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A Good Drink, Hold the Pretense



Jim Wilson/The New York Times

Prizefighter, a bar in Emeryville, Calif.

By ROBERT SIMONSON
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[Prizefighter](#), a bar in the Bay Area, doesn't look like much at first glance. It's in a boxy brick building with a lot of space but not much in the way of distinctive décor. It's not even in San Francisco, but in Emeryville, a small community in the East Bay.

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Gabriele Stabile for The New York Times

T.J. Lynch, owner and bartender, behind the bar at Mother's Ruin in downtown Manhattan.

If you hang out long enough, however, you notice things. The back bar is impressive, with dozens of whiskeys, tequilas and rums. If you venture beyond beer, you'll find the daiquiri is beautifully wrought, and the old-fashioned is excellent. They ought to be. That man fixing your drink is Jon Santer, who was among the opening staff at [Bourbon and Branch](#), one of San Francisco's fanciest cocktail dens.

Over the last decade, bartenders around the country have created a cocktail culture of exquisite drinks and exclusive digs — hidden speakeasies that require a seat reservation to get in, and lavish, library-like barrooms where drinks are contemplated with hushed seriousness or marveled at like circus acts.

Prizefighter is part of what is shaping up as a fresh chapter for high-end mixology: a new

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breed of cocktail bar that seeks to retain the profession's hard-won artistry while shedding the pretensions that often come with it. These bars — which include Mother's Ruin in the NoLiTa neighborhood of Manhattan, [Evelyn](#) in the East Village and [Basik](#) and [Lighthouse BK](#) in Williamsburg, Brooklyn — have no secret entrances. Their outdoor signs are easy to spot. Standing at the bar is allowed. Canned beer is often an option. And they aim to be neighborhood places rather than destinations, just as most bars traditionally have.

"I think it's overdue," said T. J. Lynch, who helped open Mother's Ruin in the summer of 2011. "There's a large gap in the industry between high-end cocktail spots where you have to be on the list or make a reservation, and something more casual. There should be a lot more of these, one in every neighborhood."

At Prizefighter, which opened in 2011, the cocktail menu keeps things brief and simple. Drinks are well made, but not overly intricate; most have no more than three ingredients. There's no pressure to order them or, worse, discuss them. "I won't tell anybody anything about the cocktails unless they ask," said Mr. Santer, sounding almost proud.

In most cases, these low-key saloons are evidence of their owners' desire to take a few steps back from behind-the-bar pyrotechnics and overly thought-out mixology theorems.

"I wanted to build a bar that I would go to," said Jay Zimmerman, an owner of Basik, where the layout is, well, pretty basic, and the cocktail list a tidy five drinks long. "I love to visit my friends at these very buttoned-up cocktail bars. But that's just not me. And I love going to dive bars. But I didn't want to do that, either. I needed to do something in between."

[Scofflaw](#), which opened early last year in the Logan Square neighborhood of Chicago, is not without its epicurean edge; it has one of the best gin selections in the country. But with its corner-bar facade and twin fireplaces, it has a comfortable, no-frills air. "We knew we wanted cocktails, combined with a neighborhood, regular barroom," said Andy Gould, an owner. "It's not highfalutin."

Drinks are only part of the scene at [Silver Dollar](#), a sprawling honky tonk in the Clifton section of Louisville, Ky., that serves up an aural backdrop of the Bakersfield Sound, and a menu of Southern and Mexican food. Yet the craft cocktails have found the spotlight anyway, amounting to 40 percent of bar sales.

"Louisville is starved for cocktail bars," said Larry Rice, an owner. "We sell a lot more than we expected."

The bar managers at these relaxed spots do not have relaxed résumés. Susie Hoyt, who runs the bar at Silver Dollar, cut her teeth at [the Violet Hour](#), a pre-eminent Chicago cocktail lounge. Mr. Lynch of Mother's Ruin worked at [the Breslin](#), the chic Manhattan bar and restaurant that Mr. Zimmerman once managed. Danny Shapiro at Scofflaw trained at the [Whistler](#), in Chicago, under Paul McGee, a leading mixologist there.

But because some of these places are big, and don't stand on ceremony, the staff members possess a talent you might not see at a five-stool speakeasy: speed. "We tend to hire bartenders who have club skills," said Mr. Lynch, who once ran a nightclub in Baltimore. "Anybody who can read can make drinks. I can't teach speed."

Mr. Santer, another club veteran, agreed. "There's a generation of bartenders now who've only worked in cocktail bars," he said, adding, "You're not good unless you can execute drinks with the same precision when things speed up, while still being hospitable and charming."

Not everyone loves this laid-back simplicity. "The cocktails aren't declining in quality at all, but they're also not progressing," said [Camper English](#), a San Francisco liquor journalist. He thinks this paring back of complexity, in both atmosphere and drink, has come too quickly on the heels of the bartender's triumphant return as a culinary artisan.



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“It’s casual fine drinking, and I get that,” Mr. English said. “But after spending the last half-decade convincing consumers to try new cocktails, now bartenders are saying, ‘Stick to the classics.’ They’ve hooked drinkers on novelty and now they’re saying novelty is overrated.”

Mr. Santer, of Prizefighter, has heard that complaint. “A lot’s been said about our ‘simple’ drinks, and sometimes I think they’re misunderstood,” he said. “A drink with less ingredients is actually harder to make than a drink with more, as there’s less room for error.”

Simplicity has other advantages. “I feel bad for other cocktail bartenders,” Mr. Lynch said, “when they find out how much money we make here.”

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