

Esquire

250 YEARS IN
THE MAKING
ONE DAY
IN THE USA

JON
BERNTHAL
WILL DIE
TRYING

STEPHEN
BREYER:
WHAT I'VE
LEARNED

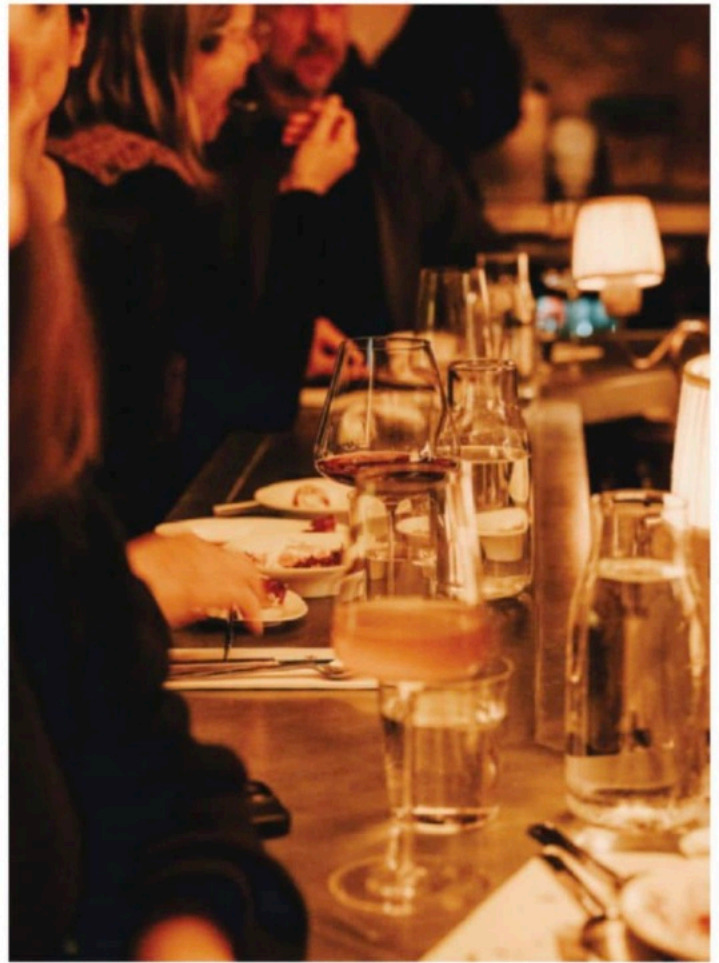
DWAYNE JOHNSON AMERICAN OPTIMIST

The Best Bars
from Sea to
Shining Sea



The Top 10 Presidents
By Charles P. Pierce





THEY DIDN'T HAVE INSTAGRAM AND SUBSTACK BACK in 1776, so how did that whole revolution thing get rolling? Where did the rebels of the American colonies manage to meet up and murmur to each other about their radical strategies for, well, overthrowing a king and kick-starting a new country? Kid-dos, we have bars to thank for all that. The very concept of the United States of America had its genesis some 250 years ago in the taverns of the Atlantic seaboard. You've heard about Thomas Paine and *Common Sense*, his revolutionary pamphlet, but did you know that *Common Sense* gathered momentum as it was passed around in pubs and recited aloud by drinkers swept up in the froth of pints and the spirit of the moment? (And have you read *Common Sense* lately? It's still . . . pretty relevant. To wit: "When William the Conqueror subdued England, he gave them law at the point of the sword; and, until we consent that the seat of government in America be legally and authoritatively occupied, we shall be in danger of having it filled by some fortunate ruffian, who may treat us in the same manner, and then, where will be our freedom?") We'd like to think that here at Esquire we're carrying on that tradition with our annual tribute to the Best Bars in America. This year we've gathered some of our favorite writers to proclaim their loyalty to bars—in Alabama and Arizona, in Tennessee and Louisiana, in California and Texas—where that deep sense of American comradeship is alive and well. Another round for our friends? That's just common sense. —Jeff Gordinier

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Need more places to drink?

