



BOURBON IN THE BAY

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To many people, San Francisco is an international hub of innovation in financial services, fashion apparel, entertainment, research, and technology. But if you're a mixologist or Golden Gate imbibers, you know this city as the epicenter of the "cocktail renaissance" – a progressive throwback to making classic cocktails with greater discipline, fresh ingredients, and in some cases, new interpretations of classic cocktails. Bars and lounges in San Francisco have particularly gravitated toward bourbon over the last few years, in a move that harks back to the founding days and the saloon culture that followed the Gold Rush of 1849. TBR recently spent some time exploring San Francisco's best known bourbon establishments to grasp the origin of today's cocktail renaissance. We found out first hand that San Francisco's bartenders and saloon-operators take great pride in this escapade to resurrect classic cocktails. Education is valued and successful variations on classically-themed drinks spread quickly. San Francisco's cocktail revolution draws upon pre-prohibition era themes - like saloons and the pioneering westward spirit - yet infuses these with a disciplined approach to bourbon ingenuity.

To understand why this city has always embraced whiskey and the resilient image that encompasses those who drink the spirit, one would have to study San Francisco's past. It wasn't until the early 1800s that merchants began to occupy the Bay Area. The Gold Rush of 1849 put San Francisco on the map as it began to attract entrepreneurs in significant numbers – 50,000 in one year alone. According to bourbon historian Mike Veech, it is likely that whiskey first made its way to San Francisco during this time, although there are no official records until the late 19th century. In 1851, five years before San Francisco was an official city, Englishman Joe Anthony created San Francisco's first saloon from a marooned ship on the Barbary Coast to cater to the droves of rugged frontiersmen. The "Old Ship Saloon" had a sign out front that read "Gud, Bad, & Indif'rent Spirits Sold Here! At 25 Cents Each" (that's \$6.37 in today's dollars).

The first westbound train arrived in 1869, as a result of the transcontinental railroad completion. The next year, San Francisco became the 10th largest city in the US. Being also a major port of trade, San Francisco was well on its way to becoming a vibrant urban metropolis with Victorian architecture, hotels, parks, churches, synagogues, schools and libraries. It was during the early hours of April 18th, 1906 when the city would experience its greatest test of resilience as the San Andreas Fault violently disrupted the quaint history of the "Western Paris." While the earthquake would have likely measured around an 8.0 magnitude, it was the ensuing fires that caused 80% of the damage. Estimated property damage from the earthquakes and fires was \$400,000,000 in 1906 dollars (that's \$9.4 billion in today's dollars). But residents did not take long to rebuild.

The next 95 years of San Francisco's history was also quite eventful. The city embraced and somehow survived the Grateful Dead, Alcatraz, the Golden Gate Bridge, the dot-com bubble, the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals, the anti-Vietnam war movement and the Summer of Love. You have to give some credit to San Francisco's entrepreneurial spirit which has withstood man-made bubbles and natural disasters alike. There is perhaps nothing more American than entrepreneurship and whiskey. This country was founded upon, and improved, principles of economic mobility. Partly due to the affluent tastes of successful entrepreneurs and partly due to the dynamic growing region, the architects of San Francisco's cocktail renaissance are culinary artisans that have a cornucopia of ingredients and no dearth of eager epicureans.

The term "farm fresh" has been coined to describe the San Francisco school of mixology. Bartenders often shop for organic ingredients in farmers' markets before their shifts; some are known for using herbs from their own garden to produce their unique homemade infusions. How far we've come – to view a vegetable garden as innovation! TBR consulted Ted Haigh (aka Dr. Cocktail) for insights into San Francisco's standing as an international destination for imbibers. Ted is the author of *Vintage Spirits & Forgotten Cocktails* and the Curator of The Museum of the American Cocktail. During a conversation, Ted suggested that "the old adage that a rising tide floats all boats may not be entirely true, but great new venues do seem to put other drink destinations, both old AND new, on their toes." Haigh continued, "Bourbon and rye are the MOST versatile spirits for cocktail use, period. Normally people pin that banner on vodka, but I discount that entirely because, in my view, to be judged even an adequate mixer (alcohol or not), an ingredient must add flavor, texture, and complexity to the drink...it's all about balance and creating harmonies from the individual instruments of flavor. All vodka adds is intoxicant."

What Nashville is to country music fans, San Francisco should be to bourbon cocktail lovers. And how fortunate those lovers are, because there are a host of venues at which to try bourbon inspired drinks and food in San Francisco. The city currently supports dozens of establishments that incorporate the philosophy just touched upon by Haigh. TBR has narrowed this list to its top 10 "MUST SEE" bourbon destinations. San Francisco offers several forms of transit, so it's easy to see half of these in a weekend if you're dedicated. Lastly, don't be afraid to engage in conversation with the friendly staff, bartenders, mixologists and proprietors. Most enjoy talking about their trade. We hope our profiles of the saloons and the entrepreneurs who own them are a helpful tool in navigating San Francisco's bourbon bars. We leave you with a toast: To whiskey and entrepreneurship – the original stimulus package!



