



# Top Cocktail Bars in the Bay Area

Where to find a well-made drink in San Francisco, Oakland, San Jose and beyond.

BY [ESTHER MOBLEY](#) | NOV. 14, 2022 | UPDATED: JAN. 4, 2023 5:01 PM



Bartender Chelsea Van Billiard makes drinks at Pacific Cocktail Haven in San Francisco.

It's no wonder that the Bay Area is chock full of world-class cocktail bars. The region was one of the birthplaces of the [craft cocktail revolution](#), which has seen scores of influential bartenders incorporate high-quality ingredients and innovative techniques into their craft over the last two decades. Today, a well-made drink in the Bay Area can be as revelatory as a great meal — a special experience that lodges indelibly in your taste memory.

This list represents our favorite cocktail bars throughout the Bay Area, from Wine Country to San Jose. It spans a wide range of flavors. There's a furtive speakeasy beneath a sausage restaurant. A swanky lounge that takes its inspiration from the Chinese agrarian calendar. A historic honky tonk where you'd never expect the drinks to be so meticulous. A meditative, tranquil Japanese jazz bar. And much more.

difficult, and maybe subjective, exercise, since many restaurants contain bars and produce excellent mixed drinks. We've limited this guide to places that feel more to us like bars than like restaurants, though many do serve food (and we've noted those that do). The litmus test: Is this bar a place where you could feel comfortable just ordering a drink, without a snack or a meal? If so, we considered it eligible for this list.

Finally, this is not a guide to wine bars, beer bars or dive bars — though we love those types of bars, too. If a dive bar's what you're after, check out our [Ultimate Guide to Classic S.F. Bars](#).

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Understated cocktails and some of the best bar food in the city.

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The best stop in Livermore for Tequila and mezcal.

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### Bar Shiru

The Bay Area's best take on the Japanese hi-fi bar.



3174 16th St., San Francisco

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Patricia Chang / Special to The Chronicle

The cocktails at ABV are deceptively simple. Most have only three or four ingredients, but they pull off layers of complexity, whether in the Tangerine Dream — which combines gin and dry vermouth with tangerine oil and orange bitters for an ultra-refreshing take on a martini — or the Gin & Celery, which adds just a hint of vegetal crunch to the gin-and-tonic template. Also on offer is exemplary bar food, all of which is intended to be consumed without utensils: an excellent cheeseburger, a plate of fries topped with blackened octopus, a heap of spicy fried cauliflower florets. (Hand wipes are provided.) The real treasure here is the spirits selection, and if you're curious to try a new gin, mezcal or whiskey neat or on the rocks, it would be worth asking one of the knowledgeable bartenders for a recommendation.

SERVES FOOD

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**PHONE:** 415-294-1871 **WEBSITE** **MORE COVERAGE**

1540 Mission St., San Francisco

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Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

