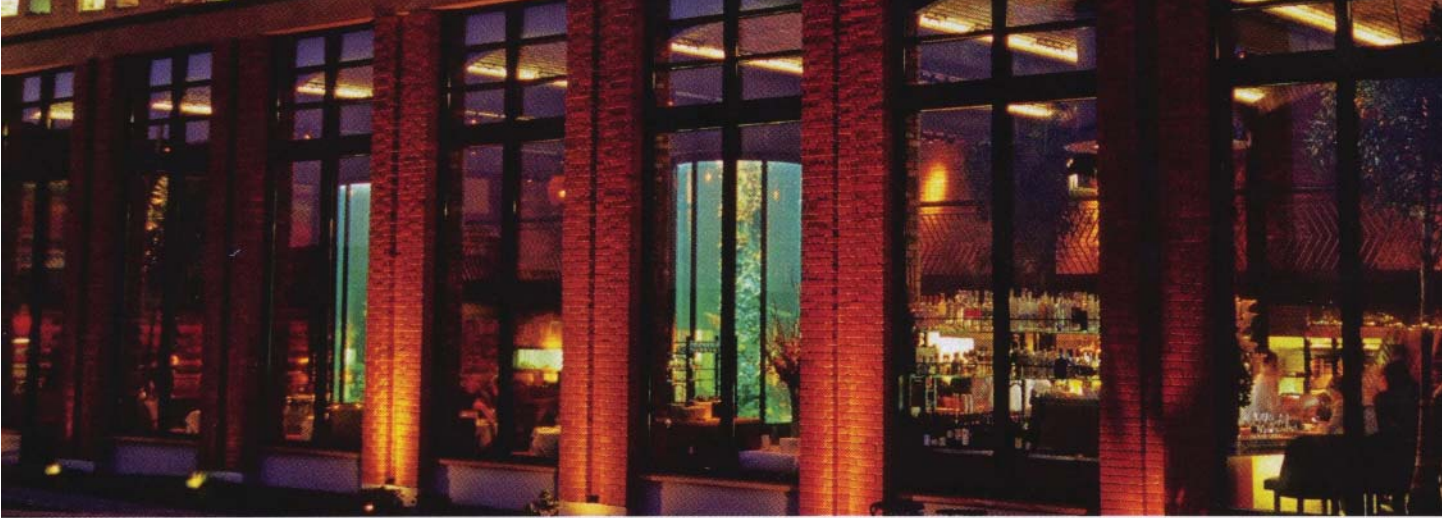


Cheers

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DRINK MECCA OF THE WEST

Wine is a daily affair, innovative and classic cocktails abound and beer is growing in San Francisco, a small city big on beverages.

By Liza B. Zimmerman

As cities go, San Francisco is not large. Often referred to as “7 X 7”—the city almost is exactly those measurements in miles—Victorian homes mix with modern high-rises and old society families live alongside young families and Boomers. High rents and an expensive standard of living make San Francisco home to more dogs than children, but residents can afford both if they wish.

Per capita income is \$41,734, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, which will buy San Franciscans a lot more drinks than the national average of \$25,267. Historically somewhat recession-proof, San Francisco residents nonetheless are starting to seek more value wines and affordable dining as recent changes in the economy take a toll.

Geography and trading down aside, San Francisco is not a small drinks city. According to *Cheers* parent The Beverage

Information Group, San Francisco held a 1.3 percent share of the wine market in 2007, and generated 0.7 percent of total U.S. distilled spirits consumption that year. For a city that is home to slightly less than 750,000 residents, that is impressive.

Not surprisingly, wine does extremely well in San Francisco, with trends such as organic wine and biodynamic bottlings starting here. But the cocktail scene is large and vibrant, too. From the use of local, organic ingredients to updates on pre-Prohibition drinks, a grassroots cocktail movement defines this city as a haven for classic and cutting-edge libations. Inventive bartenders and locally-produced spirits—such as Charbay Vodka and Gin No. 209—help fuel the trend.

Beer even is undergoing a revival; Belgian brews were quite the rage a decade ago, and after cooling off a bit, they now are experiencing a resurgence.

VAL ATKINSON



Two new venues by San Francisco restaurateur Pat Kuleto, Waterbar (opposite) and Epic Roasthouse (left), showcase extensive wine lists along with inventive cocktails such as Farewell to Arms (above left), made with Oronoco Rum, grapefruit, vanilla and lime, The Gatsby (above center), made with Knob Creek Bourbon, Barolo chinato, Vermouth Bianco and a burnt orange and Gold Rush (above right), which has house-made watermelon syrup and seltzer.

Great wine offerings mix it up with innovative cocktails everywhere from iconic restaurants such as Jardinière and Michael Mina to the city's growing group of intimate, owner-driven bars, including Bourbon & Branch, Cantina, Elixir and Rye. There's an energy and constant revitalization at many of the city's watering holes, driven by operators' desire to keep things fresh for discerning guests. This extends to lavish re-vamps of hotel lounges such as those at the J.W. Marriott and the Larkspur Hotel.

