



DREW SWANTAK/THRILLIST

BY [KEVIN ALEXANDER](#) AND [LIZ CHILDERS](#)

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There are few things better in life than sitting down at a comfortable establishment at the end of a long day of pushing words around the Internet, ordering your first cocktail, watching the bartender skillfully make it with a steady hand, and then taking that first icy, boozy sip. And each of the places on this list would be a damn fine place to end your day.

For the list this year, we did a couple of things differently. For one, we've tightened the list down from [33 last year](#) to 21. We also have tried to diversify the regional makeup of the list to give a broader look at the fantastic cocktails available all around the country. What that really means is: we've been forced to make a lot of hard decisions. Feel free to comment on our poor decision-making skills in the comments, or just sit back and enjoy. Hopefully with a well-mixed drink by your side.



DREW SWANTAK/THRILLIST

NEW YORK, NY

AMOR Y AMARGO

Rather than the precious attitude adopted by most tiny cocktail bars can waver towards, Amor y Amargo has managed to harness the spirit of the American diner. Not the grease-laden air, but the sense of community, the temporary closeness that comes from being physically close to the cook and the person butting elbows with you as you eat eggs. Sother Teague, the bar master, holds comfortable court along the counter, eager to teach and help drinkers explore the bitter palates. Ask for his twist on a Negroni or head during the afternoon for the Double Buzz: there are few better ways to spend a day than working through the coffee cocktail lineup, with drinks like the Flamingo -- a coffee, tequila, Cocchi rosso, and apple bitters concoction that's sure to wake you up.

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CATHERINE OWENS

SOMERVILLE, MA

BACKBAR

It has the whole “Oh, I’m kind of secret” thing going for it, but not in a way that feels anything but natural. After all, it is the bar in the back of Journeyman, so it’s not like they’re trying to hide that fact in its name. It’s also the bar I immediately want to go to whenever I’m home visiting all of my Irish Catholic friends from high school and tire of drinking old cans of Icehouse we found under my mom’s deck.

This summer, it’s got a Queen’s Park Swizzle that is delicious and makes me want to make a joke about English soccer, (I will abstain because I am polite, but just know it would’ve involved a Clint Hill reference), and also, it has the Banana Stand, which has rum, salt, banana, and Cynar, but I mostly just wanted to say that name.



COURTESY OF BAR MARCO

PITTSBURGH, PA

BAR MARCO

Many years ago, on a trip to Pittsburgh, I discovered the glory that is a very newly opened Bar Marco basically by accident. And ever since, I've been praising it in all its glory and watching as it's become a pillar of that city, both for its progressive ways (they pay their kitchen and front of the house a salary, dammit, don't tip them!) and fantastic drinks that I can't mention specifically because it doesn't have a menu. They just want to talk to you about what you like, and then make you the best version of that thing. Oh, and now it has "The Wine Room" where its legend-in-the-making James Beard-nominated chef makes special menus and everyone laughs and laughs and eats and drinks. Get thee to Pittsburgh.





COURTESY OF BEVY BAR/PAULA KIM

HONOLULU, HI

BEVY

Now that we have talented writers on the island penning our Thrillist Honolulu edition, it was inevitable that we'd have our eyes opened to the talented people doing very cool things in the drinking world over there. And so it is with Bevy (Liverpool slang for a drink) and Christian Self, who has proven exceedingly good at marrying the craft cocktail aesthetic with the local Hawaiian flavor, as evidenced by a cobbler using Poha berries and Maui sugar, and adding lemongrass and candied ginger foam into the mix with his Mai Tai. And if that seems too overwhelming for your palate, its gin & tonic, using Old Tom gin, orange & thyme is damn fantastic too.