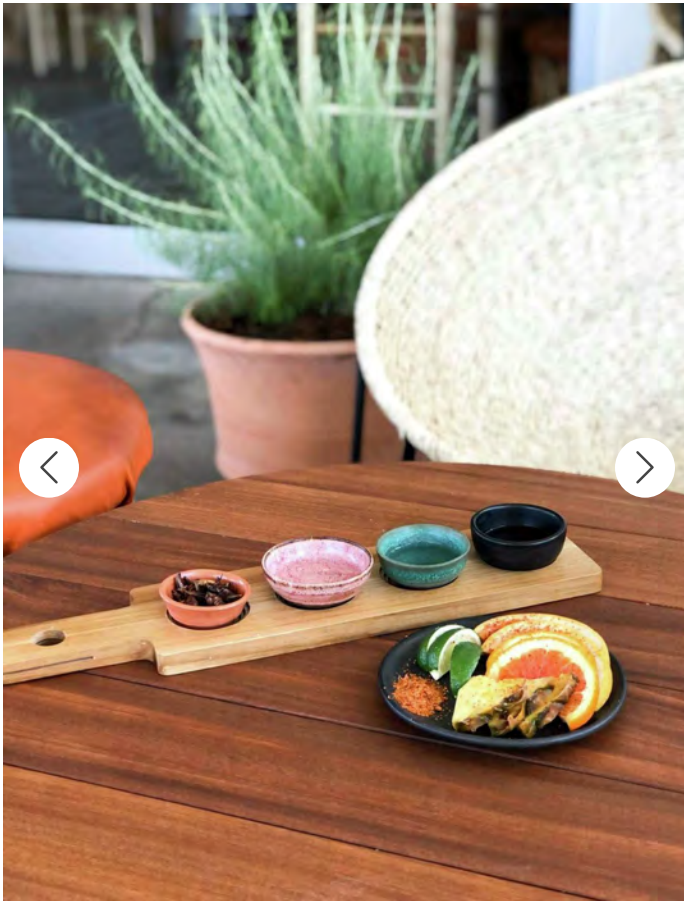
The new — and, yes, improved — iteration of Bar Agricole opened in the summer of 2022, a few blocks away from the bar’s previous home, which won a James Beard Award for restaurant design. Bar Agricole 2.0 is just as eye-catching from a design perspective, but what’s more exciting is the selection of spirits, which owner Thad Vogler has painstakingly sourced from producers who farm responsibly and eschew chemical additions. Think of it as terroir-driven spirits — or the hard-liquor version of natural wine. It’s rare to find mixed drinks made with such special bases, like Old Fashioneds made with single-cask bourbon or an Improved Cocktail with vintage Armagnac. Make reservations for dinner in the main dining room, or stop in for a more casual drink in the “package room,” which has a slightly less expensive drink menu.

SERVES FOOD

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**PHONE:** 415-341-0101 **WEBSITE** **MORE COVERAGE**

## Bar Quiote



Admission Orange Life, one of Livermore's coolest restaurants, opened this agave-driven bar in 2021. It feels like a honky tonk, with a vintage jukebox, old arcade games and movie posters from Sam Peckinpah Westerns. The house margarita has a floral dimension thanks to the addition of orange blossom, while the paloma has a tangy kick from a rim of sal de gusano, the traditional Oaxacan salt made from worms. Or try the Zicatela Sun, which gives mezcal and pineapple juice a potent kick from arbol and ancho chile salt. It's easy to stop in here for a quick, casual drink, and service is speedy, thanks in part to the cocktails that are available on draft.

Courtesy Lauren Heanes-Longwell  
SERVES FOOD

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# Bar Shiru

1611 Telegraph Ave. #100, Oakland

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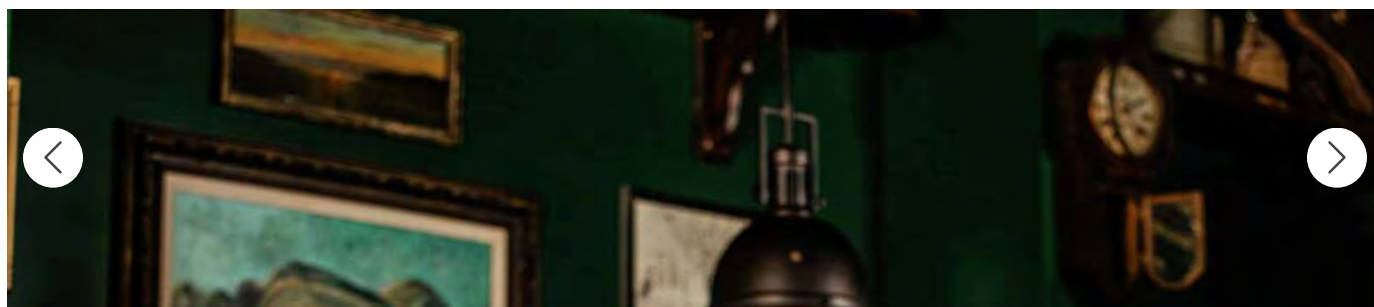
Uptown Oakland's Bar Shiru is a tranquil, relaxing place. Modeled on Japan's hi-fi bars, also known as listening bars, it's the rare bar that actually wants its customers to keep quiet. A vintage McIntosh sound system broadcasts vinyl records — mostly jazz, carefully curated each night — inside a sleek, loungey space with high ceilings. One section of the drink menu focuses on highballs, a popular type of drink in Japan, including a great one made with earthy Iwai 45 whiskey. Many drinks have no recognizably Japanese influence at all, though, like the grassy, bright Sidewinder, made with yellow Chartreuse and Tequila, or the Velvet Mood, which tastes like a floral, herbal riff on an Aviation cocktail.

