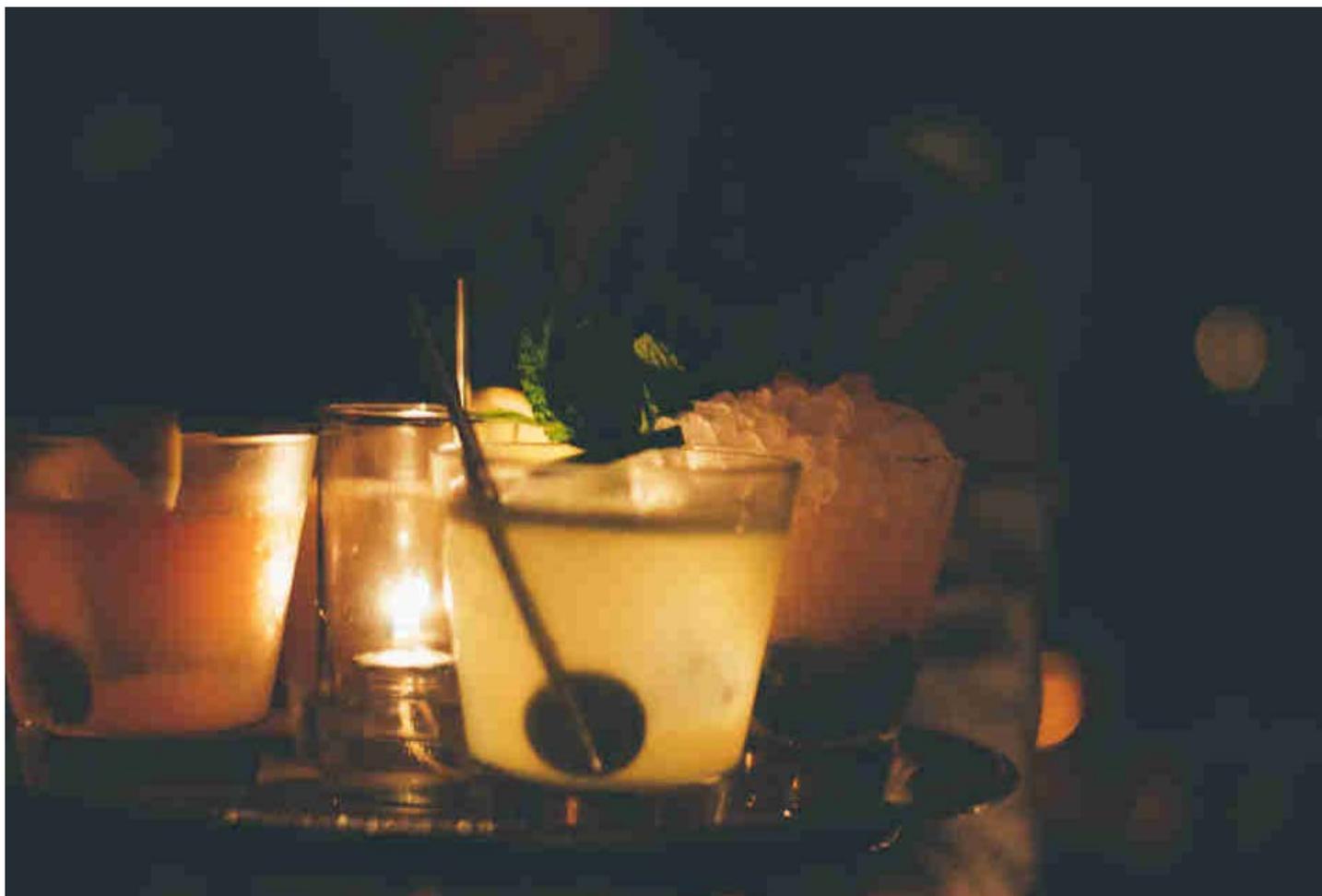


COURTESY OF SUGAR HOI

## **SUGAR HOUSE**

*DETROIT, MICHIGAN*

One of the many reasons Sugar House in the Motor City's rapidly hipsterfying Corktown continues to stay on our list year after year, might be the fact that the cocktail list is 21 pages long and includes a glossary. But you're likely not going to make it past page two, as that has its amazing seasonal cocktail list. But if you want classics, may we suggest pages six through nine (!), which offer up a veritable who who of just about any popular cocktail from any era. Sugar House led the charge for cocktail bars in Detroit, but it remains the best because everything it does -- and given that Bible-thick menu, it does a lot -- extremely well and in a way that doesn't betray the city's roots.



CARLOS LOI

## THE VARNISH

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

The lineup of bartenders who work at The Varnish is ridiculous, like some sort of cocktail Murderer's Row. But even if you didn't get that reference to the Yankee baseball teams of the 1920s, you still need to go here immediately and let one of the best bartenders in the city make you pretty much anything ever -- though we like to keep it simple for the summer and start with a Southside and a sandwich from French dip OG Cole's in the front, and get weirder from there. Don't worry, they'll accommodate. And there will very likely be live jazz.



VOLSTEAD'S EMPORIUM

## **VOLSTEAD'S EMPORIUM**

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

The speakeasy thing's been done over and over, so it takes something truly amazing to make us go looking for some unmarked bar and wait for a table these days, especially when it's cold as balls in the Twin Cities. But it turns out it's totally worth wandering down an alley and waiting to get through the creepy metal door of Volstead's, which counters accusations of pretentiousness by making some of the best cocktails in the midwest. It's low lit, with a vibe somewhere between a '20s speakeasy and the dining car of a particularly boozy Agatha Christie mystery. While the cocktails tend to rotate seasonal the Brooklyn (a twist on a Manhattan) is worth asking for by name. And unlike in actual Brooklyn, it's not going to gut your wallet: cocktails here hover around \$10.

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