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# THE New REIGN

A wave of cocktail bars  
is making sure you'll never be  
drinkless *IN SEATTLE*.

Story by *Paul Clarke* // Photos by *Lara Ferroni*



Evan Martin behind the  
marble at Ba Bar.



# Forget about the rain.

Also, forget about the Space Needle, and Puget Sound, and the hulking dome of Mount Rainier, too. Ignore Seattle's history as a brawling timber town and seaport, its fortunes made from selling shovels to Yukon-bound miners, airplanes to globe-circling airlines, and high-tech wizardry and lattes to, well, everyone.

Yes, if you're a fan of good cocktails and you find yourself in this drizzly, moss-covered metropolis, you can forget about pretty much everything else as long as you remember one thing: while its craft-cocktail establishment was once defined by a single bar, Seattle is now embracing the cocktail with the same fervor it formerly lavished on Gore-Tex and grunge.

Seattle is home to Zig Zag Café, which, beginning nearly 10 years ago, grew into prominence and earned acclaim as one of the world's best cocktail bars. But in recent years, Zig Zag has been joined by other establishments that have taken the city's ever-creative approach to food and drink in new and unexpected directions. Today, Seattle's cocktail creativity can be found in its most venerated restaurants and in jeans-and-sneakers neighborhood bars, in speakeasy-style matchbox venues and in cafés serving oysters or Vietnamese street food. For longtime observers of Seattle's cocktail culture, this evolution is particularly welcome. "Seattle's cocktail scene very much has a garage-band, startup-style atmosphere, with people doing some very interesting concepts, often on a shoestring budget," says Robert Hess. A founder of the Museum of the American Cocktail and host to a cocktail-oriented series on Small Screen Network, Seattleite Hess has kept close tabs on his city's cocktail scene for more than a decade. "The quality of cocktails has greatly improved over the years, and bartenders are taking more pride in the craftsmanship of the drinks they make."

## TOP OF THE TOWN

Seattle's downtown area is home to some of its most notable cocktail establishments, but to fully appreciate the city's bibulous side, it's best to be a little adventurous. Capitol Hill is one of the city's oldest and most densely populated neighborhoods; not surprisingly, it's also home to a growing number of quality-minded cocktail bars. One that exemplifies the city's mix of casual comfort with serious drinks is Liberty, on 15th Avenue. The bar's well-loved couches and no-pretense atmosphere underscore Liberty's identity as a neighborhood bar, but co-owners Andrew Friedman and Keith Waldbauer have also made Liberty a destination for the cocktail-curious, with a menu that's well-considered without being fussy, featuring originals, such as the Cognac-based Emerald City Cocktail with green Chartreuse and two types of bitters, to a selection of barrel-aged cocktails, such as a cachaça Old Fashioned and the aquavit-based Trident.

Capitol Hill's cocktail credentials were further cemented in 2009, when Tavern Law opened on 12th Avenue. This Prohibition-style establishment with a small faux-speakeasy bar upstairs is owned by Brian McCracken and Dana Tough, chefs whose first venue, Spur Gastropub, helped solidify the downtown area's cocktail scene. Tavern Law's extensive menu of classics, tiki drinks and inspired originals, such as the rye-based Tiger's Paw with allspice, ginger and Peychaud's bitters, has firmed up the foundation of the city's drinks culture.



## COOPERSMITH

The flavors of gin and French apple brandy have a remarkable affinity, and this rich, complex combination is typical of the intensely flavorful spirit-forward cocktails served at Zig Zag Café. Meletti Amaro is available at well-stocked liquor stores, and online at [drinkupny.com](http://drinkupny.com).

1 ½ oz. dry gin  
1 oz. Calvados  
¾ oz. Carpano Antica  
¼ oz. Meletti Amaro  
2 dashes Regans' orange bitters  
Ice cubes

Tools: mixing glass, bar spoon, strainer  
Glass: cocktail  
Garnish: orange twist

Combine ingredients in mixing glass and fill with ice. Stir well until chilled, about 30 seconds. Strain into a chilled glass; twist orange peel over drink and use as garnish.

Erik Hakkinen  
✿ Zig Zag Café



The many faces of Canon,  
the new bar from Jamie  
Boudreau (pictured right).







The light-filled Sambar, manned by Jay Kuehner (pictured right)





## BENEDITO

Sambar barman Jay Kuehner uses fresh fennel from a wild plant growing outside the bar's patio door to flavor honey and mix it with aged cachaça and lemon in this deep-flavored cocktail.

