

ADVENTURE & TRAVEL



DAVID CHOW FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (6); GETTY IMAGES (POLICE RAID, SPEAKEASY)

Unquenchable Manhattan

The Prohibition era offered illicit fun, and a thirst for it lives on—from secret cellars to flapper parties

BY TONY PERROTTET

I T FELT LIKE a furtive liaison from a vintage film noir. After midnight, downtown Manhattan seemed deserted: I barely saw another soul on the streets as I scurried past the wrought-iron fences of Gramercy Park. When I finally located the awning of the Player's Club, a stately old mansion on the park's south side, a hulking doorman looked me up and down before shouldering open the portals.

But the moment I stepped inside, my night erupted with music and light. Dapper crowds surged up and down the antique stairs, the men dressed in tuxedos with wingtip collars and bow ties, the women in flapper dresses and cascades of feathers. I squeezed my way beneath glittering chandeliers, past oil paintings of long-gone actors, into wood-paneled rooms where musicians were belting out raucous jazz and blues. Bartenders shook up Gin Rickeys, Sazeracs and Mary Pick-fords. The main parlor was packed with swing dancers. I was at a "retro nouveau" Prohibition party, open to anyone who could buy a ticket and a pair of spats or a vintage chemise. The only concession to the 21st century was the absence of smoke.

Manhattan's fascination with the Prohibition era—the period from 1920 to 1933 when the U.S. government issued a nationwide ban on alcohol—seems never-ending. In a city where almost any pleasure is available around the clock, New Yorkers are evidently compelled by a time when fun was forbidden. Those years now inspire a host of parties all over the city evoking the period. For travelers, the events provide access to venues that might otherwise be off-limits, like the members-only Player's Club (a seasonal soiree hosted by Prohibition Productions), or allow a fresh view of classic New York sites. You can find the Jazz Age Lawn Parties on Governors Island, immersive theater pieces about gangland murders in an old bank in Williamsburg, even swing dance parties on the decks of the USS Intrepid aircraft carrier. Meanwhile, a string of historic speakeasies have been reborn as hopping retro bars.

I sidled up to the Players Club bar, ordered a classic Southside (gin, mint, club soda and lemon juice) and decided to immerse my-



self in all things Prohibition. That 13-year period of official austerity is now recalled as a festive golden age.

Although the bright young things in many American cities are fond of '20s style, New York rightfully harbors a genuine Prohibition obsession. Jazz was born in New Orleans but thrived in Harlem, along with Swing and acrobatic dance styles like the Lindy Hop. Once, tens of thousand of speakeasies, bars and clubs selling illegal alcohol operated in the city and stories of hidden tunnels, rooms and chutes are part of its folk mythology.

Even the classiest New York venues cherish their secrets. After the Player's Club, I set out to explore an even more storied Prohibition relic, the '21' Club in Midtown Manhattan, where mayors, socialites and famous artists once came for illicit libations. There used to be 37 speakeasies on this block," said manager Avery Fletcher, as she led me down-

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stairs from the busy bar-restaurant into the kitchen. "It was the wettest block in town." Guests had to present a yellow invitation card to "Jimmy the Doorman" to gain access to 21, where they would be treated to fine wines and champagne smuggled from Europe. "There was no moonshine here, so nobody was getting sick."

With a dramatic flourish, Ms. Fletcher paused in front of a gray-brick wall and produced a menacing 18-inch-long metal skewer. She inserted it into a tiny hole, nearly hidden from the naked eye. With a push, the wall swiveled open to reveal a softly lit cellar, where some 2,000 cases of fine booze were once



hidden away. After an FBI raid in 1930 cost the bar a fortune in confiscated liquor, a top architect was hired to design this secret cellar, which remained in use for decades afterward as a stash for celebrities' wine stocks. It's now been converted into a private dining room, with labeled bottles once owned by Richard Nixon, Sammy Davis Jr. and Elizabeth Taylor tucked into niches along the walls.

The '21' Club's downtown counterpart is the William Barnacle Tavern in the East Village. "While the mayor was drinking uptown at the '21' Club, the city councilors were drinking down here," explained the owner, Lorcan Otway. Al Capone was a regular at the once-bustling underground jazz club, which hosted bands, dancing and all-night cavorting. Though quieter now, it's just as atmospheric. Mr. Otway, who inherited the bar from his father and wears a vintage three-piece suit, gave me a hard hat so we could clamber through a smuggling tunnel to the bunkerlike basement. There, under a bare bulb, the original safe from the '20s sits with its door forced open. He remembers as a child seeing the previous owner remove \$2 million from it in gold certificates. Mr. Otway has set up the Museum of the American Gang-



HAUTE HOCH Clockwise from top: A '20s-themed Shanghai Mermaid party at the Django bar; the Red Room's Fallen Angel cocktail; Lorcan Otway, owner of William Barnacle Tavern; the historic bar at '21' Club.

ster upstairs from the bar in homage to the period, when competing Jewish, Italian and Irish gangs roamed the Lower East Side. The two rooms are filled with mobsters' portraits, grisly photos of corpses riddled with bullets and relics like handmade "automatic shotguns." Despite Prohibition's dark side, he said, it ironically also opened up society, allowing women, for example, to frequent bars for the first time. "In the 1920s, a lot of people felt disempowered by the government," he said. "But then they realized that beating the law was fun. It's no surprise that the song 'Let's Misbehave' was such a hit."