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## California Gold

848 B St., San Rafael [SEE ON MAP](#) |  [ADD TO WISHLIST](#)





Marin County doesn't have many destination-worthy cocktail bars, but it does have California Gold. (Stillwater in Fairfax also makes top-notch cocktails, though it's more of a restaurant.) The bar in downtown San Rafael channels the mood of a plush saloon that the original 49ers might have visited after a day of panning for ore. Think dark wood, red leather seats, an antique piano and old maps of the Golden State. Noted bartender Isaac Shumway opened this bar after years of running cocktail programs in San Francisco at Tosca Cafe, Bloodhound and other spots. Happy hour (4-6 p.m. daily) is a particularly good deal here, with an extensive list of \$9 drinks that include the Jungle Bird, a restrained tiki classic with Jamaican rum and Campari.

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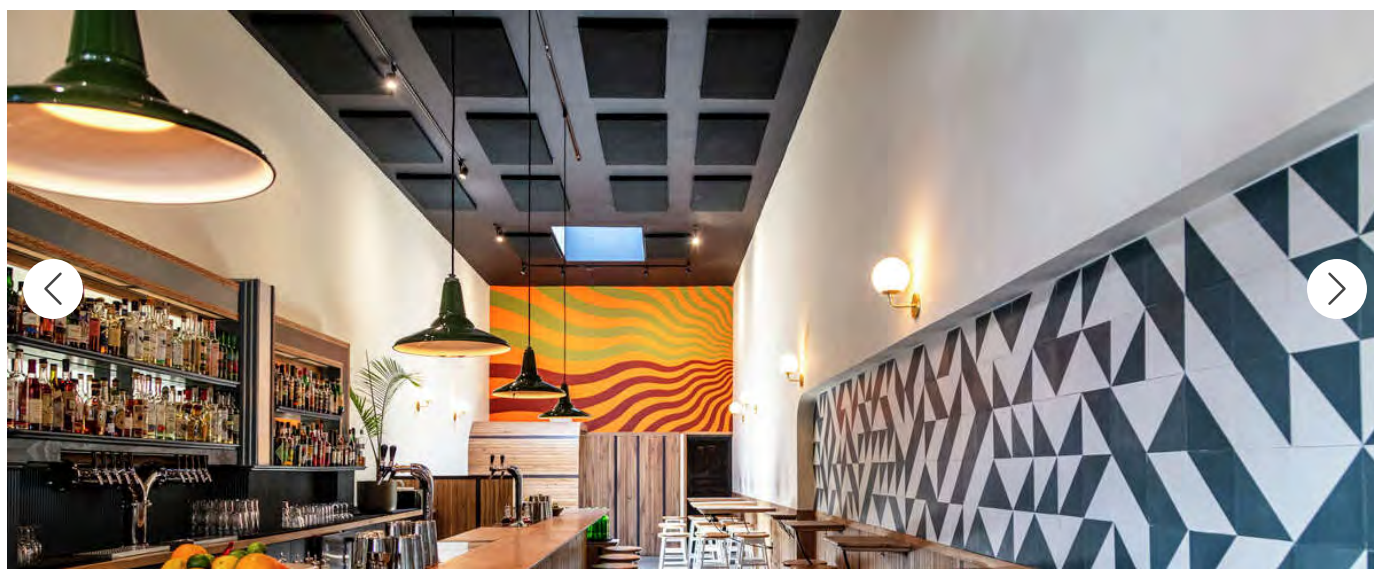
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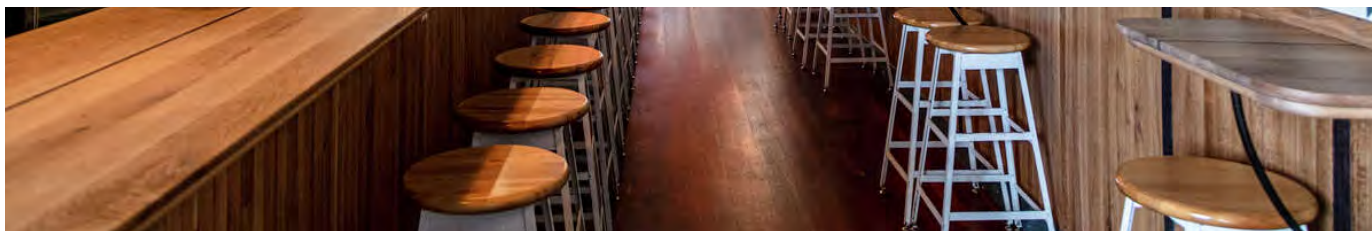
## Dalva & the Hideout

