

FOOD

SF's Interval puts the fern bar on a cocktail menu

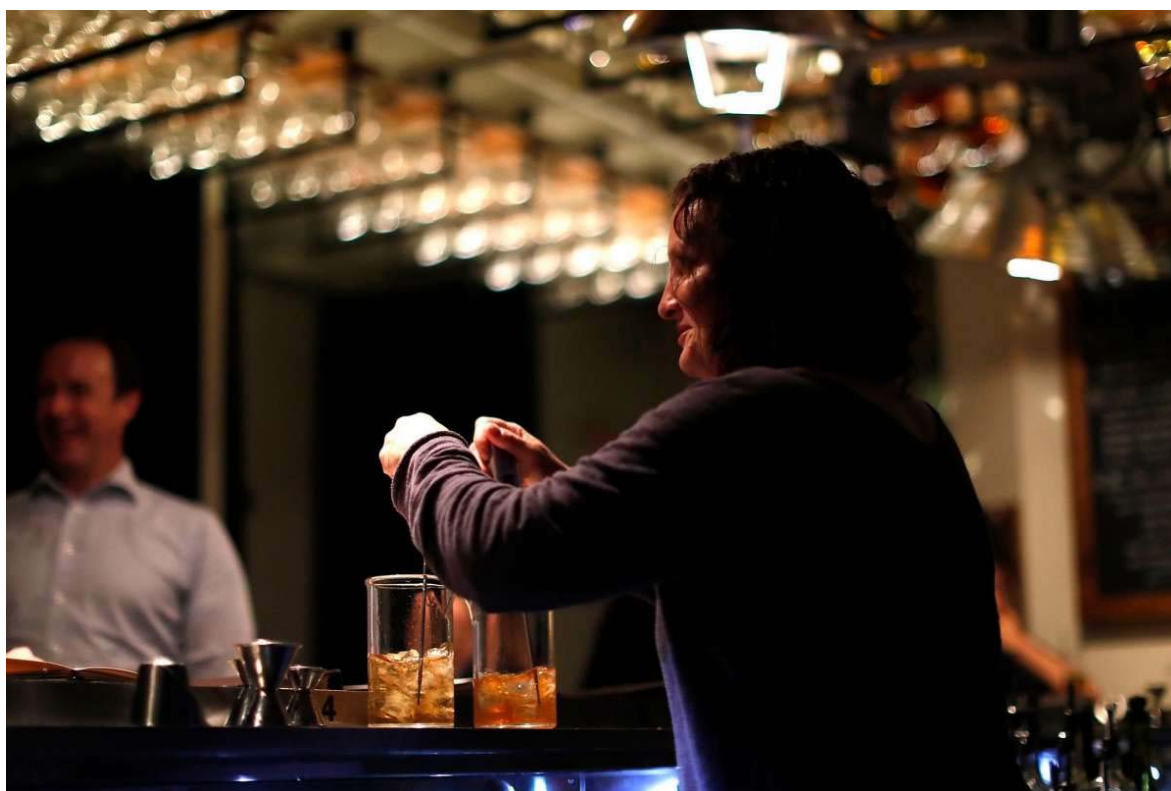


Esther Mobley

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Beverage director Jennifer Colliau makes an Oaxaca Old-Fashioned and an Improved Calvados Cocktail at the Interval in Fort Mason.

Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

Imagine if an artsy nonprofit organization opened a bar. Let's say it's a nonprofit devoted to providing "a counterpoint to today's accelerating culture." Maybe, for example, it's building a clock that can run for 10,000 years without human intervention. Maybe people like Brian Eno, the famous composer of ambient-electronic music, founded it. What would that bar look like?

Walk into the Interval, the [Fort Mason bar operated by the nonprofit Long Now Foundation](#), and you're looking at it.

The Interval is just as unusual as its pedigree would suggest. It looks more like a library than a saloon, with abstract art installations and bookcases up to the ceiling. A commanding metal staircase winds upward at its center. It is a light place, not a dark place, the sort of setting where you'd feel just as comfortable writing your master's thesis as taking a date.

The Long Now Foundation has been in this beautiful space since 1996, but the Interval didn't arrive until 2014. Since then, to borrow from the foundation's mission statement, the bar has provided a refreshing counterpoint to our city's accelerating cocktail culture.

The Interval's prodigious tome of a drink menu is the work of beverage director [Jennifer Colliau](#), a [Chronicle Bar Star](#) in 2015. She divides the menu into chapters – The Old Fashioned in All Its Glory, Daisies for All, Drinking Around the World – that emphasize cocktail history and genealogy, with each drink thoroughly explicated.



Oaxaca Old-Fashioned (left) and Improved Calvados Cocktail at the Interval in Fort Mason.
Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

Where else in San Francisco can you find a drink as strange and cerebral as the I've Grown to Love Life Too Much (\$14)? The cocktail is an allusion to "The Brothers Karamazov," combining delicacies that Dmitri collects before going to prison. It arrives in two parts: a small, neat glass of cognac, pear liqueur and creme de cacao, and a glass of sparkling wine. You're meant to go back and forth between the two glasses. It's an exercise in palate cleansing, moving between richness and refreshment.

You could say that such a drink, quirky and referential, defines the Interval. Or maybe it's defined by a drink like the Improved Calvados Cocktail (\$14), which riffs on the template of the old-fashioned cocktail with the old-fashioned ingredients of apple brandy, Chartreuse and Benedictine. It's quaint and yet modern, lushly fruity yet not at all sweet. Plus it's gorgeous, the liquid resting on the hypotenuse of a triangular block of ice that's been frozen into the glass.