Patrons of Alembic pause for a quick photo

Elixir

Beneath the varnished bar lie the core beliefs of Elixir; working for historical preservation, charity, community, education and green efforts. This is one of the oldest continually running saloons in San Francisco having been in operation since 1858. Recently restored from past neglect, Elixir offers a warm and inviting atmosphere that centers around a beautiful old red mahogany bar. This exceptional no attitude neighborhood bar morphs throughout the week offering a Thursday night cocktail club that provides lessons in the art of cocktail making to the public, guest bartenders working for non-profit charities Wednesday nights and a Sunday morning "make-your own" bloody mary bar just to name a few. Driven by California's rich produce and innovative culinary scene, Elixir integrates culinary techniques and fresh ingredients with high quality spirits "taking advantage of what the earth is giving us today"(owner H. Joseph Ehrmann). In 2005 Elixir was acknowledged by the City of San Francisco as one of its first 50 Certified Green Businesses. Elixir actively utilizes the Barrel Program and currently features barrels of Buffalo Trace and Woodford Reserve with a Four Roses single Barrel coming soon.

Alembic

Alembic embodies the zeitgeist of San Francisco, holding close to its heart the city's history. Self-proclaimed history nerds Dave McClain (owner) and Daniel Hyatt (AKA "The Mad Scientist"/bar manager) based their concept on original American craft and whiskey products. This is truly a rock'n'roll bar appropriately set on Haight Street where musicians who have walked this street still frequent your ipod on a regular basis. The tavern developed organically in a steampunk fashion sporting a bar fabricated from reclaimed Kezar Stadium bleachers. You can see the seat numbers inscribed under your cocktail glass and feel the vibrations of Led Zeppelin and Carlos Santana still resonating within. The bartenders are absorbed, instinctive and enthusiastic in their art, using a conglomeration of tools, vintage soda siphon bottles and sometimes chemicals like calcium chloride and sodium citrate to create an array of textures and delicious concoctions. Details of this unpretentious place should not be overlooked, whether it be the individually rolled terry cloth hand towels in the restroom or the extra patience it takes for the bartender to craft your beverage. The cocktail menu is broken into two categories; "The Canon" which is the architecture/classic list and "New School" developed by Daniel which feature drinks like The Southern Exposure (a spin on The Southside with a shot of celery juice). The food here is not to be missed either.

Bourbon & Branch

The crown jewel in San Francisco's speakeasy history, Bourbon & Branch heads the current libation culture. The bar is set over a trap door to a genuine speakeasy. Lacking a street sign, you'll wonder if you're at the right place. But upon entering you'll find an interior adorned with lush wood finishing, brick, rich maroon walls and a tin ceiling. Bourbon & Branch lures the finest bartenders the West Coast has to offer and incorporates hotel management techniques into the bar setting. Each table has a check-in and check-



The subtle entrance to Bourbon & Branch

out time. This controls the number of people served and allows bartenders to execute the extensive, complex and labor intensive cocktail menu with incredible accuracy to the original recipes. Every one of their 40 cocktail recipes is rigidly followed by jiggering. Even the number of stirs it takes to dilute each cocktail is counted so that it remains unaltered from when the recipe was first created. Ingredients are fresh or from bottles and never out of a can or soda gun. Reservations only at Bourbon & Branch – but you can have a drink at the Library next door if you forgot. Just as important as having a reservation to gain admittance, is keeping your composure reserved and in line with the “House Rules” which (to name a few) remind patrons to not even think of ordering a “Cosmo”, not to speak on cell phones, and to please Speak-Easy. Bourbon & Branch was the first bar to utilize a whiskey barrel program and concentrates on “boutique spirits.” Weekends can book up to three weeks in advance so if your time frame doesn’t allow a reservation, check out Rickhouse.

Nihon

This intimate Japanese whiskey lounge has a zenned-out feel with it’s comfortable modern interior overshadowed by a looming wall of whiskey. Boasting the largest selection of single malt offerings on the West Coast, Nihon is the perfect place to splurge on some top shelf booze. Owner Khaled Dajani describes the word Nihon as



The scene outside of the very inventive Nihon

a classically aristocratic name for Japan. Serving sushi and contemporary Izakaya menu (japanese small plates) like Hamachi stuffed Shiitake served with tsume and lemon aioli. Located at 14th Street and Folsom in the Mission District, Nihon is off the beaten path of the downtown



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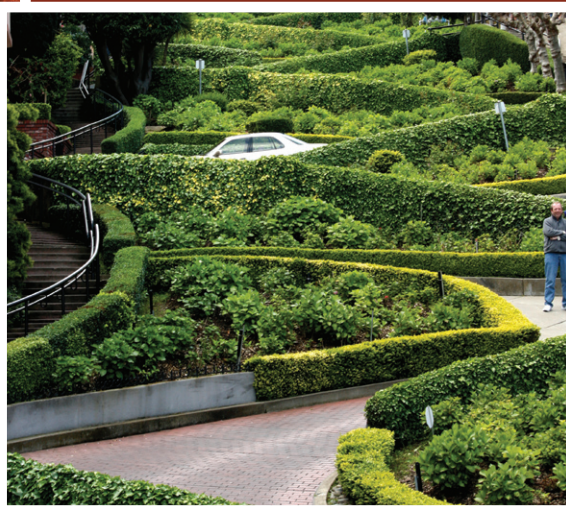
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View of San Francisco from the Presidio