3121 16th St., San Francisco

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Longtime Mission favorite Dalva reopened in early 2022 after a hiatus, with new owners, a new drink menu and a colorful new interior situated in front of the Roxie Theater. In its previous incarnation, it had already been one of the neighborhood's best spots for a drink, and the new Dalva carries on that tradition. More recently, the team reopened the Hideout, the not-really-secret bar-within-a-bar that had always been hidden in a back room. The Hideout feels cozy and sexy, with dark red lighting, a sharp contrast from Dalva's bright, airy look. In either spot, the drinks are tasty, with liberal use of fortified wines like Sherry and vermouth. The Strange Paradise combines vermouth with blueberry and passion fruit for a drink that's ultra-fruity but balanced, and in the Return of the Mak the irresistible flavor of makrut lime shines through, thanks to vodka that's infused with the citrus.

SERVES FOOD

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## El Barrio

16230 Main St., Guerneville

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This stylish bar is located on the main drag in Guerneville, the quirky Sonoma County town that's increasingly known as a vacation haven for the LGBTQ+ community. Many of the interior trappings, like the talavera tile lining the main bar, were custom made in Mexico, whose signature spirits — Tequila and mezcal — form the basis of the drinks menu here. Try the El Jardin, which is like an agave-spiked green juice with celery, cucumber, jalapeño and cilantro, or La Adelita, a hibiscus-forward take on a margarita. Before you leave, make sure to check out the bathroom: The striking, hand-painted latrine, also custom-made in Mexico, is possibly the bar's most Instagrammed element.

SERVES FOOD

**PHONE:** 707-604-7601 **WEBSITE** [READ THE FULL REVIEW](#)

## Friends & Family

468 25th St., Oakland [SEE ON MAP](#) | [ADD TO WISHLIST](#)



It's not hard to imagine Friends & Family as the setting for a Kinfolk magazine photoshoot: The Oakland bar possesses the kind of stylish minimalism that these days is often described as "curated," with colored glassware, shelves of natural wine and just the right amount of plants. The San Michele ... My Belle is a characteristically understated entry, a clear drink with an elusive honeydew melon flavor amplified by the sharp notes of grapefruit peel and the Italian aperitif Cocchi Americano. Mocktails are standard these days, but Friends & Family has some uncommonly thoughtful ones, often made with fruity, acidic shrubs.

SERVES FOOD

**PHONE:** 510-225-0469 **WEBSITE** **MORE COVERAGE**

## The Hotsy Totsy Club

601 San Pablo Ave. #2, Albany [SEE ON MAP](#) | [ADD TO WISHLIST](#)



Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

The Hotsy Totsy Club has been around since at least 1939, making it the longest-running pub in this quiet East Bay city. Since 2009, it's been run by Jessica Maria and Michael Valladares, who

keep the rowdy, kitschy vibe that always endeared the Hotsy Totsy to locals. On a Friday night now, the place is bumping with energy — bartenders are dancing, friends are playing shuffleboard and old movies are airing on the television. There's no shame in ordering a PBR here (it's on draft), but the staff can also be trusted to make a top-notch drink, like a daiquiri riff that incorporates cardamon and barbecue bitters or a clarified milk punch with mezcal and jalapeño. Few spots in the Bay Area feel like this much fun.

