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LIQUID CULTURE

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ISSUE 19 MAY/JUNE 2009 WWW.IMBIBEMAGAZINE.COM







Story by PAUL CLARKE Photos by STUART MULLENBERG I don't like to take chances. I obsessively research even minor purchases, and the belt-and-suspenders approach to life seems pretty reasonable to me. Which makes it a bit odd that I'm in Las Vegas, where the cacophonous casinos and omnipresent video-poker machines—not to mention the sheer hubristic madness of building a major city in the middle of the Mojave Desert—all contribute to one inarguable truism: This place is all about the gamble. But as I wander the city from the Strip to Fremont Street, taking in everything from the tatty Triple Double Diamond slots at the airport to the high-stakes baccarat tables at the Bellagio, one risk-related question remains paramount in my mind:

What are the chances of getting a decent drink around here?

Until recently, my odds would have been slim to none. While Las Vegas's official symbol could well be a cocktail waitress, and the massive 30-billion-lumen spotlight atop the Luxor could likely be fuelled entirely by the vodka poured in casino bars each day, for much of the city's recent history, well-made cocktails have been a rarity. "It was really an afterthought," says Tony Abou-Ganim, a celebrated bartender and cocktail consultant who lives in Las Vegas.

After working at prominent bars and restaurants in San Francisco and New York for much of the 1990s, Abou-Ganim moved to Las Vegas in 1998 when he was hired by Steve Wynn to create an ambitious cocktail program for bars at the Bellagio. He was dismayed by what he found. "There wasn't a lot of attention focused on the cocktail, other than how fast they could be served and how inexpensively they could be made," he says. "Everything was off the guns"—the automatic devices behind the bar that spurt cola, club soda or a sickly green sour mix at the press of a button—"so the bartenders had become button-pushers more than craftsmen of great cocktails. Artificial mixes, frozen-drink machines, Strawberry Daiquiris in a glass with a big mound of whipped cream and a maraschino cherry—that was kind of the norm."

While the Strip still tends to be full of tourists toting enormous plastic cups filled with slushy Piña Coladas, the bar, so to speak, is slowly rising. During a three-day tour of a number of Las Vegas bars, I discovered that there are good, and occasionally great, things being poured from the shakers of Sin City.

strip search

In the vast, glittery expanse between the Sands and Mandalay Bay are countless bars and nightclubs pouring everything from Bud Light and Vodka Tonics to over-the-top floor-show concoctions prepared by bottle-juggling flair bartenders. Roll the dice for a well-made Manhattan or Negroni, however, and they'll likely come up snake eyes.

"So many people, when they come to Vegas, just want to drink and get drunk," says Sean Bigley, a career bartender who, prior to starting at the Fontana Bar at the Bellagio in 1998, tended bar at the Mirage for several years. "A lot of people don't really care," he says. "You try to persuade them to have a good cocktail, and that's where the challenge comes in—but once they have it, they love it."

Not content to simply churn out assembly-line drinks, Bigley has been a driving force for quality in Las Vegas bars, founding the Ultimate Bar Chef website to support excellent mixology and competing in cocktail competitions with drinks such as the By Any Other Name, which combines Hendrick's gin with Sence Rose Nectar, a product made from Bulgarian rose petals by a company based in the Las Vegas area. (While the drink is not listed on the Fontana's menu, Bigley prepares them for guests seeking something special.)