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COURTESY OF BILLY SUNDAY

CHICAGO, IL

BILLY SUNDAY

Sure, naming a candlelit cocktail den after a prominent Prohibition advocate is clever and all, but a catchy name only gets you so far. Luckily, the libations within take Billy Sunday even further. This is the kind of place where you can take your friend who's a devout spirits geek and watch him nerd out over the esoteric spirits and ingredients while thumbing through *The Goodbook*, a leatherbound tome of rare amari and Scotch (among other things) that wouldn't look out of place in an *Indiana Jones* movie. Of course, it's also the kind of place where you could just as easily take your other friend who "really likes gin & tonics," and watch the proverbial cocktail lightbulb go off in their head as they tip back the Kent, made with Navy Strength gin and house-made tonic along with less-expected appearances from allspice, lemongrass, and cinchona bark.



COURTESY OF DAN BISHOP

MILWAUKEE, WI

BRYANT'S COCKTAIL LOUNGE

Many bars on this list attempt to channel a sense of cocktail history, but few have actually lived it. Bryant's has. A bar since the '30s (and largely unchanged since a 1971 fire nearly took it completely out of commission, necessitating a rebuild), Bryant's lack of a menu for its arsenal of 450-plus cocktails doesn't feel like an inconvenience. It's suggestion that you let the bartenders help you find something you like doesn't feel like hipster preciousness. It just feels right. Of course, if you just want to skip the thinking, drink like a proper Wisconsinite, and down a perfect brandy Old Fashioned (somehow just five bucks during cocktail hour Tuesdays through Thursdays), that's a perfectly defensible way to proceed.



ANDY KRYZA/THRILLIST

PORTLAND, OR

CLYDE COMMON

In a city that blurs the lines between a great restaurant and a great cocktail – Oregon law dictates that liquor-serving bars have to serve food, and standards dictate the food better be good - - Clyde offers up the best of both worlds. The pan-Euro/Asian menu features everything from Filipino comfort to Dungeness crab, but it's barman Jeffrey Morgenthaler's innovative cocktails that made this Ace Hotel-inhabiting spot famous. Case in point: the barrel-aged Negroni, a take on the classic that sits in a bourbon barrel for three months before hitting your glass. Throw in a small-batch take on the Old Fashioned and other spins on favorites, and it's hard to beat Clyde... though if you want to dive deeper, hit up Pepe le Moko, Morgenthaler's speakeasy underneath Clyde where they do wonderful things with drinks normally reserved for bowling alleys. Which is to say, you'll get the fanciest damned Long Island you've ever had.



ELEANOR LONARDO

SEATTLE, WA

DAMN THE WEATHER

It feels a little strange that a place known for its food (special on the chalkboard on my last visit: fried tripe, tomatillo broth & a fried egg) with a list only seven cocktails deep would be amongst the best cocktail bars in the country. But the creativity of the cocktails and the quality and skill with which they're made -- be they an Apple Old Fashioned with Calvados and gin, the Despite the Weather (cachaca, dry vermouth, lime, and basil syrup), or the peculiar and addictive/refreshing special of the day made with pisco, passion fruit, lime, and tomato water -- prove that you don't have to have a 100-deep list in a leatherbound case to prove you can be serious about drinks. Oh, and also: get that tripe.



COURTESY OF JACK ROSE DINING SALOON

WASHINGTON, DC

DRAM & GRAIN

Sure, the whole "speakeasy" trend kind of ran its course, but Dram & Grain took it to a new level when it opened last year beneath all-world whiskey bar Jack Rose, only allowing patrons access via reservations made on burner phones carried by the bartenders. It's gone to a first-come, first-served model Tuesdays through Thursdays (the space seats only 20), but Fridays and Saturdays remain reservation-only, and it's a reservation you want. Why? "Because the drinks!" you probably surmised, as you are a smart reader enjoying an article about outstanding cocktail bars. Take the Ode to Omaha, a rum-based concoction made with blackberry syrup and infused with hickory smoke via a hose that's fed into the spherical flask. It's a drink that looks like a science experiment, but tastes like anything but.