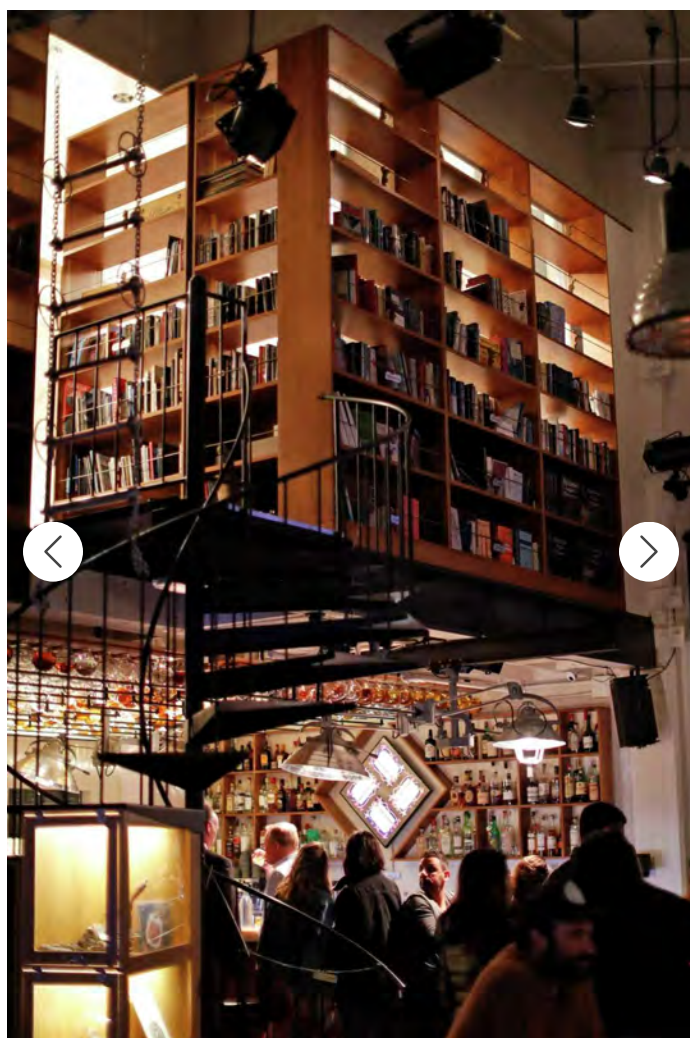
**PHONE:** 510-526-5986 **WEBSITE** [READ THE FULL REVIEW](#)

## The Interval at Long Now

2 Marina Blvd., San Francisco

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Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

There's no bar quite like the Interval at Long Now, nestled next to Green's Restaurant in Fort Mason. It's operated by the Long Now Foundation, a nonprofit whose stated goal is to "foster long-term thinking and responsibility in the framework of the next 10,000 years," co-founded by composer Brian Eno. Accordingly, the bar is full of abstract artwork, walls of books and a striking, winding staircase at its center. The menu has a strong point of view, with lengthy descriptions for each of its drinks. Try the one called I've Grown to Love Life Too Much, an allusion to a line from "The Brothers Karamazov." It's a rich concoction of Cognac, pear liqueur and creme de cacao, with a separate glass of sparkling wine on the side to cut the intensity. If you want a drink that looks as beautiful as this bar's interior, try the Four Ways to Play, in which rye, amaro and curacao are served over a sloped ice cube. The glass appears to be only half full (or half empty, depending on how you see things).