Part of the challenge of finding a quality cocktail on the Strip is due to the sheer scale of the bar scene. "A place like the Bellagio does 25,000 drinks in a 24-hour period," Abou-Ganim says. With these kinds of numbers, it can be virtually impossible to serve fresh-squeezed lemon or lime juice in cocktails such as the Cable Car (spiced rum, curaçao, lemon sour), one of Abou-Ganim's originals that's now a feature at many Las Vegas bars. Instead, some casino bars have come to utilize a locally produced sour mix called Rocky's that combines fresh lemon and lime juices with sugar syrup, which Abou-Ganim says helps keep the juice from oxidizing and gives it a longer lifespan behind the bar. While this flash-pasteurized, pre-mixed ingredient-which began appearing in Las Vegas bars around the time Abou-Ganim launched the cocktail program at Bellagio-may fall short of the expectations of cocktail purists, it's helped make local cocktails more consistent, and Abou-Ganim says it's a significant step up from what was being used a decade ago, and what still appears in many Vegas bars. "This is the next

Bartender Sean Bigley at the Bellagio.

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best thing to squeezing [fresh lemons], and it's 150 times better than the limegreen stuff that's coming off the gun," he says.

This increasing emphasis on freshness has helped elevate the cocktail quality at most casino bars, and creative drinks are increasingly easy to find. Bartenders, such as Patricia Richards at the Wynn, and bar consultants, such as Abou-Ganim, Francesco LaFranconi and Bobby Gleason, are working to raise customers' expectations of what to find at casino bars. Across from the Fontana Bar, the Petrossian Bar at the Bellagio features cocktails such as the Aperitivo, which mixes Plymouth gin with grapefruit, pineapple and the Italian bitter liqueur Aperol. Down the street at the MGM Grand, the San Francisco-themed Nobhill Tavern offers a North Beach Negroni, prepared with the Bay Area's own Junipero gin; a Gin Bramble, a variation of a drink created by London bartender Dick Bradsell that combines blackberries with Boodles gin, lemon sour and crème de cassis; and a classic straight-up Daiquiri made with 10 Cane rum and fresh-squeezed lime juice.

While at times the quest to serve well-made drinks to the crowds thronging Las Vegas casinos can seem like swimming upstream, Bigley says he's seen a significant change over the course of his career. "Especially in last four or five years, people have really started coming around and looking for good cocktails," he says. "Before, everybody drank a Jack and Coke; now, people are ordering higherend spirits, and they expect to see fresh lime squeezed into a Margarita."

pocket aces

Before the Bellagio, before the Mirage, even before the Flamingo, there was Glitter Gulch. This cluster of clubs and proto-casinos—including Binion's Horseshoe, the Eldorado Club and the Golden Nugget—sprang up around Fremont Street in downtown Las Vegas beginning in the 1930s. (Although "Glitter Gulch" has long since faded as a nickname for the area, it lives on as the name for, what else, a downtown strip club.) While downtown Las Vegas is now overshadowed by the megacasinos that line the Strip, perhaps the most ambitious bar in the city is not in one of the massive hotels, but instead is almost hidden away on a side street near the expansive pedestrian mall dubbed the Fremont Street Experience: the Downtown Cocktail Room.

Opened in 2007 by owner Michael Cornthwaite, the Downtown Cocktail Room is Las Vegas's best shot at world-class mixology. Under the guidance of bar manager George Austin Sproule, Downtown has an approach to drinks unlike almost any other place in the city: The house cocktails lean toward complexity and nuance, and most citrus juice is squeezed to order for cocktails like the classic Pegu Club and the gin-based Cat's Pajamas, made with Campari and Chartreuse. The small bar, separated by curtains from the dark lounge area, features a glass absinthe fountain and seven types of absinthe, and it has what is in all likelihood the only Kold-Draft ice machine in the city.

With its off-the-beaten-path location, subdued lounge environment and demure exterior—access is through an unmarked steel door that appears to be part of the outside wall—the bar attracts primarily a local clientele, and the atmosphere is sedate and hip, a vivid contrast to the aggressively up-tempo atmosphere found in many Vegas clubs. "Most of the tourists who come in are escorted by locals," says Sproule, who hopes to make the bar a destination for out-of-towners as well. "We fill in a lot of missing pieces in the Las Vegas market, and I think we're becoming more of a spot that people are talking about."