"Handcrafted and uniquely themed cocktail lists are very important now to hotels and multi-units," confirms San Francisco-based hospitality and restaurant consultant Andrew Freeman. He adds that for many years, hotel bars were seen as amenities for hotel guests; there was no need to be overly creative since they had a captive audience. But now, Freeman says, "hotel bars are hot and sexy again, and therefore the cocktail lists need to be very innovative, unique and fun to drive business from both hotel guests and locals."

WINE PARADISE

While cocktails are in vogue, wine typically is the first thought for those looking for a drink in San Francisco. "Everyone comes here with the wine angle in their head," says Rajat Parr, sommelier and wine director for the Mina Group, which operates Michael Mina, the recently opened Clock Bar at the Westin San Francisco and 11 other restaurants in six states. Parr and the Mina Group will open RN74 in San Francisco next spring, a wine bar named after the famed wine route of Burgundy.

At flagship Michael Mina, located on Union Square, the signature prix fixe is accompanied by a 3,000 bottle wine list. The cellar includes a wide selection of California offerings, as well

as wines from Champagne, Burgundy, the Rhône and Austria, along with the restaurant's house blends.

San Francisco venues often offer great local wine selection. The city's passion for California wines comes both from loyal residents and visitors intent on experiencing the depth and breadth of the region's wines while in town.

California wine is a focus at the San Francisco-based PlumpJack Group, which owns the PlumpJack and CADE Winery brands, as well as retail wine shops, restaurants and inns. The vibe at the group's restaurants ranges from upscale chic at PlumpJack Café to loud and festive at Balboa and casually elegant at Jack Falstaff, where sustainable, organic and biodynamic wines are highlighted. While wines of the world are available, the group's focus is on hard-to-find boutique California wines. PlumpJack is locally famous both for being founded by Mayor Gavin Newsom and for its gentle wine markups.

"Wines are generally priced at \$10 above retail [a bottle]," explains wine director Gillian Ballance. This is an incredibly fair markup given that in San Francisco and across the country wine markups typically are two and a half to three times wholesale. At those prices, San Franciscans easily are continuing their love affair with vino despite the economic slump.

Pat Kuleto, the San Francisco-based restaurateur behind such legendary venues as Boulevard, Farallon and Jardinière, opened two dining destinations at the beginning of the year: Epic Roasthouse and Waterbar. Located on the Embarcadero with stunning views both of the San Francisco Bay and the skyline, the two restaurants make much-overdue use of prime waterfront property.

Both restaurants offer high-ceilinged dining rooms, bar and outside dining options, a range of classic and unique cocktails and lengthy wine lists. Epic has a more California-centric list featuring whimsical information about producers, such as the

fact that winemaker Ryan Zepaltas of Zepaltas Winery in Sonoma happens to be a professional skateboarder.

The concepts epitomize the San Francisco scene in that each has a strong individual food and wine identity. Epic is more meat-centric with a California-focused list, and Waterbar is more global in spirit with its international drink offerings and extensive seafood selection. This is in keeping with Kuleto's vision of having "a group of highly independent, chef-operator driven restaurants," according to Pete Sittnick, managing director of both restaurants.

A WINE BAR ON EVERY CORNER

While little wine bars always could be found in San Francisco, the past year has brought a spate of openings. One of the grander newcomers is Bin 38 in the city's trendy Marina area. Guests can dine and drink in an assortment of small rooms, as well as in a lush enclosed back garden. Other new arrivals include the small and charming The Wine Bar, along with Amélie, both on Polk Street in Russian Hill.

New World wines are the focus at Bin 38, but the list isn't limited to California. "There were areas of the world that we felt were underrepresented [in San Francisco]," says owner and chief wine officer Don Davis, who points to Oregon, Washington, Chile, Argentina, South Africa and New Zealand. Echoing Plumpjack's positioning, Davis strives to provide customers with a great "quality to value [ratio], whether it's \$7 a glass or \$17."

The goal of many new wine bars is to provide a hybrid restaurant and bar experience. "Wine is very rooted in people's lives here and is not a special-occasion drink," Davis explains, noting that wine bars are daily destinations for city residents and visitors.

Plumpjack's Ballance adds, "The wine bar concept exploded

because you used to only be able to get fine wine in a fine restaurant, and people don't want to go out [for a fine dining experience] every night." In addition, he adds, today's consumers "want to try interesting wines without breaking the bank."

The flood of new wine bars opening is testament to the fact that locals and visitors alike want to graze and sample different wines. Other new wine bars include District and the southern hemisphere food specialist South Food + Wine Bar in the SOMA area.

Beer bars also are cropping up in the city, often with a strong focus on Belgian and local specialty beers. The trio of independently owned bars La Trappe, The Monk's Kettle and The Trappist opened in late 2007 and early 2008 in neighboring Oakland. "I think our wine boom finally settled down and San Franciscans were looking for something [new]," says Michael Azzalini, CEO and president of La Trappe, a Belgian bistro with more than 200 brews available and 15 rotating taps. The growing number of artisanal beers at bar bars also is educating consumers and generating buzz as a result, he says, noting that wine and spirits garnered all the attention until recently

A REPUTATION WELL DESERVED

While beer is a developing segment in San Francisco, cocktail bars are well established. Absinthe Brasserie & Bar raised the standard for inventive and classic cocktails—not to mention appealing wines—when it opened a decade ago. "It set the stage for what was to come," explains Jeff Hollinger, manager of restaurant operations, who notes that since then, "We have kept things progressive without following trends."