Other Prohibition sites have also returned to their boozy roots. A few blocks from William Barnacle, I dropped by the KGB Red Room, a remodeled art-deco enclave at the top of a creaking set of wooden stairs—apparently, Lucky Luciano ran the Palm Court casino in the same building. In the Red Room, a monthly absinthe party called the Green Fairy was in full swing. As bartenders dripped the potent spir-its over sugar, I ran into Don Spiro, the co-founder of *Zelda* magazine, dedicated to the '20s revival. He argued that the Jazz Age is far easier to relate to than previous historical periods. "It was the first truly recorded history," he said. "We can see pictures of what people looked like, see movies of what they did and hear recordings of how they sounded. We will never hear how Mozart played. But we can hear how Louis Armstrong played trumpet and how Cab Calloway sang,

NIP AND TUCK // '20S-THEMED HIDE-HOLES IN NYC

For a wide range of Prohibition-era events in New York, check thisweekinswingnyc.wordpress.com. On the high end, the '21' Club has its \$42 prix fixe lunch, and if the restaurant isn't busy, ask your waiter about the secret wine cellar (21club.com). For a vision of Manhattan straight out of a period film, try the **Rainbow Room's** jazz brunch, complete with live band and revolving dance floor (rainbowroom.com). The 1930 **Pierre Hotel** hosts live jazz in their art deco Two E Bar on weekend evenings (thepierreny.com). **Prohibition Productions** throws weekly swing dance parties, and events at unique venues (prohibitionproductions.com). Most attendees don period dress at the monthly **Shanghai Mermaid** parties (shanghai-mermaid.com). The **New York Hot Jazz Fest** celebrates benchmarks like the 100th anniversary of the first jazz record (nyhotjazzfest.com). At **William Barnacle Tavern**, you'll find a busted safe in the basement and the Museum of the American Gangster upstairs (museumoftheamericangangster.org). The most imaginative addition to the retro bar scene is **BlackTail**, near Battery Park (blacktailnyc.com). A bit older but also fun is the **Raines Law Room** in Chelsea (raineslawroom.com). **KGB's Red Room**, in the East Village, hosts live jazz and a monthly absinthe party (redroomnyc.com). Former speakeasy **Chumley's** reopened in the West Village last year as an upscale eatery (chumleysnewyork.com). Annual events, worth planning a trip to the city around, include the **Jazz Age Lawn Party** on Governors Island every summer (jazzagelawnparty.com) and the **Great Gatsby Party** in the former bank Capitale in darkest winter (thegreatgatsbyparty.com).

just like it was yesterday."

The clandestine nature of the era also still appeals: The more furtive the venue, the better, it seems. To visit the Monday night swing party in the Back Room in the Lower East Side, I descended an unmarked stairway, followed an underground passageway to the entrance, where I gave a password (gleaned from a Facebook page) through a grille, before being admitted into a softly lit world of velvet lounge chairs and erotic oil paintings. In the '20s, this was the speakeasy "backroom" of Ratner's Deli and a hangout for Jewish underworld figures such as Meyer Lansky and Bugsy Siegel. Cocktails are still served in tea cups and saucers, as they were in the day.

Then Michael Katsobashvili, founder of the New York Hot Jazz Festival, took me to Iguana Restaurant and Dance Lounge, a cheesy-looking Mexican eatery on a generic Midtown street. I began to wonder if success in re-creating the free-wheeling spirit of the 1920s depended less on antique locations than on a state of mind—a liberated, improvised creativity that has always infiltrated the city.

"This is a postmodern speakeasy," the Russian-born impresario assured me. "It's hidden in plain sight." The moment we got upstairs, I saw what he meant. The dozen members of the band Vince Giordano and the Nighthawks were dressed to the nines and blasting jazz through vintage megaphones to a crowd that included comedian Mel Brooks. "Who would imagine a scene like this on top of a Mexican restaurant in Midtown?" said Mr. Katsobashvili. Not me, for one. It was an encouraging thought. Somehow, the defiant Prohibition spirit will always survive.

THE DRY SEASON // MILESTONES IN THE PROHIBITION ERA—FROM THE FIRST SIGN OF RESTRICTIONS TO FULL REPEAL

1893

Anti-Saloon League founded in Ohio; temperance lobby gains traction.

1896

March 23 Raines Law passes in New York state, imposing restrictions on liquor consumption, including a ban



Artwork at '21' Club.

on Sunday alcohol sales except in hotels.

1918

November 11 The Great War ends; U.S. gets ready to erupt into a festive frenzy.

1919

January 16 The killjoy reaction begins: 18th Amendment

banning the manufacture and sale of alcohol is ratified by the 36th state, Nebraska, ensuring it will pass into federal law.

October 28 It's official. The National Prohibition Act is ratified.

1920

January 16 Last day of legal alcohol sales causes uproar around the country.



A liquor raid circa 1921.

January 17 Prohibition goes into effect; illegal sales begin immediately. Hit songs include: "How Are You Going to Wet Your Whistle (When the Whole Darn World Is Dry?)"

1925

April 10 "The Great Gatsby" is published. Bootlegging reaches epidemic proportions, fostering U.S. organized crime.



A relic at the Red Room.

1929

October 29 Wall Street Crash heralds the start of the Great Depression, increasing calls for tax revenue from liquor.

1933

March 22 Newly minted President Roosevelt, who promised "repeal" during his campaign, signs Cullen-Harrison Act legalizing low-alcohol beer and wine.



A NYC speakeasy in 1932

December 5 The 21st Amendment repeals Prohibition. Macy's liquor store is mobbed. The date is still celebrated as "Repeal Day" by aficionados.