

Secrets in the City

Hidden bars are all about discovery. This concept in New York is all about giving the customer an unparalleled experience in ambience and cocktails.

Text: Peggy Tee

At Crif's, a hotdog stand in New York, patrons walk into the phone booth at the back, pick up the receiver and vanish from sight. They've gone to PDT or "Please Don't Tell", a secret bar with an unusual entrance. Hidden bars were originally inspired by the Prohibition era, when speakeasies

might have been anything from a hole-in-the-wall space hidden behind an innocuous frontage, to a dressed-up living room with a security peephole. The secret bars of today emulate the mystery and ambience of the speakeasy, and pride themselves on serving high quality, artisanal cocktails.

The main appeal of speakeasies

is that "one must seek it out," says Meaghan Dorman, head bartender of Raines Law Room, a hidden bar in Chelsea. "Our popularity has spread by word of mouth. We like how that builds our clientele as they come in with a purpose and are excited to be there. Business builds more slowly that way, but it makes for a meaningful





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connection with our guests.”

Bar Style

Modern speakeasies seek to capture the glamour of the forbidden. Reservations, no standing, passwords, house rules and lack of signage are de rigueur. Behind the unmarked black door at Raines Law Room, warm brown leather couches make up dark, cosy booths while cream and beige dimpled armchairs are sprawled around the dimly lit, wood-panelled seating area. The bar area is suggestive of a kitchen, with its olive green furnishings and oval island table.

The cocktail list here runs the gamut from classic and signature to seasonal. The Manhattan is perfectly assembled from rye whiskey, vermouth, angostura bitters and brandied cherries, served with a lemon twist. Raines

Law Room’s signature cocktails are evocative of the Prohibition era, with bourbon, absinthe, cognac and scotch featuring heavily on the list.

The innovative mixologists behind the hidden bars who create these original cocktails are the main draw, as demonstrated by one of New York City’s first secret bars, Angel’s Share, founded in 1994. The bar is a tiny, sequestered space hidden behind a raucous Japanese restaurant in the East Village. The leather booths, chandeliers, smooth jazz, velvet curtains and plump-painted cherubs overseeing the bar give Angel’s Share a cosy, intimate feel.

The cocktail list highlights ingredients such as shiso, fresh Yuzu citrus juice and herbs in precise, but creative pairings with infused liquors, fruit liqueurs

and sake. Patrons can choose the classic Serenity, a lychee martini made from citrus-infused vodka, homemade lychee liqueur, grapefruit juice and “dragon tears”, an extract from shiso leaves; or a seasonal cocktail such as the Quintessence, made from jasmine-infused rum, elderflower liqueur, tonic and grapefruit juice.

Stairway to secrets

The modern speakeasy, like its predecessor, is an escape, but not from the law. Instead, patrons flee overcrowded, noisy bars and substandard drinks to find refuge in hideaway bars that serve up great cocktails. Behind a dingy sandwich shop in the East Village, a staircase leads up into the fantasy world of Cienfuegos, decked out in bubblegum pink tiles and pistachio green walls.

“We like to do our best for a singular kind of product. We’ll

probably see more of that as a trend,” explains Miguel Calvo, creative director, Cienfuegos. Marrying the concept of a hidden bar with rum punch “cocteleleria”, Cienfuegos is a newly opened bar, which focuses on high quality rum cocktails.

Little touches, such as the cigar box in which the check arrives in, the punchbowls and the spicy Cuban tunes make Cienfuegos a departure from the dim, underground bars of the original Prohibition period, but the bar manages to hold on to its aura of mystery while creatively carving out

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Punch and Judy cocktail, made from spiced rum, Armagnac, agave syrup, gin, fresh pineapple and lime juice, finished with angostura bitters, and garnished with ruby red strawberries is the perfect concoction for the candy coloured, Havana inspired surroundings of Cienfuegos.

Without mass market advertising, underground bars rely on customers who seek unique, exclusive and surprising experiences. Successful hidden bars have a slowly growing, but solid clientele base. "There is limited promotion and less chance of street traffic customers, but we feel great work will be recognised on its own. That is exactly what has worked for us," says Raines Law Room's Meaghan.

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with delicious cocktails, they almost always walk away happy and look to come back soon," she continues. In quiet back rooms hidden behind unmarked doors, secret bars are serving satisfied customers. There may never be as many speakeasies as ordinary corner bars, but the concept of is definitely here to stay. 🍸