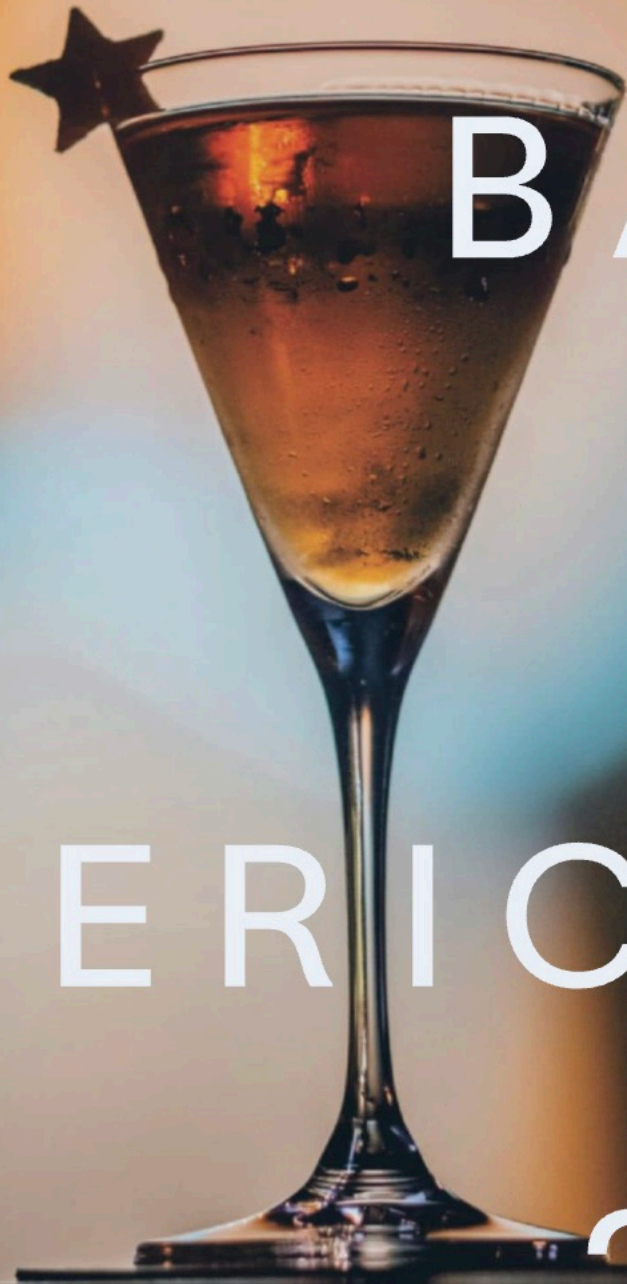
Head to Esquire.com for the complete list of Best Bars in America 2026.

Top left: Ball & Chain, Miami. Top right: Stars, N. Y. C. Bottom left: Cody's Public House, Chicago. Opposite: Papercut, Austin.



The

BEST



BAR

in

AMERICA

2026



The Endorsement:

Let the

BARTENDER

Have

FUN

I have become a cocktail curmudgeon, yes. Maybe it has to do with the fatigue that one feels when confronted with too many damn choices. Whatever the reason, I've slouched into a stubborn, grouchy, reactionary phase of ordering the same two cocktails at any given bar: a classic martini or a classic Negroni. That's all I want. (Okay, maybe a classic daiquiri now and then.) But one recent evening I found myself at the bar at Morihiro, the Los Angeles sushi sanctuary where Han Suk Cho makes the drinks. And, suddenly weary of my own fatigue, I remembered how lovely and life-affirming it can be to let a cocktail virtuoso make whatever she wants to make, be it a highball (with St. George Baller single malt, Manzanilla, and the roasted green tea called hojicha) or an amaro sour split sweetened with rice-bran syrup. I mean, here's something that's never going to happen at home: Chef Morihiro Onodera mills his own rice each day for the sushi he serves at Morihiro. "We collect the rice bran, toast it, soak it in water overnight to make 'rice-bran milk,' mix it with beet sugar—and there goes our rice-bran syrup that is used to sweeten our cocktails," Cho told me. "It gives a silky texture and a subtle toasty, malty flavor to the cocktails." Now, don't you want to try that? I sure do. As I learned from that rice, it's never too late to scrape off one's tough outer shell. —J. G.