ARNAUD'S RESTAURANT

NEW ORLEANS, LA

ARNAUD'S FRENCH 75

America's cocktail renaissance that started a decade and a half ago may just finally be over, with even the most begrudging of dive bars able to serve a drinkable Old Fashioned, but don't bother telling the French 75 that a renaissance was ever necessary. Within The City that Care Forgot, Chris Hannah and his white-coated staff have preserved a drinking culture that lesser bars let die after the heyday of boozy tinctures. That they're just as comfortable pouring the namesake sweet, yet biting French 75 or beating egg whites into frothy peaks for a Tom and Jerry as they are experimenting with mezcal and tequila is certainly a huge part of it, but the atmosphere and service of the dim, tiled bar make the entire experience a throwback to old-school drinking. That this is just the expected norm for the decades-old bar, and not a planned style speaks the most to just how damn great a place it truly is.



COURTESY OF GEORGE'S KEEP/LINDA ROMERO

SAN ANTONIO, TX

GEORGE'S KEEP

Is it strange that one of the best cocktail bars in San Antonio just happens to be located in Eilan, an interesting combination of luxury residences, business offices, markets, a hotel, and basically a mall less than a mile from Six Flags? Will you even care once you try one of Steve Mahoney's Rural Jurors with white rum, sloe gin, lychee liqueur, orgeat, lime, and Angostura bitters? No. No you will not.





COURTESY OF MICHAEL DAVID ROSE

SAN FRANCISCO, CA

THE INTERVAL

Jennifer Colliau may know more about drinks and their histories than anyone I've ever met. She is the person whom other noted bartenders call up when they want questions answered. She also has put together a menu that also exists as a short story about the history of drinks, and takes you on a bit of a knowledge journey. She's like the Mary Poppins of mixology: she reaches into her bag and oh it's a draught gin & tonic! Or a hot caustic with cinnamon shortbread! Or a Gin Daisy! Or a Wisconsin Old Fashioned! And each of these drinks is impeccable and comes backed by full character development. Honestly, it blows my mind she is not more well known than she is. Oh, and if you have at least four people and go into the little room in the back, it feels like you're drinking on a boat.



COURTESY OF JULIE SOEFER PHOTOGRAPHY

HOUSTON, TX

JULEP

Last year, when we were drinking our way through America's new bars in search of 2014's best, I fell in love with Julep. It wasn't even the drinks that seduced me first. It was the atmosphere, which takes the elements expected in great cocktail bars in NYC or San Francisco and subtly, yet distinctly makes them Southern. Every detail, from the back porch that practically insists that drinkers sit and stay, to the homey lace curtains, hints at a bit of the region's history. And Alba Huerta, Texas's bourbon queen, made her drink menu the grand flourish in this reminiscing. Obviously there are masterful odes to the bar's namesake drink, but the list runs on into a boozy Southern history book with classics born in the region, like the Ramos Gin Fizz, and a seasonal lineup that plays with Southern inspirations. Go this summer for the Saltwater South menu, which dances with the coastal cities, like the Low Country, a drink that incorporates toasted South Carolina rice cream into the cachaca and absinthe mix.



COURTESY OF MARVEL BAR

MINNEAPOLIS, MN

MARVEL BAR

Though we were originally disappointed when we found out this place was NOT going to be a tribute to our favorite superheroes from Alpha Flight (they even had a dude named Northstar!), we felt better again once we tasted the fancified perfection coming out of the basement of Bachelor Farmer. If you're like me, and constantly look for ways to try and drink pine trees, may we suggest the Ebenezer, which comes with pine bud extract, absinthe, fernet, and gin. One will go a long way, friends.



JOSH MEREDITH

LOUISVILLE, KY

META

Meta is a wonderful world of contrasts -- a marble-barred, copper-penny-floored temple of swank drinking lodged next to a strip club. A spot whose duality includes jazz on Thursdays and Wu Tang Wednesdays, and where they once converted their allotment of precious Pappy into lowbrow Jell-O shots. But it's not just bravado and balls that make Meta the best damn cocktail bar in a city that was doing craft cocktails long before they were trendy. The signatures are all grounded in tradition, but with a nice kick in the knickers. Take, for example, The High Pant, which augments some Old Fitzgerald with fernet and ginger to transform the Old Fashioned into something completely new. And hey, with cocktails this good, that strip club next door just keeps getting less lurid by the sip.