Patrons enjoy fine dining and drinks at Nopa

business crowd and a great spot to take advantage of their happy hour featuring half off of their great cocktail menu, beer, well drinks, appetizers and salads. Take a seat on the red pillowed mezzanine level overlooking the bar and relax to live dj's. Did I mention that every selection here is available for bottle purchase? Inspired by western movies where cowboys buy a bottle to drink at a table with associates, and sushi restaurants where important customers have their own bottle of sake behind the bar, you too may purchase a bottle to drink in one sitting or store your unfinished choice in a bottle locker within their private room.

Whiskey Thieves

Get ready for some unabashed whiskey drinking at Whiskey Thieves, the bar that delivers the most bang for your buck. This low-key neighborhood bar is chock full of American-focused whiskey and an assortment of local characters that will either entertain you or annoy the hell outta ya. The low-key atmosphere is a comfortable place to unwind and sip straight shots of your favorite marks. A lot of chefs and bartenders can be found here taking advantage of cheap tallboys while playing pool and



Whiskey Thieves' bartender Simone prepares a cocktail

dropping quarters in arcade games. The friendly bartenders are more than willing to point you in the right direction and will sometimes even pour you a sample (time and cost permitting.)

Nopa

Nopa is always sure to please but plan ahead. Reservations for dinner can take a week or two to get or you can take your chances at the first come, first serve communal table or bar. Either way the cocktails are amazing and the food is nothing short of a culinary phenomenon. They serve until food and drink until 1a.m. if you want a late-night bite to eat. The whiskey menu is brief, but well selected and the bartenders know their whiskey.

Comstock Saloon

This 100 year old Victorian features the original Mahogany bar with it's stand-up urinal underneath - though I don't recommend using it if you plan a return visit. Adorned with antiques and



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Above: A second level view of the back room at Rickhouse



Folks enjoying the stylish atmosphere offered at Rye

class, this establishment will make you want to sip a Manhattan as you listen to the piano player tickle the ivories. Located in the old SF Brewery space in North Beach this "Drinkery and Eatery" maintains a streamlined whiskey selection aimed at the locals liking, but the product-centric environment will undoubtedly make it a destination bar and restaurant. And of course who could pass up "The Headbutt Happy Hour" from 4p.m. to 6p.m. which includes a shot of Four Roses and Anchor Steam for \$5?

Rickhouse

Appropriately named, Rickhouse's interior is constructed of brick and bourbon-barrel-staves creating a rustic atmosphere and an aroma of oak and bourbon. Only the best bartenders from Bourbon & Branch work at this sister establishment. Here accessibility is key. Rickhouse maintains the high quality and theme of cocktails inspired from the 1880's onward but without the speakeasy regulations. The lively atmosphere is popular for happy hour with the Financial District crowd and late night with flocks of cocktail connoisseurs. If you want to get a head start on the crowd Rickhouse opens weekdays at noon. And if you want to get ahead of yourself try some of the featured punch bowls intended for four and loaded with fresh fruit.

Swig

Opened ahead of it's time in the opinion of some, Swig is an undeniably classy, venerable San Francisco establishment. It has one of the largest whiskey selections available with 150 labels and counting. Swig opened its doors six years ago in the TenderNob area, close to Union Square. The modern space is equipped with an impressive fireplace that adds to the ambience. If you are not blown away by the sleek décor, collection of whiskey or vast selection of fresh ingredient cocktails, then the wide range of music that Swig embraces should do the trick. Anything from Motown, to salsa, to house music is used to entertain its patrons. Swig opens its doors daily at 3p.m. and updates on the week's drink specials and featured music can be found on their Facebook page.

Rye

Rye is a chic joint that offers an enchanting cosmopolitan feel. The bar is constructed of light colored woodworking, with exposed brick that spans the walls, accenting the elevated ceilings, and providing excellent backdrop to the oversized modern art. The eclectic artwork and attractive lighting help provide an upbeat ambience and unique trendiness symbolic of the progressive San Francisco nightlife. A pool table and an outside patio for smokers, give the bar some traditional elements that help balance the "artsy" décor. There is really no dress code, as one would be comfortable in a suit or shorts. Drinks are reasonably priced (around \$10) and the menu offers an array of classics as well as new creations, enticing the pallet with some creative herbal drinks (that the bartenders have perfected concocting. If you visit early, you'll have no problem getting a drink and will experience a chill crowd. But as the night moves on, this place will get crowded. If you enjoy fine people and fine cocktails, then it's worth your time to stop in.