STARS NEW YORK CITY

One night at Stars I ordered a Mini Tux, a small version of the Tuxedo No. 2, a complex, herbaceous variation on the martini, and a few minutes later it arrived in a curiously petite glass. It was like a thimble with a stem. I wondered what such a glass could be for.

I have to tell you about this glass. But Stars is a wine bar, so first I should tell you about the wine. Recently I asked for a red that would stand up to a Caribbean dinner I would be eating later that evening. I was presently poured an earthy, spicy Santa Maria Valley syrah whose notes I could still conjure hours later, even after raw shrimp doused in Scotch-bonnet oil, and goat shoulder, and dog sauce. Another night, after a particularly long day, I found myself with a white from Savoie so cool and refreshing I questioned whether to drink it or hold it against my forehead. (I drank it.) Pairing with food is one thing; pairing with life is another. In 2026. For a guy with a demanding job and two young kids.

There is something to be said for bars big enough to get lost in, but what I need is Stars, whose twelve-seat bar and kitchen would fit in a two-car garage, where every little detail makes you feel grand. Somehow, if it were bigger, it'd feel smaller.

But this glass! Halfway through the drink, with one sip left, I couldn't help myself. I looked at the knurled bowl, picking up the light of the small, dual-sconced table lamps on the zinc bar, and asked the sommelier about it. She shrugged. "One of our sister restaurants just happened to have this glass," she told me. "So we took it." Then she tilted her head to the side, shyly. "The truth is, we only have one." The glass was just for me. —Kevin Dupzyk

GOLD CLOVER BAR WASHINGTON, D. C.

It almost seems a bit foolish to mention Gold Clover here. Though it's far from hidden, it inspires the protectiveness of a best-kept secret—the kind of spot that understands the essence of being a third space. There's well-curated music, televisions, and the welcoming faces of co-owner Antoine Lyers and his staff behind the bar mixing up drinks. Whether you want something outrageous (the last time I was there, the bartender poured me some sort of gimlet made with Hpnotiq and gin) or something more refined (the white Negroni is the only Negroni I crave), the bartenders here are plenty capable of meeting the moment. But more than the drinks, it's the sense

of local consciousness and camaraderie that makes the place special—you're in a bar that seeks to give something back to its community rather than just separate people from their money. It's been nearly a decade since I moved away from D. C., but Gold Clover is a reminder of why it always feels like home. (Bonus: Drop in on a Friday evening for some phenomenal homemade fried chicken, but move quickly—it tends to disappear in less than thirty minutes.)
—Briana Younger, *Spotify editorial lead and music writer*

BAR TONIQUE NEW ORLEANS

After wading through tides of Mardi Gras partiers on a recent Sunday, I needed a good drink that didn't come in a Styrofoam cup. I slogged



Stars



The House of Found Objects



The Cork



Ball & Chain

to the edge of the French Quarter and reached the quieter territory of North Rampart Street, where Bar Tonique emerged like an oasis, untouched by the melee. That's not to say it's quiet or snobby. Just approachable, with a subtle nod of local cred. The space is small, just one room with a bar in the center, stripped to the essentials: well-mixed but affordable cocktails with a New Orleans flair, knowledgeable service, and a chill vibe for a low-key kickback. Every day there's a rotating pick of some specialty cocktail for eight bucks—maybe a Pimm's Cup on Mondays or a daiquiri on Tuesdays—but people know Tonique for its Ramos Gin Fizz. A bartender shakes gin, orange water, egg white, and everything nice for five arduous minutes until a highball glass towers with cloudlike foam. You haven't tried one until you've had theirs. —*Sirena He*

