

August 6, 2010

Where to drink cocktails in the Big Apple: Tracking down the best bars in New York

By PAUL OSWELL

I'm in a seminar room surrounded by some of the finest minds (and livers) ever to address the mixing of drinks. Educating the room is Angus Winchester, one of the world's foremost authorities on gin, all-round good egg and booze expert.

'Does anyone know which figures have done the most to promote cocktail culture in the West?'

I'm expecting a list of mutton-chopped bartenders from the late 1800s, or long-forgotten inventors of Italian liqueurs. Imagine, then, my surprise at what came next.

'James Bond and Carrie Bradshaw.'



So, two fictional characters. A smarmy, alcoholic killer and a shallow, spaniel-haired harridan are who we have to thank for our current shared predilection for Martinis, cosmopolitans, whiskey sours and whatever else we're having our barkeeps whip up for us. I suddenly need a stiff drink.

Thankfully, that's not a problem. The seminar is part of the inaugural Manhattan Cocktail Classic, where mixologists and imbibers alike gather to talk about and show off cocktail recipes, techniques and retro facial hair.

Lucre

This piece of coverage is brought to you by

There's a working bar staffed by some globally respected bartenders in the main hall, so you can take a world-class tippie before heading off to talks on why the Martini is the king of cocktails, why hand-chipped ice is better than machine cracked ice and at what temperature to store your champagne flutes. Fascinating stuff, if somewhat involved for those of us that just appreciate a well-crafted drink.

It's all a far cry from my bartending days in a provincial northern pub some 20 years ago. The George was not what you'd call a hotbed of cocktail culture. Sure, we mixed drinks. Taboo and lemonade. Mirage and lemonade. Vodka and lemonade. You name it, we mixed it with lemonade. Apart from Tia Maria. That got mixed with Coke. Obviously.

New York, though, is an especially favoured city for fans of the cocktail, and is currently enjoying high times in a highball glass.

It was the first place to really promote the cocktail revival scene, whereby smaller, speakeasy-style bars huddled into forgotten spots and slowly gained word of mouth notoriety.

The original was Angel's Share, which went about its business unconcerned with peer recognition or the media spotlight.

'Inspired' by the concepts of seating-only bars and authentic cocktails came the now-famous Milk and Honey, after which bars like PDT (Please Don't Tell) and Death and Company sneaked into every hipster's little black book.



Speakeasies such as Death and Company in the East Village are thriving but Sarah Jessica Parker can take the praise for the western world's rediscovery of cocktails says expert Angus Winchester

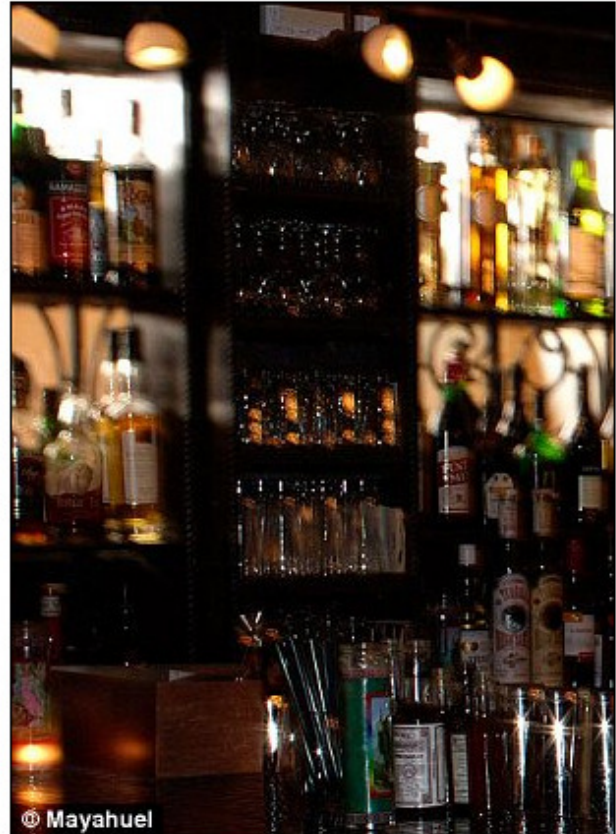
David Wondrich has been a cocktail writer for at least a decade, and I asked him why New York in particular was so popular for fancy drinks fans: 'New York was the richest city in America, had the most immigrants in America and had the pickiest drinkers in America, and all these things came together at the turn of the 20th century.'