1 ½ oz. aged cachaça  
½ oz. fennel-infused honey syrup  
½ oz. Bénédictine  
½ oz. fresh lemon juice  
1 dash Angostura orange bitters  
Chilled brut sparkling wine (Cremant d'Alsace works best)  
Ice cubes

Tools: shaker, strainer, fine-mesh strainer  
Glass: flute  
Garnish: lemon twist, fennel flower

Combine everything except wine in a shaker and fill with ice. Shake well until chilled, about 10 seconds. Double-strain into a chilled flute. Top with chilled sparkling wine. Garnish.

**FENNEL-INFUSED HONEY SYRUP:** Add 8 Tbsp. chopped fennel tops and fronds to 1 cup honey and 1 cup water in a small saucepan over medium heat; let simmer for 5 minutes, then remove from heat. Let mixture rest for 10 minutes, return to medium-high heat. Once the honey mixture reaches a boil, remove from heat and let cool. Let the mixture steep overnight in the refrigerator; strain and bottle for use.

Jay Kuehner  
✿ Sambar

Another speakeasy-style bar, Knee High Stocking Co., also opened in 2009, serving well-honed classics to the handful of devoted drinkers who can fit in its intimate space. Other bars and restaurants have left their own imprint on Capitol Hill's liquid identity: Barrio introduced inventive tequila cocktails to the thirsty neighborhood; at the contemporary Italian café Artusi, bartenders push the envelope with ingredients such as grappa, black-currant vinegar and salted moscovado syrup; and at Sun Liquor and its sibling bar, Sun Liquor Distillery, drinkers will soon be able to order a Southside made with gin from the distillery-bar's own still, situated behind a glass wall behind the bar.

Capitol Hill's already robust mixological microcosm gained more gravitas in September, with the opening of Canon less than two blocks south of Tavern Law. Co-owned by Jamie Boudreau, who sparked Seattle's cocktail scene to life in 2006 as the opening bar manager of the much-lauded Vessel, Canon has the glamour of a circa-1900 drinking palace, with glittering chandeliers and an antique armoire just inside the front door (the décor is also cocktail chic meets cocktail geek: the bartop and tables were stained using cases of Angostura bitters). The menu is a hardbound tome of around 100 drinks, most adopted from vintage bar guides, and Boudreau staffed Canon with some of the city's most sought-after bartenders, including former Tavern Law bar manager Nathan Weber. Although is plenty ambitious in its cocktail offerings, Boudreau says he's aiming for a casual, timeless atmosphere for the bar, so that everyone feels welcome. "We're just trying to be a neighborhood bar that's doing good stuff," Boudreau says. "We want to give people complex drinks in a way that's timely and fun."

## BOOMING BERG

As Capitol Hill was forming its own cocktail galaxy, a similar phenomenon was underway in Ballard, a markedly different neighborhood on the northwest side of Seattle. Long dominated by the fishing industry and occupied by immigrants from Norway and Sweden and their descendants, Ballard has recently experienced a marked cultural evolution.

Situated beneath Le Gourmand, a fine-dining institution on a residential street, Sambar is a tiny slice of France in a Scandinavian neighborhood. For more than seven years, Jay Kuehner has developed Sambar's adventurous cocktail menus and crafted its distinctive drinks with an emphasis on small-batch spirits, fresh and seasonal ingredients, and complex, multi-ingredient creations. A summer menu featured drinks made with joven mezcal, grilled watermelon, sage and sherry; for autumn, Kuehner is featuring such drinks as the Benedito with aged cachaça and fennel-infused honey. Kuehner has also mastered the practice of matching disparate ingredients in spur-of-the-moment improvisations. "What Jay does amazingly well, better than maybe anybody else, is to come up with drinks on the fly," says Wendy Miller, creator of a Seattle cocktail culture smartphone application that's an exhaustive guide to the city's best bars. "He has it in his head what flavors go well together, and it doesn't sound like something that should work at all, but it's perfectly dialed in. He's absolutely fearless."

More recent additions in Ballard have given the neighborhood a more diverse mixological identity. Like the neighborhood and the nearby Sons of Norway hall, Copper Gate is emphatically Scandinavian, with a décor notable for its Viking-ship bar and a drinks list that leans heavily on aquavit and food such as gravlax and smørbrød. An additional global touch is lent to Ballard by the Brazilian-themed Paratii Craft Bar, with a menu notable for its cachaça-based originals, such as the Gisele with vermouth and Creole Shrub liqueur and topped with a beer foam.