BALL & CHAIN MIAMI

There are plenty of reasons to visit Ball & Chain. Start with the history. Built in 1935, it predates the names of the street it's on (Calle Ocho) and the neighborhood it's in (Little Havana). Then there's the lore. Bootleggers, gamblers, mobsters, crooked politicians—oh, and Billie Holiday sang here. Behold the pineapple-shaped band shell outside; savor the rum-heavy drinks inside. But tonight, *she's* the reason I'm here, and I'm anxious. I'm visiting from Los Angeles. A decade has passed since we last saw each other. She lives nearby. She's the girl I liked and dated at Florida State University twenty-five years ago, now grown into the woman and friend I love. A mother, a schoolteacher,

a wife to a lovely guy. She's just completed a round of radiation. The tumor on her brain worries me, shakes me. It's hard to pretend otherwise, but I'm trying. She charges in like a Conch Republic buccaneer, and she hugs me hard. She's radiant. I finally know she's okay. Ball & Chain's mojitos always loosen the joints. A necessity, because the band's bringing it. Hips swaying, she pulls me onto the floor to salsa, and for a little while we're carefree college kids again. —*Khuong Phan, writer and branding expert*

THE HOUSE OF FOUND OBJECTS BIRMINGHAM

"Whatever you do, do not touch this switch," reads a sign beside a switch in the House of Found Objects. If you're the type to be flipping the switch before you reach the end of that command, congratulations, you've found the perfect bar—enjoy the shower of bubbles you've triggered. Half seventies retro happening, half futuristic fun house, this joint is not for those who prefer to nurse a whiskey in silence, occasionally glancing at their phone. No. Here, every nook provokes and amuses, from the Elvis Table, which comes with six "Vegas Elvis" jumpsuits, to the poetry corner (a desk and manual typewriter) to the photo booth (the photos, projected onto a screen behind the bar, become part art installation, part introduction to your neighbors). It's hard not to make friends when whoever sits at the Sesame Street table and dons the Cookie Monster costume is given a tray of cookies to hand out. Drinks are named for regulars, so if you order a Mary Kozielski—"complex, approachable, vibrant"—don't be surprised if

Mary herself brings it to you. The House of Found Objects is filled with whimsical tableaux, but as it turns out, the true found object is community. —*Beth Ann Fennelly, author, most recently, of The Irish Goodbye*

STIR CRAZY LOS ANGELES

There is no actual bar inside Stir Crazy, at least not the kind of bar-shaped berth where you sit on a high stool and stare at bottles. Stir Crazy does not even categorize itself as a bar. But before you and I get lost in the fog of semantics, allow me to make the case that your favorite bar might simply be a place where it feels good to have a drink with people who make you feel good, and for me that happens to be this minimalist boîte on Melrose Avenue where the young proprietors pour wine and serve food with a generosity of spirit—a true *conviviality*—that can turn a blah Tuesday night into a vacation. Four decades ago I used to wander up and down Melrose with my friends, hunting through thrift shops and record stores, pretending we were cool. Now creakier and world-wearier and long past pretending, we meet on the same street for anchovies with herbs and hazelnuts (hey, why don't we throw in the leek toast with chèvre and kombu oil, and a celery salad, and that poached chicken with turnips and chanterelles?), and we share a table and order glasses of Colombard, and we admit that our elders were correct about the lasting value of simple pleasures. —*J. G.*

THE CORK TUCSON

Here in the Sonoran Desert, where roadrunners and bristly javelina rule and where the monsoon rains of summer



The Endorsement:

The BEST

BURGER

Is the One at

the Bar

It is one of life's most reliable pleasures: You duck into a bar, maybe you're in a strange city for work, maybe you're a mile from home and in need of some decadent solitude. You order a drink, and now that the bartender mentions it, you are a little hungry. You *will* take a look at a menu. What's that? Burger's good here? Let's do it. Medium rare, please. You're about to have a bar burger, and even if you don't like it, you know you're going to love it. The bar burger is versatile. You can dress it up, as Evan Funke has done with his celebrated and elusive fondue-topped cheeseburger, now appearing at Los Angeles's Bar Avoja on Thursday nights. You can dress it down, like the legendary no-frills number at Manhattan's Corner Bistro. The former is like eating a bowl of French onion soup with your hands, the latter is pretty much exactly what they serve at a high school football game, and both of these descriptions are compliments. It is a thing to pair with a plummy zinfandel or a well-mixed Manhattan or whatever draft pilsner is on the happy-hour special. It is available in establishments around the world, and wherever you eat one, when you eat one, you are in America. (Same rule that applies to embassies—too complicated to get into here.)

Enjoy it. And know that for the rest of your life, whenever the name of that bar comes up, you'll be able to say the three most hopeful words in the English language: Burger's good there. —*Dave Holmes*

pelted down like fury, you need sanctuary: a cool, dim space to ride out the triple-digit peaks of late afternoon. In Tucson, few places feel as consoling as the bar at the Cork, especially when bartender James Hernandez is on duty. Originally part of a Southwest-themed steakhouse chain, the Cork has existed in some form within these adobe slump-block walls since 1966, when air-conditioning was wonky and the eastward run of Tucson's paved roads ended at its parking lot. The bar at the Cork shotguns up and down a narrow space across from the host stand. Since there are only fourteen stools and three high-top tables, getting a seat can involve some maneuvering, but Hernandez, with his chinstrap beard and altar-boy freshness, is the kindest, most courteous barman you'll ever face behind the stick—whenever I'm forced to stand,

he slips out from behind the bar to take my order and deliver my drink. The cocktails are straightforward, well-made, and, crucially on blistering afternoons, *cold*—I've watched Hernandez pour a Manhattan gorgeously murky with micronized ice. The crowd's a mix of locals and passers-through, like the buff ex-Marine turned birder I met one night, in town to spot the elusive ruddy ground dove. If you're lucky, you'll find yourself next to Coach, an octogenarian regular with a taste for Frangelico on the rocks. If you pass muster, he'll twist off his chunky circa-1980 Super Bowl ring and drop it in your palm so you can admire its heft—a desert rite of passage as unforgettable as your first yodeling caterwaul from a lovesick roadrunner. —*John Birdsall, author of The Man Who Ate Too Much and What Is Queer Food?*