Sproule formerly worked at another downtown cocktail destination, Sidebar. With muted lighting and intricate wood details, Sidebar has an aesthetic not unlike that of vintage bars in Los Angeles or San Francisco (though, as with most places in the city, in-bar video poker machines are ubiquitous). The cocktail menu features classics, such as Sidecars, Negronis and Hemingway Daiquiris that are occasionally ambitious, if not always perfectly executed.



cat's pajamas

Downtown Cocktail Room bar manager George Austin Sproule created this drink for a friend's dinner party; it went over so well that he took it to work, where it became one of the bar's signature cocktails.

1 oz. gin
1 oz. Campari
1/2 oz. green Chartreuse
1/2 oz. fresh-squeezed orange juice
1/4 oz. real maple syrup (Sproule uses the more flavorful Grade B)
Ice cubes
Tools: shaker, strainer
Glass: cocktail
Garnish: flamed orange peel (see page 76 for instructions)

Combine ingredients in a shaker and fill with ice. Shake for 10 seconds, strain into chilled glass and garnish.

George Austin Sproule, Downtown Cocktail Room, Las Vegas



ANDRE'S RESTAURANT & LOUNGE

Monte Carlo Resort & Casino, 3770 Las Vegas Blvd.; 702-798-715; andrelv.com

CRAFTSTEAK

MGM Grand Hotel & Casino, 3799 Las Vegas Blvd. S.; 702-891-7318; craftrestaurant.com

DOWNTOWN COCKTAIL ROOM

111 Las Vegas Blvd. S.; 702-880-3696; downtownlv.net

FONTANA BAR & LOUNGE Bellagio, 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. S.; 702-693-7089;

bellagio.com

FRANKIE'S TIKI ROOM

1712 W. Charleston Blvd.; 702-385-3110; frankiestikiroom.com

FREAKIN' FROG / WHISKY ATTIC 4700 S. Maryland Pkwy.; 702-597-9702; freakinfrog.com

NORA'S CUISINE

6020 W. Flamingo Rd., #10; 702-873-8990; norascuisine.com

NOBHILL TAVERN

MGM Grand Hotel & Casino, 3799 Las Vegas Blvd. S. 702-891-7337; mgmgrand.com

PETROSSIAN BAR

Bellagio, 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. S.; 702-693-6163; bellagio.com

PICASSO

Bellagio, 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. S.; 702-693-7223; bellagio.com

POUR 24

New York New York Hotel & Casino 3790 Las Vegas Blvd. S.; 800-689-1797; nynyhotelcasino.com

SIDEBAR 201 N. 3rd St., 702-259-9700; sidebarlv.com

TRIPLE 7 RESTAURANT AND MICROBREWERY Main Street Station Casino, Brewery Hotel #200 N. Main St., 702-387-1896; mainstreetcasino.com While there are sure bets in Las Vegas, there are also long shots with excellent payoffs. One such winner is in a strip mall in central Vegas: Nora's Cuisine. In this unlikely setting—a mom-and-pop Italian restaurant with the smell of garlic in the air and a lounge combo in the corner on a Friday night—some of the city's most engaging cocktails are being prepared at a bar whose ambitious program was developed by longtime bar manager Gaston Martinez. Martinez, who left Nora's in late 2008 to become a national brand ambassador for Milagro Tequila, says it's precisely because Nora's is a small enterprise serving locals that its bartenders were able to create a drinks list that features contemporary cocktails like the bourbon-based Bluebird Creek and the yuzu-laced Pisco Blast, as well as classics, such as a Vesper and a Clover Leaf. "People aren't demanding when they come to Vegas," he says. "The big corporations are like, 'If we can get away with beer and shots, why do a cocktail program?' At these small places, though, we have full control, and locals demand good product—just as they do in any city."

island time

While once home to Polynesian palaces, such as the Aku Aku, which served exotic drinks at the Stardust in the 1960s and '70s, Las Vegas has been without a full-blown tiki bar for years. This all changed last December with the arrival of Frankie's Tiki Room, on West Charleston Boulevard about three miles from the Strip. A legendary dive bar for decades, Frankie's was purchased by Vegas nightlife legend P Moss (who also owns the infamous Double Down Saloon) and Chris Andrassay, and now features a Polynesian-themed interior created by legendary tiki designer Bamboo Ben, as well as a drink menu that draws heavily on the work of exotic-drink historian Jeff "Beachbum" Berry and an ingredient list that includes fresh-squeezed juices and house-made syrups, such as the lime-and-clove-flavored falernum.