On Ballard Avenue in the area's downtown district, Bastille Café & Bar serves classically inspired cocktails, such as the Manhattan-esque Darjeeling Express made with a chocolatey amaro and cardamom bitters. Down the street is one of the neighborhood's most celebrated recent arrivals, The Walrus & the Carpenter, a French café-meets-oyster bar where you can chase a dozen Penn Cove oysters with such drinks as the tequila-based Bearded Lady, which is flavored with two types of amari and a smoky single malt.

One of the anchors of Ballard's burgeoning cocktail scene is Moshi Moshi, a Japanese restaurant on Ballard Avenue. Bar manager Erik Carlson returned to his native Seattle three years ago after developing his bartending skills in San Francisco, and he brought home a dedication to small-batch spirits, such as single-village mezcal and Martinique rum, which is reflected in his menu of drinks, such as the Agave Sour with tequila, blackberry and mint; and the Muzzle Flash with bourbon, grapefruit, cinnamon and Cocchi Aperitivo Americano. Since opening the bar at Moshi Moshi in 2008, Carlson says he's seen the cocktail awareness of the neighborhood grow. "We've really seen the community appreciate it," he says. "They come in for dinner and decide to try one of our cocktails; a year later, they're going to Tales of the Cocktail and bringing home bottles of Amer Picon from Europe. People are really branching out, and the community is totally hooked."

## COCKTAIL FEVER

Seattle's mixological metastasis is spreading the art of good drinking throughout the city, and at times the flow takes a surprising direction. At Canlis, one of Seattle's most legendary restaurants and perhaps still its swankiest, bartender James MacWilliams crafts elaborate cocktails using sous vide-infused spirits and housemade vermouths and bitters, and in the South Lake Union area, Mistral Kitchen has been embracing quality cocktails since opening in 2009, serving drinks like the Starboard Light, a tiki classic made with scotch and passionfruit syrup.

While Liberty may have brought the craft-cocktails-in-a-neighborhood-bar vibe to Capitol Hill, they're hardly alone in Seattle. In the quiet Phinney Ridge neighborhood, Oliver's Twist is a casual, mostly-locals spot with a blackboard over the bar featuring favorite drinks of regulars, a list that can include ubiquitous standards alongside cocktails like the Campari-edged Jasmine, and a menu built on classics, such as an Arsenic & Old Lace.

One of the city's more unexpected cocktail venues is Feedback Lounge in West Seattle. Far from the parts of the city frequented by tourists, co-owner Matt Johnson outfitted his laid-back rock 'n roll bar with vintage pin-ball machines, Alice in Chains memorabilia and a giant flat-screen showing Led Zeppelin concert videos, while serving such drinks as the dark and bitter Earl Jam made with walnut-infused bourbon and Ramazzotti amaro, and a Blackberry Bruise with cachaça, tarragon and blackberry shrub.

Seattle's affinity for quality cocktails has even spread to that most challenging of regions—the suburbs, where bars, such as Naga and Lot No. 3 in Bellevue and Trellis in Kirkland, prepare well-honed mixtures using rye whiskey, housemade tinctures and other signature ingredients of typically urban cocktail lounges.

One of the newest places to open in an unexpected location is Ba Bar, on a quiet stretch of 12th Avenue several blocks south of the more vibrant Capitol Hill. Opened in July by longtime restaurateur Eric Banh, Ba Bar's focus is Vietnamese-style street food. Banh matched his kitchen with an inspired cocktail bar helmed by Evan Martin, and Martin's autumn menu features originals, such as the Dizzy Izzy, which combines apple brandy, pineapple syrup and olorosso sherry, and a spicy and bitter Yakima Sling with tequila, cinnamon and grapefruit topped with a hoppy IPA.

## DOWNTOWN DRINKSCAPE

As the flood of fine drink spreads through the city and into the drizzly surroundings, Seattle's central core remains the heart of its cocktail scene. Vessel, which helped fuel Seattle's cocktail boom when it opened in 2006, closed last year, but it's slated to reopen in another downtown location by the end of this year. In 2009, former Vessel bartenders Anu Apte and Zane Harris purchased Rob Roy in the city's Belltown neighborhood. Apte is now the sole owner, and in two years, she has turned the place with a '70s-style basement-lounge décor—replete with black padded bar stools and a reel-to-reel tape player—into one of Seattle's best cocktail bars.