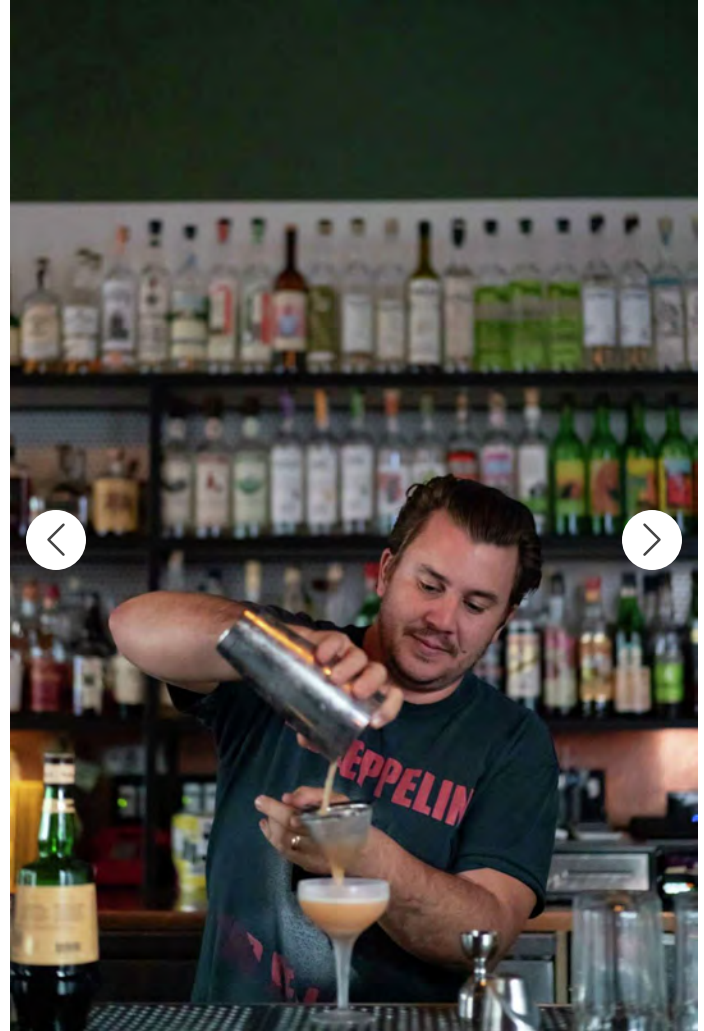
SERVES FOOD

**PHONE:** 415-561-6582 **WEBSITE** [READ THE FULL REVIEW](#)

2545 24th St., San Francisco

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Although owner David Ruiz swears he didn't set out to open a mezcal bar, Junior certainly passes for one. The menu offers some great mezcal cocktails — including a top-notch margarita — but enthusiasts will enjoy the chance to drink a copita the way it's served in Oaxaca, with orange slices and sour sal de gusano served on the side. Straddling the border of the Mission District and Potrero Hill, Junior strikes a comfortable, neighborhood-focused mood, with plenty of natural light indoors and sidewalk seating for groups of coworkers who come in for a drink after shifts at nearby Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital. There's an uncommonly smart selection of local craft beers (from the likes of Temescal Brewing and Henhouse) and natural wines from producers like Berkeley's Buddy/Buddy.



Paul Kuroda / Special To The Chronicle

**PHONE:** 415-814-2107 [WEBSITE](#) [MORE COVERAGE](#)

## Moongate Lounge

28 Waverly Pl., San Francisco

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In San Francisco's Chinatown, Michelin-starred restaurant Mister Jiu's always mixed a good drink, but it took its cocktail game to a new level in 2019 by opening an upstairs bar, Moongate Lounge. Aesthetically, the place is mesmerizing, with plushly textured furniture and a pink-and-blue color scheme that's begging for selfies. The drinks — which change seasonally, based on the Chinese agrarian calendar — are as precise, colorful and flavorful as the food downstairs. Right now, try the Awakening of Instincts. It recalls a Grasshopper, with sweet evaporated milk and cocoa nib-infused pisco blending with green elements (snap pea, mint) for a creamy, satisfying drink.

SERVES FOOD

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**PHONE:** 415-857-9688 **WEBSITE** [READ THE FULL REVIEW](#)

## Pacific Cocktail Haven

550 Sutter St., San Francisco [SEE ON MAP](#) | [ADD TO WISHLIST](#)





After burning down in 2021, Pacific Cocktail Haven — known to most as PCH — rose from the ashes and reopened in a new location, on the same block near Union Square. Owner Kevin Diedrich’s signature bartending sensibilities are unchanged, with his penchant for evocative Asian ingredients (red beans, miso, calamansi, lychee and the like) still front and center. Diedrich has deservedly earned recognition for creating tropical, escapist-feeling drinks that are emphatically not tiki, like his popular Lime in da Coconut, made with vodka, salted pistachio and coconut-lychee milk, or the Thrilla in Manila: bourbon, shiso, calamansi, coconut, absinthe and li-hing mui (sour plum powder).