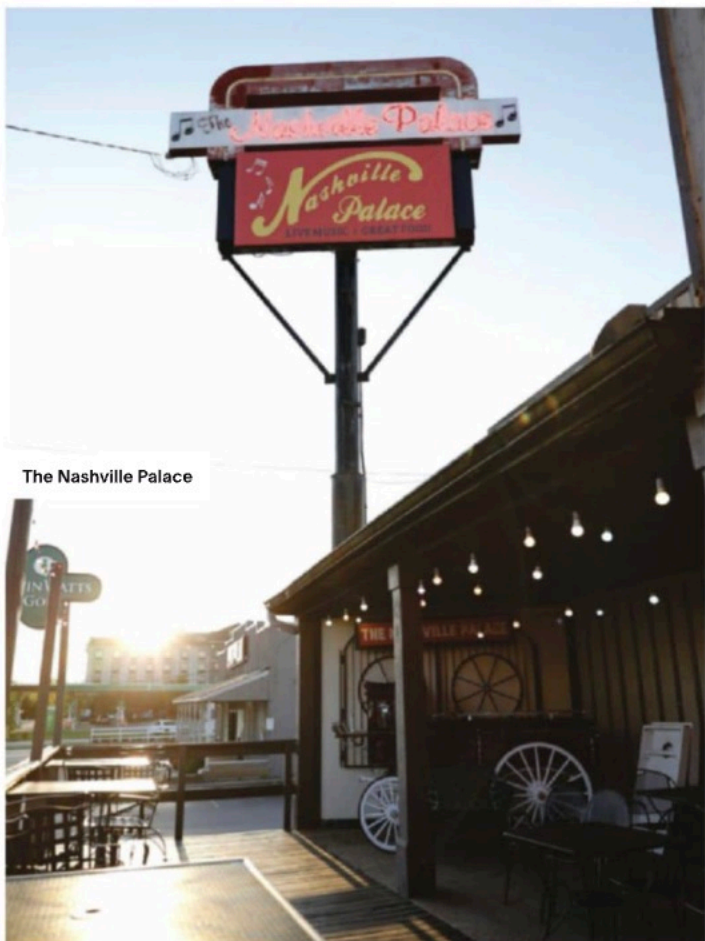
THE NASHVILLE PALACE NASHVILLE

You can fall in love so fast you look up and you've been sucked five feet under the water and can't breathe. This can happen by the ruby light of a giant neon guitar in a honky-tonk bar. In fact, if it is going to happen, that's probably where it'll happen. And it might be—most likely *will be*—with a hot-pantsed member of the Nashville Palace Angels, the in-house dance team at the Nashville Palace, as both of you line-dance and she whispers the steps so that you can keep up. I have no doubt that there are many love stories whose first lines (and probably last lines) were written during the nearly fifty years that the Nashville Palace has been open. Mine took place late last summer when I was new

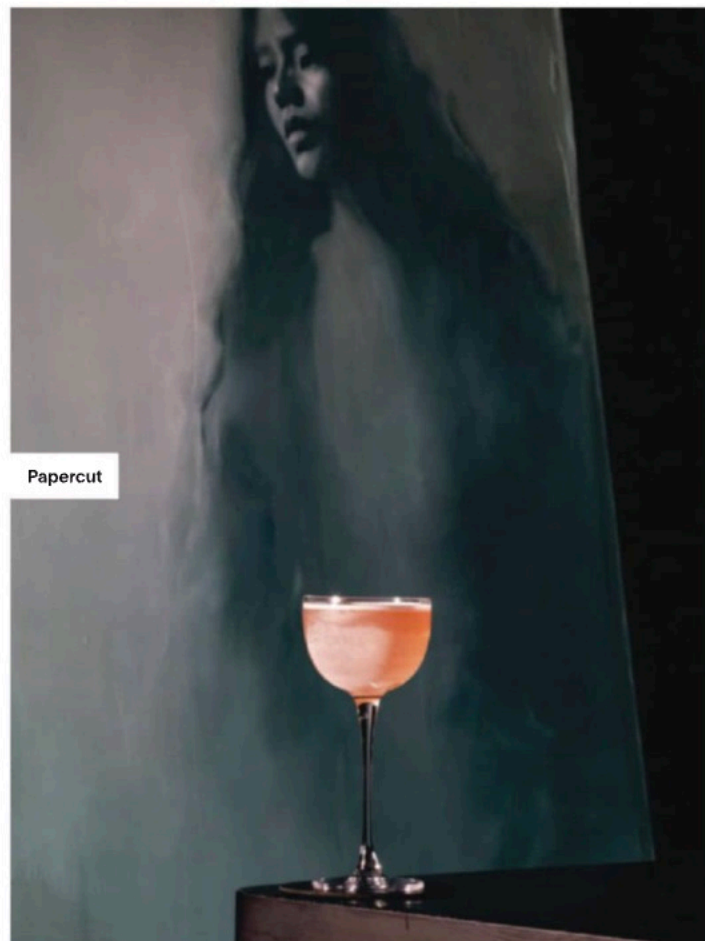
in town and needed a place to move my body in unison to music with others, preferably with whiskey to sustain me. And it lasted all of Elle King's "Ex's & Oh's," approximately four minutes. But not all love stories are long. That don't make them untrue. And not every bar can be as perfect as the Nashville Palace. In fact, few are. —*Joshua David Stein, author of cookbooks and children's books*