The bar at Absinthe runs the length of the front room; the warm and welcoming space then subdivides into many smaller rooms. Absinthe offers lunch and street-side dining in the once dodgy and now chic Hayes Valley neighborhood.

Almost all the area's top bartenders have done a turn behind the bar at Absinthe. A founder of San Francisco Cocktail Week, which launched in 2007 and takes place in May, Hollinger in many ways embodies both the classic and the inventive sides of the San Francisco cocktail movement. While steeped in tradition—he's known for his classic Sazerac—Hollinger also is the visionary behind some cutting-edge cocktails. For instance, he recently created a drink called the Mushroom Hunter, made from Old Overholt Rye infused with locally foraged candy cap mushrooms, Cossart Gordon Rainwater Madeira, Aperol, orange bitters and a thyme tincture.

"San Francisco really embraced the New Age cocktail culture that emphasized fresh ingredients," notes Sittnick of Waterbar and Epic. "It really mirrors the food scene, which is intensely seasonal and local," adds Noah Ellis, beverage director for Clock Bar.

The focus on local ingredients stems from the bounty of produce available year-round in the Bay area. "People are very in tune with what's happening in their backyards on a seasonal basis," notes Hollinger. "It's reflected in the glass."

San Francisco bartenders are a tight group who take pride in the strength of their community and the inspiration and learning it engenders. Hollinger boasts there may not be a larger or more tight-knit bar community in the States. "The ratio of great bars where you can get a really great cocktail is higher here than it is in New York," he speculates. "You have a number of really talented people in a limited amount of places and they make a lot of noise."

EAST vs. WEST?

Cocktail geeks often compare the drink scenes in San Francisco and New York, and the cities appear engaged in a friendly competition for billing as the country's cocktail capital. Many observers have tried to pinpoint the differences between the two; it's often been said New York barkeeps are more classically focused, whereas San Franciscans are wildly inventive with local ingredients.

Not everyone agrees that the cocktail capitals of the East and West Coasts are so stylistically different. Bar manager Joel Baker at speakeasy Bourbon & Branch says he believes San Francisco falls somewhere between being classically-based and locally inspired. Noah Ellis, beverage director for Clock Bar, adds, "I don't think it's one or the other. You can interpret cocktails classically, but use seasonal, local ingredients." Local specialties range from the Basil Gimlet at Rye, made with fresh, organic basil, lime juice, cane sugar and gin or vodka, to a variety of pisco-based cocktails made with local fruit and eggs at Elixir.

San Francisco bartenders "are incorporating our fresh, local ingredients with boutique [and] well-made spirits, and are creating a new breed of cocktails that pay homage to both the classic and the culinary palate of our great city," says David Nepove, director of mixology at Southern Wine & Spirits of California and national vice president of the United States Bartenders' Guild (USBG). A testament to the city's intense bartending community: The San Francisco USBG chapter currently is its largest, with about 80 members out of a total national membership of close to 600.

Among this small and talented group gaining headlines and fans is H. Joseph Ehrmann of Elixir, *Cheers* 2008 Rising Star Duggan McDonnell of Cantina, Greg Lindgren of Rye and Rosewood Bar & Grill, Erik Adkins of The Slanted Door, Jacques Bezuindenhout of the Kimpton Hotel Group and Marco Dionysos of the recently opened Clock Bar. Noted bar chef Scott Beattie, formerly behind the bar and now a consultant at Cyrus in Healdsburg, leads the cocktail charge in nearby wine country.

Opened two years ago on a less than savory block in the city's Tenderloin, Bourbon & Branch is perhaps the best example of the city's penchant for combining classic cocktails with the thrill of discovering the unknown—and doing so with style.

The front door is unmarked, and visitors must ring the bell and give a password to gain entrance. The narrow space leads back to a concealed door in the Library, another room within the bar. Bartenders sport Fedoras and cocktail waitresses wear little black dresses.

B&B bar manager Joel Baker says the bar's focus is on "creating Prohibition-style cocktails—mostly classic recipes, with some of our own inventions."

Bitters are made in-house at B&B, as they are at many top bars in the city. Baker notes, "It was a big thing in the 1890s that each bar had its own bitters." B&B also features house-made tinctures in flavors such as clove and thyme.

The elevation of wine, cocktails and even sometimes beer to parity with food seems logical in such an epicurean city. "It was only a matter of time before the San Francisco cocktail scene met up with our food scene to create a city of bartenders whose integrity [in making] cocktails and passion for the craft is compared to [the work of] our great chefs and sommeliers," says David Nepove, director of mixology at Union City, Calif.-based wholesaler Southern Wine & Spirits of California and national vice president of the United States Bartenders' Guild.

Indeed, San Francisco may well help solidify the connection between great food and drink. It certainly is off to a good start. ●

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