For bar manager Allison Hartling, who worked with the new owners on the concept for Frankie's makeover, the decision to go tiki made perfect sense. "There's no other tiki bar in Vegas," says Hartling, who is married to co-owner Andrassay. "And all of us love vintage Vegas from the '50s and '60s, so it all came together." A veteran of casino bars, such as Rum Jungle at Mandalay Bay, Hartling says the smaller-scale approach at Frankie's allows her to fully represent the tiki tradition. "I like the personal touch of it; Rum Jungle was such a high-volume bar and restaurant, you didn't have time to really craft a cocktail for somebody," she says. At Frankie's, the bar's modest size and focused scope allow bartenders to employ that one-on-one creative approach. "That ties into tiki as well, and the time period when it was at its peak. It really was about making one person a great drink, every time."

Alongside tiki classics, such as the Navy Grog and the Zombie, Frankie's serves original drinks, such as the Thurston Howl, a potent mix of spirits and juices that's spiced with cinnamon and ginger. (Typically served in standard glasses, many of Frankie's house drinks can be ordered in custom-made tiki mugs to take home for an additional price.) With a rum-rich Murky Lagoon on the bar in front of me and snippets from *Bikini-a-Go-Go* playing on the flat-screen behind the bartenders, I feel right at home in this island oasis in the middle of the Mojave.

While progress may be slow and Las Vegas may still lag behind some cocktail capitals, there's a definite desire and a momentum, both on and off the Strip, in the direction of quality. "I'd say fresh cocktails are now more the norm than a novelty," Abou-Ganim says. "There's still a long way to go in Las Vegas when you compare it to someplace like New York or San Francisco, but I'm waiting for the next evolution in Las Vegas. I sure hope I'm part of it."

> Get the recipe for Sean's Bigley By Any Other Name cocktail: IMBIBEMAGAZINE.COM/RECIPES



thurston how

Bartenders at Frankie's Tiki Room make this house drink with homemade cinnamon and ginger syrups and garnished with a "flag" made of a pineapple slice and cherry speared on a cocktail pick.

1 oz. Appleton Special rum
1/2 oz. brandy
1/2 oz. Tanqueray Rangpur gin
1/4 oz. grapefruit juice
1/4 oz. cinnamon syrup (see below)
1/2 oz. ginger syrup (see below)
2 oz. papaya nectar
2 oz. pineapple juice
lce cubes
Tools: shaker
Glass: highball or tiki mug
Garnish: pineapple and cherry flag

Combine ingredients in a shaker and fill with ice. Shake for 10 seconds, pour unstrained into a glass and garnish.

GINGER SYRUP

Combine 1 cup each granulated sugar and water in a saucepan over medium heat. Whisk until sugar is dissolved and mixture comes to a boil. Add 4 ounces chopped ginger and reduce heat; simmer for five minutes, stirring frequently. Remove from heat and cover; let sit for four hours. Strain mixture through a mesh strainer. Keep syrup refrigerated and use while fresh; the ginger flavor will fade within 7-10 days.

CINNAMON SYRUP

Follow instructions for ginger syrup, substituting three lightly crushed cinnamon sticks in place of the ginger.