You could say that. But the more I visit, the more I find the Interval impossible to define.

Right now Colliau has added a new chapter, called the Fern Bar, to the Interval menu. It's not the first time she's rotated a chapter; a recent section called Tiki Not Tiki came and went. (Colliau also owns the cocktail syrup company Small Hand Foods, and her proprietary orgeat was a critical step in the [contemporary revival of tiki drinks like the mai tai.](#))

When I first heard that the Interval was doing a fern bar-inspired menu, it struck me as discordant. A fern bar, the epitome of tackiness, transported into the city's most intellectual bar setting?

But that funny juxtaposition, it turns out, is what makes the Interval's fern bar menu so successful.

The Interval in Fort Mason prides itself on conversation as well as cocktails.
Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

A refresher: The fern bar came into vogue in the 1970s, at places like TGI Fridays in New York and our own [Henry Africa's](#) on Polk Street. To some extent, this genre of bars was distinguished by the presence of ferns, plus other kitschy decor like faux Tiffany lamps, all meant to conjure something like your grandmother's living room, if she were also a hippie.

But what really made a fern bar a fern bar wasn't the decor at all.

"Basically, fern bars brought women into bars," Colliau explains. "It came out of the sexual revolution of the '60s, coinciding with the invention of the birth control pill."

Fern bars were the first singles bars. If bars had previously been the domain of men, places that respectable women wouldn't be seen, new social mores suddenly changed that. "Before then, saloons and taverns were very dark and very male," Colliau says. Fern bars emasculated them. "Now, they had to make women feel comfortable." Hence the ferns, the grandma kitsch — and, yes, the fruity, sugary, creamy drinks.

Out of the fern bar came saccharine standards like the lemon drop, a Henry Africa's invention, and the Harvey Wallbanger, a screwdriver topped with Galliano. "The cocktails were really a device," Colliau says. "They realized, if we get women to come, the men will follow."

The fern bars must have seemed seedy even at the time. Herb Caen, a famous chronicler of the genre, wrote in these pages on April 10, 1977: "A fern bar is not like a proper bar. Under those faintly menacing

tendrils, people change, become furtive, dissembling, with it, rotten as the jungles whence come the plants.”

Lemon Drop at the Interval in Fort Mason.
Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

But surely even curmudgeonly Caen would have fallen for Colliau's brilliant interpretations of these awful drinks. Her new menu chapter includes a lemon drop (\$6): vodka infused with lemon zest, plus fresh lemon juice, clarified with whey. Unlike the typical, cloying lemon drop, Colliau's version is subtle and balanced, with the intriguingly complex flavor that comes from milk clarification. Served as a shot, it makes a perfect interlude between drinks.

The Harvey Wallbanger has been reimagined as the Harvey Bell-Ringer (\$14). Convinced that orange-juice-based drinks, especially when served over ice, are always too dilute, Colliau decided to freeze ice cube trays filled with a mixture of orange juice, Galliano and lemon juice. She puts the cubes in a blender with St. George citrus vodka, ice and half an ounce of milk, then pours it into a rather large coupe that's been washed with apricot brandy. (A glass washed with apricot brandy is known as a “bell-ringer.”) Bright, intensely fruity and with a healthy kick of booze, it's the best slushie cocktail I've had in a long time.

Colliau has even added to the menu a Long Island Iced Tea (\$10), maybe the most lowbrow cocktail ever. She keg-carbonates big batches of vodka, gin, rum, Tequila, curacao, lemon and sugarcane cola for a citrusy, spritzy sipper that somehow feels light. And her Mudslide (\$12), decadent though it may be, won't give you a stomachache. House-made coffee and rum-cream liqueurs are blended with vodka, crushed ice and a drizzle of bittersweet chocolate syrup. “I knew there was a way to make a creamy frozen drink that was still great,” Colliau says.

The fern bar may be tacky, but it's also historic, and beyond the hanging plants and Tequila Sunrises lies a fascinating story about feminism, about inclusivity, about power. The Interval's fern bar drinks wink and teach, instructing and delighting. And maybe *that's* what defines the Interval as a bar.

Asked how popular the fern bar drinks have been, however, Colliau chuckles.

“No one cares,” she says. “Once in a while we get some Marina bros who come in and say, ‘Dude, you've got Long Islands on draft? Cool, we'll take four,’ but for the most part that's not really our audience.”

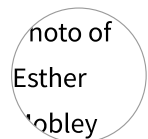
Esther Mobley is *The San Francisco Chronicle's* wine critic. Email: emobley@sfchronicle.com Twitter: [@Esther_mobley](https://twitter.com/Esther_mobley) Instagram: [@esthermob](https://www.instagram.com/esthermob)

More Information

To order: Lemon Drop (\$6), Mudslide (\$12), Harvey Bell-Ringer (\$14), I've Grown to Love Life Too Much (\$14), Improved Calvados Cocktail (\$14)

Where: The Interval at Long Now, 2 Marina Blvd., Fort Mason Center Building 2, S.F. 415-496-9187 or www.theinterval.org

When: 10 a.m. to midnight daily



Esther Mobley

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Wine critic Esther Mobley joined The Chronicle in 2015 to cover California wine, beer and spirits. Previously she was an assistant editor at Wine Spectator magazine in New York, and has worked harvests at wineries in Napa Valley and Argentina. She studied English literature at Smith College.

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