PAPERCUT AUSTIN

Some people you just don't forget. Consider Dragan, a muscly and mustachioed mixologist. Years ago, at a fancy cocktail lounge in Austin, Dragan made me an unforgettable clarified concoction, stirring up a storm behind the bar while chatting me up in his Serbian



The Nashville Palace



Papercut

accent. Years later, when I learned that Dragan had helped open up a new spot called Papercut, I knew where my night would cap. As soon as you step into Papercut, you realize you're not in just another dimly lit drinking den. The space doubles as a sleek contemporary-art gallery that features a rotating roster of artists—mainly local. When the art changes, so does the menu. Except for a few of the mainstays, like the bar's namesake, a bright but boozy mezcal cocktail spiked with Aperol and homemade tangerine liqueur. (It's like if a Paper Plane and a Naked & Famous had a boozy baby.) The potion is served in a coupe cup that gets blast-chilled *à la minute* in six seconds in a fancy CO2 machine from the future. Very cold. Very cool. —Omar Mamoon, *San Francisco-based writer and cookie-dough professional*

RUSSELL'S SEATTLE

With all due respect to the themed bar, the concept bar, and the experiential phenomenological happening in bar form, sometimes what you really want is J. A. B.—*just a bar*. A place that exists without anything in the way of formal artifice or motif, for which there is no competing matrix of credit-card reservations, where one might reasonably hope to watch a ball game of some sort or drink a tallboy or fall into conversation with perfect strangers. Russell's is presently the greatest exemplar I can think of for the J. A. B. anti-phenomenon. This place is chill, sitting unassumingly on the ground floor of an apartment building in the Wallingford neighborhood. But inside, Russell's quietly offers one of the best agave-spirit selections in the American

Pacific Northwest (and a vast raft of whiskey as well), somehow presented with zero pretense, at wildly affordable prices in one- and two-ounce pours. This tension—between a place that's J. A. B. and a place that's a kind of heaven for spirit geeks like myself—feels so deeply resonant and cool to me, and now I will gladly drive an hour or more out of my way to spend more time there. Russell's has a little bit of food (and great tacos on Monday nights), but it isn't a restaurant masquerading as a bar, another increasingly prevalent trope. It's usually pretty busy, you can casually watch sports there on one of the little quiet TVs above the back bar, and every time I go, I meet interesting people. It also has a deep following in the Seattle hospitality industry as a before- or after-shift haunt; I've been sent away with bottles of Underberg from the bar to drop at other joints around

town, which is an incredibly good sign. Sometimes just a bar is just enough.

—Jordan Michelman, *Pacific Northwest-based restaurant critic, James Beard Award winner, and coffee obsessive*

KELLY'S KORNER TAVERN PLACENTIA, CALIFORNIA

I first visited Kelly's Korner Tavern about a decade ago on a mission of mercy. My cousin Vic texted me in our group chat, dubbed "Mexiclan," which consists of my favorite cousins, my brother, and our mutual best friends. "Gus," Vic said, "they're killing us. We need you." Vic was referring to the smug trivia team that kept kicking his team's ass. I, the nerd of our Mexiclan since kindergarten, was being called up as a ringer.