f p



COURTESY OF RON MANVILLE

NASHVILLE, TN

THE PATTERSON HOUSE

While Nashville's food and drink scene has undeniably exploded, thanks in huge part to the Goldberg brothers (Catbird Seat, Pinewood Social), when in Music City, we can't break away from The Patterson House, one of their first bars, which they opened in 2009. One of the reasons is the atmosphere and its very strict rules -- don't use your cell phone, and no seat... no drink -- that lets us pretend we're in an old-school gentlemen's club, but one with less grandfatherly white dude and far better drinks. Oh, and those drinks: the list changes quarterly, but it always includes house-made syrups and tinctures and essences. And don't sleep on its tater tots that come with a side of horseradish-dill-crème fraîche and have developed a following all their own.





COURTESY OF JOHN KWIATKOWSKI

DETROIT, MI

SUGAR HOUSE

One of the many reasons Sugar House in the Motor City continues to stay on our list year after year, might be the fact that the cocktail list is 21 pages long and includes a glossary. But you're likely not going to make it past page two, as that has its amazing seasonal cocktail list. But if you want classics, may we suggest pages six through nine (!), which offer up a veritable who's who of just about any popular cocktail from any era, all done perfectly by bartenders a lot classier than you.

f p



ALLISON WEBBER

SAN FRANCISCO, CA

TRICK DOG

The Louis C.K. of the bar world. Every six months they come up with a fantastic, innovative cocktail menu, both in terms of the actual ingredients and also the presentation, and then, as soon as that half year rolls around, they throw the entire thing out and start again. You have to be either crazy or a genius to throw out a thing everyone loves every six months. And yet they pull it off, because the Bon Vivants have figured out that if you show passion, and creativity, and talent, and get people liquored up, and feed them delicious burgers shaped like hot dogs, they will keep coming back, no matter if they're ordering a drink from a paint pantone, a record album, a tourist map, a Chinese takeout joint menu, or a freaking dog calendar.

f p



CARLOS LOPEZ

LOS ANGELES, CA

THE VARNISH

The lineup of bartenders who work at The Varnish is ridiculous, like some sort of cocktail Murderer's Row. But even if you didn't get that reference to the Yankee baseball teams of the 1920s, you still need to go here immediately and let one of the best bartenders in the city make you pretty much anything ever -- though we like to keep it simple for the summer and start with a Southside and a sandwich from Cole's in the front, and get weirder from there. Don't worry, they'll accommodate.



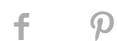


DREW SWANTAK/THRILLIST

NEW YORK, NY

THE WAYLAND

Walking into The Wayland has the distinct and slightly odd feeling of arriving at a house party at a rustic, Southern mountain cabin, the kind that would be featured in *Garden & Gun* after a surprisingly wealthy 30-year-old in a bow tie bought the decaying thing and saved the bones of the place while also adding his own eclectic flair to create a homey retreat for his friends. And this party has a blues band and smoky, sweet, complex mezcal cocktails and delicately fried oysters with spicy chilies cut with herbaceous dressing, which, in all, makes you pretty content to never leave that house party. The Wayland is just like that.





JESS MAYHUGH/THRILLIST

BALTIMORE, MD

W.C. HARLAN

Lane Harlan's bar opened in 2013 to relatively little fanfare, mostly because they didn't bother really telling anyone. But slowly word crept around that something really cool was happening behind that black door with "Enter" on it in the old Kitty Kat bar space. Inside you'll get candlelight and chandeliers and impeccable and reasonably priced cocktails. The move really is the cocktail du jour (it has famously never been the same drink twice and the bar has now been open for over two years), but the true beauty in this place is that, if you just feel like drinking \$3 beers all night, they're totally cool with that too.

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[Liz Childers](#) is a senior editor and is drinking a cocktail right now. Probably. Follow her [@lizchilders1](#).

[Kevin Alexander](#) is Thrillist's Executive Editor and will drink anything with gin in it, more or less. Follow him to the juniper bushes [@KAlexander03](#).



PUBLISHED ON 8/23/2015

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