Allison Hartling, Frankie's Tiki Room, Las Vegas



<image>

thinking outside the cocktail glass

WHILE COCKTAILS ARE A CENTERPIECE of the Las Vegas bar scene, several destinations are worth seeking out for exceptional beer, wine and spirits. Inside the Main Street Station Casino is a beer-drinker's destination: the Triple 7 Restaurant and Brewery. This expansive brewpub features rich, malty Blackchip Porter and mild and drinkable High Roller Gold, along with a rotating tap of brewmaster's specials, such as a bright and hoppy India Pale Ale. There's also good beer to be found on the Strip: Inside the New York New York Hotel & Casino, Pour 24 offers—you guessed it—24 taps featuring American craft beers, such as Alaskan Amber and Big Sky IPA. Even better, it's open 24 hours and is just off the casino floor, so you can wash away the taste of a bad night at the craps table with a Stone **Ruination IPA.**

Oenophiles also have plenty of options in Las Vegas, with an emphasis on "plenty." Several restaurants on the Strip have bottle selections stretching well into the thousands. Aureole at Mandalay Bay features a stainless-steel wine tower with a collection of more than 60,000 bottles, including a rare Millenium Collection with wines from top vintages of Bordeaux houses, such as Lafite and Margaux. At MGM Grand, Craftsteak offers a selection of more than 800 wines (including 58 available by half-bottle). Diners are encouraged to sample the list via sommelier flights; at dinner one night, I went for a selection of wines from Napa-based Darioush, including a honeysuckle-and-melon-tinged 2007 Viognier and a 2005 signature Cabernet that was rich with blackberries and vanilla.

After the meal, though, my eyes strayed in a different direction: toward Craftsteak's incredible collection of more than 150 single-malt whiskies. Served neat or over a single, massive block of ice from a Hoshizaki machine, the Scotches range from basic flights of Glenmorangie and Bowmore to craft whiskies, such as a 30-year-old Deanston and a 35-year-old Bunnahabhain, bottled in 1971. Those celebrating good luck at the blackjack table can settle in for a dram of one of the rarest whiskies in the country: the Macallan 55-year-old, which will set you back \$1,670.

Extraordinary spirits aren't limited to whisky, of course: At the Monte Carlo Hotel & Casino, the French restaurant Andre's boasts an astounding selection of Cognac, Armagnac, Calvados and other spirits, such as a beautiful aged rum from Martinique, Rhum de SA Majeste. "Sometimes you go to a bar in Europe and see a dusty bottle high on a shelf—that's what I'm always looking for," says chef Andre Rochat, who over the past 30 years has amassed a collection that includes more than 150 Cognacs, ranging from contemporary spirits, such as Pierre Ferrand Ancestrale, to older bottlings, such as a Chateau Montifaud from 1904, a Lhéraud Grand Champagne from 1900 and an extensive range of Cognacs from Jacques Hardy, including a bottle of vintage reserve from 1777 priced at \$35,000. Rochat's own house Cognac and Armagnac are available, too, a delicious—and affordable—option for those of us who aren't high rollers.

But for one of the most impressive beer and spirit destinations in Las Vegas, you have to venture far off the Strip to a nondescriptlooking bar near the University of Nevada campus—or, actually, two bars, right on top of each other, both owned by a UNLV professor and both as resolutely devoid of glitz as Strip bars are coated in it. Dark and narrow, the Freakin' Frog boasts a dazzlingly extensive selection of draught and bottled beers. The featured taps may include craft-beer classics, such as Anchor Steam and Chimay Blanche along with seldom-seen draught beers, such as Delerium Tremens Belgian Ale and Sprecher Bourbon Barrel. And the bottled selectionwhich may feature more than 500 beers at a time—is the stuff of legend.

Upstairs from Freakin' Frog, the Whisky Attic features more than 350 whiskies from around the world. Featured bottles include American whiskies, such as the hard-tofind Woodford Reserve four-grain bourbon and both expressions of Charbay whiskey, a limited-release spirit made in California, along with Scotches, such as a 1968 Macallan and a 1967 Highland Park.