TARIFF-FREE

Bottles

Our country has always borrowed from cuisines around the world and tweaked them into something altogether American. Think Pennsylvania Dutch, Tex-Mex, Asian fusion. Who could stop us from doing the same with alcohol? Enter the three spirits below. Their styles may have originated elsewhere, but they were crafted right here in the States with the gritty passion characteristic of the American dream. Toss back a couple rounds and you might start to believe in it too. —Chris Hatler

T'Maro Amaro

Coachella Valley, California



Please, please, please—drink this luscious spirit neat. Other ingredients would simply ruin it. Bright licorice flavor. Earthy

date sweetness. Complexly entwined in a way that, dare I say, Italian amari can't match. (\$55)

Kato Sake Works Nama

Brooklyn, New York



Juicy yet delicate. So compulsively sippable you might want to keep it to yourself. But if there's one thing Americans can

learn from the Japanese, it's how to share. Never fill your own glass; only fill those of companions. Don't fret. The spirit of giving always comes back around. (\$35)

Kingbird Aperitif

Finger Lakes, New York



Instructions for a simple yet elegant cocktail party: Put this bittersweet American vermouth, a bottle of sparkling water, and a lemon

on the table. Pour, splash, and twist, respectively, into however many glasses. Ice, if you like. Stir, if you must. Just don't overthink it. (\$32)

I showed up to a sports bar that looked like a scene from one of Pat McAfee's wet dreams—a neighborhood local in the white part of an Orange County suburb, lit inside almost exclusively by about thirty flat-screen televisions. Craft-beer taps hung from the ceiling. An unused dartboard sat on the wall next to the men's bathroom, which looked like a cleaned-up version of the one in *Trainspotting*. I saw pictures and jerseys of local sports heroes—the 2002 World Series Angels, Cal State Fullerton's men's baseball squad, El Dorado High.

We finished second that first time I went. We destroyed the competition the next time, a few weeks later. Since then, our "Who, Mortimer" team has dominated Kelly's trivia nights—but we don't dominate like we used to. Weekly visits turned into monthly ones. The pandemic happened. Marriages, children, and careers happened. Nevertheless, little has changed at Kelly's Korner in the past decade. Better-than-average sports-bar food: giant hamburgers, fine sandwiches, carne asada nachos with house-made salsa that legit scorches. A large menu of suds in mugs or pitchers that I never partake in because I don't drink beer. Kelly's always has a box of chilled Underberg bitters for me and me alone.

Time has not helped Kelly's, alas. Closing time is now 11:00 most nights instead of the early hours, and trivia night isn't as crowded as it used to be. We regulars have aged, and Gen Z isn't coming in, because they don't drink and don't like trivia or sports or much of anything that involves actual community. But all these years later, trivia master Dougie Craig looks as young as his barbs remain sharp. Oh, and the real MVP of Kelly's is Punk in Dribuck, the only team that's lasted as

long as we have. We take turns kicking each other's ass. Yeah, we're lucky if we get to Kelly's four times a year, but it will forever remain our Avalon. *We did it, Vic.* —Gustavo Arellano, Los Angeles Times columnist and author of *Taco USA*

CODY'S PUBLIC HOUSE CHICAGO

Back in mid-February, the icy vise grip that winter has on Chicago took a few days off and the city saw temps in the 50s and 60s. This is beyond rare. It felt like a weather pardon from the governor. Everyone I know hustled to Cody's Public House in Lakeview at 4:00 P.M. I texted two friends to meet, but three other people we knew appeared by telepathy alone. That's Cody's. You go when you hear the call. There's always at least one guy in a suit. There

are other guys in raggedy jeans and T-shirts. My friend Brant showed up in golf clothes, sunglasses not on eyes, the golfer forehead tan line. That's what Brant always wears.

Cody's appears to be a standard corner pub, though it's got a sweet beer garden out back. But it's not a pub or a beer garden. It's a *neighborhood* bar. Everyone knows when to go, and they get there right on time—even, or especially, before the workday is over. Back in February, for just a few hours we were all on vacation, storing up all the warmth we'd need for the rest of the Chicago winter, which was for damn sure coming back. Eventually summer does arrive, and that's when Cody's hits its stride, everyone with a pint in hand and the Cubbies on TV. But a beer garden in February, in Chicago, is a beautiful thing. —Paul Pabst, executive producer of *The Dan Patrick Show* 📺



Cody's Public House