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72 S. First St., San Jose

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Esther Mobley / The Chronicle

San Jose's premier cocktail bar feels like a party. The huge space has plenty of nooks and crannies for group seating and a very long bar, with an atmosphere that feels busy and alive. The extensive drink menu is helpfully categorized by flavor profile — with descriptors like fruity, sour, creamy and herbal — though the selection veers overall toward the lighter and refreshing side. The Clubber Lang is a smart take on a whiskey sour, mixing bourbon with grapefruit and the bitter liqueur Heirloom Alchermes (which gets its red color from the cochineal insect, like Campari used to). As a bonus, the bar makes some of the best mocktails around. The zero-proof Sleight of Hand, fizzy, cucumber-driven and spicy thanks to a tamarind syrup, easily passes for booze.

SERVES FOOD

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**PHONE:** 408-713-2625 **WEBSITE** **MORE COVERAGE**

6702 Hollis St., Emeryville

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Brontë Wittpenn / The Chronicle

Not quite a fancy cocktail bar, not quite a dive, Prizefighter is a neighborhood bar that punches way above its weight. Big windows and a spacious patio give the space a fluid, indoor-outdoor feeling, which encourages inter-group mingling. Many of the house cocktails are faithful interpretations of classic recipes — the Jack Rose, made with sweet-tart Calvados and grenadine; a very good Gibson with an aquavit-soaked onion — while others are gentle reinventions, like a Japanese whiskey highball with a kick of tangy umeshu. One popular order is the Oaxacan Standoff: a beer, a shot and a sangrita, the peppery tomato juice mixture that's commonly used as a chaser for Tequila.

SERVES FOOD

**PHONE:** 510-428-1470 **WEBSITE** [SEE ON MAP](#)

## Trick Dog

3010 20th St., San Francisco

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If Trick Dog is known for anything, it's for its menu layouts. One season, it was a horoscope; another, a Chinese takeout menu; another, an airplane safety manual. (My personal favorite was the menu that resembled a file of redacted CIA documents, with each drink named after a different conspiracy theory.) If the Mission District bar is known for anything else, it's for its fearless incorporation of unusual ingredients like pico de gallo, Sour Patch Kids and even, once, a tiny peanut butter and jelly sandwich (skewered on a toothpick, as a garnish). The November menu is a poetry anthology, and the drinks are as seamless as ever — though the shock factor has perhaps diminished just a bit. Order the Absinthe, which contains no absinthe, a verdant, vegetal, peppery burst of kiwi and tomatillo flavor served in a Nick and Nora glass, or the very mildly nutty Love is Not All, in which celery and sesame bring out the savory flavors of apple brandy and Sherry.

SERVES FOOD

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**PHONE:** 415-471-2999 **WEBSITE** [READ THE FULL REVIEW](#)

## True Laurel

753 Alabama St., San Francisco

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The Mission District, two-Michelin-starred restaurant Lazy Bear created True Laurel as a spinoff bar in 2017. Nicolas Torres is the mastermind behind the drink menu, and he doesn't shy away from bold, modern-feeling flavor combinations, like blueberry and Madeira, or shiso and dill. One item that encapsulates the mood is the Mai o Mai. Like a classic mai tai, Torres' creation combines light and dark rum with lime juice, Curaçao and orgeat. But in this case, the orgeat is a house-made syrup with pistachios and orange flowers, rather than the traditional almond. The light rum is made into a clarified milk punch, rendering the typically orange-colored drink crystal clear. Meanwhile, the dark rum is infused with coffee beans and left to float on top of the rest of the drink, adding a burnt orange-colored rim. The result is strikingly beautiful and meticulous, which describes just about everything at True Laurel. This is one of those bars that can sometimes feel like a restaurant, with such thoughtful food items and full table service.

