



The word is out. Speakeasies are where it is at. And the word on everyone's lips?

"Shhh...It's a secret."

THE SECRET

Prohibition in America may be a thing of the past, but speakeasies are making a furtive comeback. A world of unmarked doors, hidden stairways and dim lighting awaits.

Our reservation is confirmed by text message in the afternoon. In the evening we walk down the main street before turning off onto a dark, narrow alley. We look around nervously to make sure we are not being followed.

At the back of a well-known hotel, we press the call button on the service door and are buzzed in. The attendant checks our names and leads us down a dimly-lit set of stairs, past a fuse box and an old gas meter, into a narrow corridor. The destination of our covert operation is through a set of sheer billowing curtains. "Welcome to Manifesto," says the attendant as she leads us to two chairs at the dark wooden bar. She gestures towards a man on the other side of the counter dressed in 1920s regalia – dark trousers, with a white shirt, pinstriped waistcoat and Fedora hat – "Joseph will take your order."

Across America, speakeasies are making a comeback and they are keeping their air of secrecy. In a fashion. In the Roaring Twenties, this was born of necessity. Prohibition was the mother of the speakeasy concept and these establishments popped up in hidden locations, offering food, drinks and jazz in a clandestine atmosphere. Speakeasies were notorious for their links with the gangsters who controlled bootlegging. This was a time of unprecedented prosperity and jubilation in the USA, but also one of secrecy and criminality and all of these aspects came together in the 1920s speakeasy.

Given the nature of a speakeasy, the contemporary versions walk a fine line between remaining a secret and drawing a crowd. In the reincarnations, the secrecy is a carefully generated illusion. This is a business after all. Many of the speakeasies don't have websites, Facebook pages or Twitter accounts but Google can find them. And if Google can find it, so can Joe Public. "Our primary means of getting the word out is word of mouth recommendation," claims Jim Meehan, managing partner of Please Don't Tell (PDT) in New York. That and speaking to journalists obviously.

Take the case of Harold Black, a mainstay on the Washington DC night scene. Harold Black started in December 2012 with no social media – a brave move in this area of digital connectivity. The phone number wasn't even published anywhere. Instead, the owners personally distributed business cards with the initials "HB" and the number to potential customers in the hope that the word would spread organically.

Getting the bar's number is just the first step. If you mistakenly call for a reservation, instead of the accepted text message format, you reach an annoying recorded message advising that the subscriber you have called is not available. Leave a message or hang up. Either way Harold Black will text you back to explain the reservation system. Just don't call from a landline.





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Historically, speakeasies were on the wrong side of the law and entrance was strictly for people in-the-know. Today, this aspect is enduring. Untitled, in Chicago's River North area – the city's premier dining, entertainment, and nightlife district – is completely underground. There is no sign outside, just a doorman most nights and the address. Shreyas Shah, chief brand officer, believes this "immediately creates an insider's feel to the place", keeping it true to the speakeasy concept.

PDT in New York takes the concept one step further. Guests enter via a retro hot dog outlet called Crif Dogs, complete with arcade games from the 1980s. A vintage phone booth sits against the wall. "The bar is totally unmarked," explains Meehan "So you need to know where it is and how to get in. You walk into the booth, dial 1, and my host greets you after a buzzer sounds." This may come as a surprise, as the entire back wall of the phone booth swings open into the lounge. "A lot of people find the phone booth to be a gimmick," says Jim, "but it's fun, and bars are supposed to be fun."

There is something cloak and dagger about it, which adds to the appeal. While the novelty of a furtive entry may wear off, that's where the food and beverage offering comes into play. Both Untitled and PDT offer hand-crafted drinks, ordered either a la carte, or personally tailored to the



guest's tastes. Tell your server your favourite flavours and you will be rewarded with a concoction made to the highest standards, with specialty ingredients and an explanation of the process that reads like a recipe book. The superb skills of the mixologists are worthy of the hefty price tags drinks command.

On the food side, the bars take different tacks. Untitled has been awarded Michelin bib gourmand for its menu, meant for sharing. Chef Joseph Heppe combines seasonal ingredients with modern flair in a series of dishes ranging from truffled

chicken liver pate to duck sausage and bison burgers.

PDT, on the other hand, given its location and partnership with Crif Dogs, focuses on the New York staple: the hot dog. "It's a yin and yang thing," explains Meehan. "We serve hand crafted US\$15 cocktails made with a number of esoteric ingredients, which can be daunting to some. The hot dogs and tater tots balance out our offerings. There's a fine line between pretension and modesty, and the food really helps bring our drinks programme down to earth. Given we're attached to Crif Dogs, it only seems right to serve hot dogs."

The food might get people talking, but if they do so, it will need to in hushed tones. The speakeasy was so called because of the practice of speaking quietly about these establishments in public, or even when inside, so as not to alert police or neighbours. Times may have changed, but the rules haven't.

The framed rules of etiquette at PDT start with the Golden Rule: "Treat others how you would like to be treated. For those of you who don't treat yourselves very well, please continue reading."

"Further regulations prohibit smoking, game playing, mobile phones and overtures towards other guests, all of which contribute to the cosy, comfortable atmosphere.

Untitled is the larger of the two, with a capacity of 465 patrons. It is also the louder, but not from the sounds of dulcet mobile ringtones. The lounge features live music six nights a week. "We focus on American roots music: rhythm and blues, soul, country, blues, hot jazz, big band and more," outlines Shah. "Our live music and entertainment is amazing. We have four distinct rooms which



each have their own character and appeal. At Untitled, there is something for everyone. People can come eat, drink, and experience live music and entertainment all at once. It's a true supper club experience."

The speakeasies have tapped into something – whether it's the hush-hush ambiance, the lure of bespoke beverages, a tasty hot dog, toe-tapping jazz or the appeal of stepping back into the 1920s. A diverse range of people are finding their way into these hidden dens. "An eclectic mix of customers come here," says Shah of Untitled. "It's true that it's a very cool crowd, but we also serve a lot of business and corporate clientele, particularly business travellers." Meehan claims a similar mix for PDT. "I'm glad the demographic and age range is wide," he says. "It makes for a better atmosphere."



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