'When I started writing about cocktails around 10 years ago, only about four bars in New York knew how to make a decent cocktail...now there are at least 40 bars that really know what they're doing.'

Lucre

This piece of coverage is brought to you by

As day two of the MCC ended, and with the amount of blood in my alcohol level quickly diminishing, I managed to attach myself to some of the figurative movers and literal shakers of the cocktail world, and was ushered into the hallowed lounge room of **Death and Company** (www.deathandcompany.com), a seating-only, first-come-first-served speakeasy bar in the East Village. The name comes from the Volstead Act ('prohibition' to you and me), which deemed that drinking alcohol was 'to live a life shadowed by death'.



We squeezed into a booth and studied the menus, most of the group with professional curiosity, myself with notably amateurish curiosity. The drinks were divided by their base spirits (tequila, gin, whiskey, etc) but had mysterious names: Gantt's Tomb, Poire Man's Cobbler, Whirling Tiger. Sorry, Del Boy, no Pina Coladas or Harvey Wallbangers here.

Thankfully, the ingredients were also listed, and some minutes later, we had a round of weird and wonderful potions, passed around for tastings and savoured as you would a gourmet meal.

Over the next few days, I mixed with mixologists in a selection of saloons and a litany of lounges. I found the door to PDT in the corner of a hotdog shop, had the rare chance to tinkle in the New York Public Library (opened up for a special gala event) and sipped Mezcal with Mexican food in **Mayahuel** (www.mayahuelny.com), a bijoux treasure of a bar in the East Village.

Lucre

This piece of coverage is brought to you by



© The Counting Room



© Keith Marszalek

Away from Manhattan, The Counting Room in Brooklyn is worth a visit. Right, a professional mixologist puts the finishing touches to a new creation

Hotel bars, too, are upping their collective imbibing offerings. Upstairs in the lounge of the none-more-swanky **Lowells Hotel** (www.lowellhotel.com), head bartender Patrick regaled me with tales of his spit and sawdust bar days as he worked his way up to the heady heights of his profession. His house cocktails are now all fresh juices and esoteric gins – a long way from dishing out pints of the black stuff to construction workers.

I wanted to see where this cocktail revival started, though, so I had a knowledgeable friend escort me to the East Village. After some confusion on street level, we walked up some stairs and through a bustling, brightly-lit Chinese restaurant. At the back, people were sporadically disappearing through an unremarkable door.

We did the same, and found ourselves in **Angel's Share** (8 Stuyvesant Street), a compact bar where chic uniformed staff lead us to a table by the window and quietly handed out menus. It was mostly classic drinks, with the odd twist.

I had a delicious variation on a French 75 (mostly gin and champagne) while my friend had the best Dark and Stormy (mostly rum and ginger beer) she had ever had – no small compliment, believe me.

The cocktail revival isn't confined to Manhattan Island, either. The hipster suburbs of Williamsburg et al are enjoying their own drinking den extravaganza. **The Clover Club** (www.cloverclubny.com) is already a big name on the scene, and I spent a pleasant evening shooting the breeze in **The Counting Room** (www.thecountingroombk.com) while genial mixing genius Max stirred, shook and poured with no little aplomb.

I don't really aspire to be James Bond (I would fail the height requirement), and those Sex and the City broads can keep their overpriced Cosmos (Cosmi?), but let me roam free in Gotham with the smell of angostura bitters on the breeze; the New York cocktail scene's nooks and crannies, freshly muddled fruit and all manner of mixed up worlds for the cocktail adventurer to explore.

Lucre

This piece of coverage is brought to you by

Travel facts

British Airways (www.ba.com / 0844 493 0787) fly to New York from the UK from £327 return including taxes, fees and charges.

The Lowell Hotel (www.lowellhotel.com) is a member of the Small Leading Hotels of the World. Rooms start at around USD695.00 / GBP460.00. There is an offer for travel until September 7 – book two nights and receive a 50 per cent discount for the third night. Valid Fri to Sun or Sun to Tues including continental breakfast.

The Carlton Hotel is a member of Preferred Hotels & Resorts (www.preferredhotels.com). Rooms start at around USD280.00/GBP184 per night for an Executive King Bedroom with complimentary in-room wireless. Members of 'I Prefer, Preferred Hotel Group' Guest Benefit Programme, receive \$25 food and beverage credit when they book their stay online at www.iprefer.com until December 31, 2010.

The Lucre logo consists of the word "Lucre" in white, sans-serif font, centered within a dark red square.

This piece of coverage is brought to you by