SERVES FOOD

**PHONE:** 415-341-0020 **WEBSITE** **READ THE FULL REVIEW** **MORE COVERAGE**

## Viridian

2216 Broadway, Oakland

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Viridian bills itself as Oakland's first explicitly Asian American cocktail bar. It also happens to pour some of the most delightful and original drinks in the region. The Tomato Beef, the cocktail that everyone seemed to be talking about when the bar opened in 2020, is a revelation. Made with basil eau de vie, tomato water and Tequila, it tastes far greater than the sum of its parts, channeling the vivid flavor of a just-ripe summer tomato — and tasting far more like a caprese salad than like a Bloody Mary. The bar is known for its desserts, and in fact some drinks feel like dessert in themselves, such as the White Rabbit, which combines the popular Chinese candy with bourbon, oolong tea, coffee and pistachio in a long, milky pour. The ambiance is just as unique as the menu: Awash in a violet-colored glow, the room has the big-night-out energy of a nightclub — just with much, much better food and drinks.

SERVES FOOD

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## White Cap

3608 Taraval St., San Francisco

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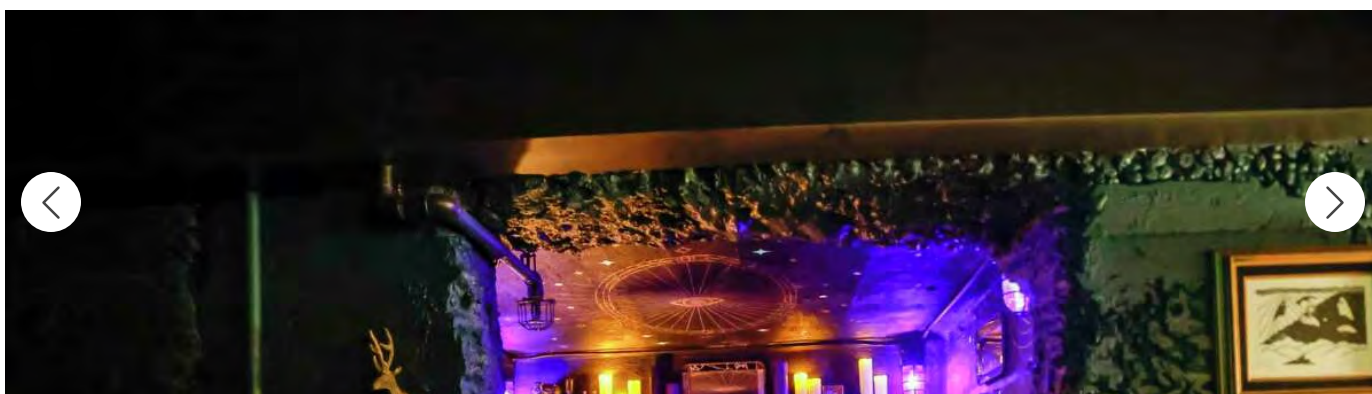
Just a few blocks inland from Ocean Beach in the Outer Sunset is White Cap, a bar that offers a cozy, warm respite from the chilly sea breeze with a glowing fire pit inside. (There's also ample outdoor seating for those sunny afternoons.) The owner is Matt Lopez, a devoted Ocean Beach surfer, who also recently took over longtime Sunset dive bar Pitt's Pub. Many of the drinks here convey a restrained beachy attitude — whether it's the addition of wheat grass and salt in the Nose Dive, or seaweed-infused vermouth in the White Cap martini. There's also an element of playfulness here. An entire dried ancho chile floats atop mezcal and tropical-fruit juice in the Passport, and there's a very serviceable boozy slushy that's creamy and just barely sweet, with rum and smoked banana.

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**PHONE:** 415-682-4215 **WEBSITE** [READ THE FULL REVIEW](#)

## Wunderbar

310 Baldwin Ave., San Mateo [SEE ON MAP](#) | [ADD TO WISHLIST](#)





San Mateo has not historically been a hot spot for furtive, sleek speakeasy bars — until Wunderbar opened in the basement of the casual German-style biergarten Wursthall. Reservations are required, and you'll have to follow instructions in order to find the bar, which reveals itself after you wave your hand in front of a white rabbit in a closet. (Aim for the bunny's tummy.) You'll then find yourself inside a swanky lounge with antique books, trinkets and framed photographs lining the walls. The tarot card-theme menu consists of standard cocktails (like a martini) and proprietary inventions. Try the Sidewinder's Fang, a San Mateo specialty of rum and passion fruit that originated with an old tiki bar called Lanai. It's light, spritzzy and less sweet than you'd expect.

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