It wasn't easy; prior to Rob Roy's change of hands, the downtown-adjacent Belltown was spiked with energy drinks, flavored vodkas and novelty shots. Apte, with a staff that includes veterans of many of the city's other top bars, transformed Rob Roy without alienating the neighborhood's



## MUZZLE FLASH

This revamped whiskey sour is given additional complexity with a lightly bitter Italian aperitif wine, the spice of cinnamon and the smoke of Islay single-malt.

1 ½ oz. bourbon (Carlson uses Buffalo Trace)  
½ oz. Cocchi Aperitivo Americano  
½ oz. fresh lemon juice  
½ oz. fresh grapefruit juice  
¼ oz. cinnamon syrup  
2 large dashes Islay single malt (Carlson uses Laphroaig 10 year)  
1 dash Angostura bitters  
Ice cubes

Tools: shaker, strainer, fine-mesh strainer  
Glass: coupe  
Garnish: thin strip of orange peel

Combine ingredients in shaker and fill with ice. Shake well until chilled, about 10 seconds; double-strain into a chilled glass. Twist a strip of orange peel over the drink and use as garnish.

**CINNAMON SYRUP:** Use a muddler to crush five cinnamon sticks in a medium saucepan. Add 2 cups of granulated sugar and 1 cup of filtered water. Simmer over medium heat for 15 minutes, stirring frequently. Let cool, then strain; keep refrigerated.

Erik Carlson  
✿ Moshi Moshi







Clockwise from top: Rob  
Roy's Philip Trickey;  
handcarved ice at Rob Roy;  
Sun Liquor's Erik Chapman.





regular visitors and while slipping a few creative cocktails disguised as party shots onto the bar's menu. "When Anu bought Rob Roy and came into Belltown with a serious cocktail program, that was a big deal," Miller says. "Now they have a few shots that are very funny for Belltown, but they're doing one of the best programs in the city."

Apte's transformation of a seasoned local bar into a world-class cocktail destination established a precedent. Vito's, on First Hill just east of downtown, has a history that goes back decades, as evinced by its non-ironic Goodfellas-vibe décor that seems to have barely changed since the lounge's 1953 debut. In 2010, new owners revamped Vito's, hiring bar manager Jared Scarr to develop an innovative menu for the storied lounge. Scarr and bartender Nabil Sherief serve original mixtures, such as the Akimbo, a potent rye-driven drink with a bitter depth from Barolo Chinato and Campari, and lesser-known classics like the Self Starter with gin, apricot liqueur and absinthe.

Sherief also tends bar at Il Bistro, a venerable Italian restaurant semi-hidden beneath Pike Place Market. Headed throughout the 1990s by Murray Stenson, Il Bistro's bar is now under the guidance of former Tavern Law drinks mastermind David Nelson. Less than two blocks away, on a stairway that leads to the Seattle waterfront, Zig Zag Café continues its role as the city's ultimate cocktail bar. Helmed by Murray Stenson for much of the past decade, Zig Zag developed an international reputation not only for cocktail excellence, but for the astonishing selection of spirits and impeccable hospitality. Stenson moved on in

May, but with its bar now staffed by his longtime apprentices Erik Hakkinen and Benjamin Perri, Zig Zag retains its iconoclastic approach, along with its position as one of the world's most impressive cocktail bars. Hakkinen and Perri continue Stenson's model of introducing guests to new spirits, preparing esoteric cocktails from the deepest realms of mixology's back catalog and improvising spirit-forward originals. "Zig Zag hires great people, and they value what they do," says Ted Munat, the Seattle-based author of *Left Coast Libations*, a cocktail guide and homage to West Coast bartenders. "They're unbowed if not totally oblivious to all the various trends; they know that what they do works, and it doesn't mean they're not expanding and always learning new things—they're just doing it on their own terms."

So while you're forgetting about the rain, Mount Rainier and the Space Needle, there's one more thing you should choose to ignore: for a few moments at least, forget about the cocktails. Zig Zag's reputation was largely built in a cocktail shaker, but its enduring legacy is in making guests feel comfortable in a bar—a legacy that's playing out at Rob Roy, Sambar and Moshi Moshi, and at virtually every new addition to Seattle's libational landscape. "This whole thing has nothing to do with the cocktail," says Zig Zag co-owner Kacy Fitch. "It's about making sure your guest has a good time. If that entails educating them about some spirits we have or making some obscure cocktail, we'll do it. We make people feel comfortable—that's what having a bar is all about." ■



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