



# *Speak slow an' easy...*

During prohibition, the criminal and social elite would enjoy lavish parties in clandestine drinking dens hidden deep within New York City. Called 'speakeasies', they were elusive and exclusive, just how New Yorkers like it. Today, a number of venues successfully employ this theme, incorporating secret entrances to entice their clientele, as **Scott Snowden** discovered

**T**he popular Crif Dogs diner is pretty easy to spot along St Mark's Place; the words 'Eat Me' hang high above the sidewalk emblazoned across a giant frankfurter. There's already quite a queue forming inside, but strangely few people are actually indulging in the delicious hot dogs served here. Everyone seems to be loitering around an antiquated phone booth that's standing against a far wall and from time to time one or two people squeeze in and then seem to somehow disappear.

My intrigue is interrupted by another patiently waiting punter ahead of me, who asks if I have a reservation.

"Yeah, six-thirty..." I reply, looking down at my watch to see that it has just gone half past six and he kindly lets me go ahead. ➤➔

**NO EASY WAY IN**  
The sliding peephole was a tell-tale sign of an illegal drinking den and chances are, there was a gun pointing at you on the other side of the door

**'ALRIGHT,  
WE'RE A  
SPEAKEASY,  
BUT WE'RE  
A MODERN  
SPEAKEASY'**

Everyone watched as I step into the booth. It's exactly how you'd expect inside, although with the door pulled shut it's a little dark and difficult to make out the instructions amongst the other information on the wall. I dial 1 and wait. A nice lady on the other end picks up and asks if I have a reservation. She confirms and tells me to wait just a second or two then hangs up. Then the wall that'd been leaning against suddenly opens to reveal a small, but very cozy bar with just a few tables, bare brick walls, wooden floors, low-level lighting and smart, waistcoat-wearing bartenders mixing cocktails. This is PDT, or Please Don't Tell.

**D**uring the 1920s, a new cultural, social and artistic scene swept the world and was especially visible in evolving cities like New York, Chicago, Paris and London. Jazz music blossomed, the flapper redefined modern womanhood and Art Deco peaked. Economically, the era saw large-scale use of automobiles, telephones, motion pictures and electricity. Unprecedented industrial growth accelerated consumer demand and significant changes in lifestyle. Ironically, the Roaring Twenties as they were to become known, were also remembered for being largely dry.

Prohibition in the U.S. focused on the manufacture and sale of alcohol. It began as reform movement in the 1840s and was heavily supported by evangelical Protestant churches. In the early 1900s, the movement was taken over by the ridiculous sounding, but very real Anti-Saloon League. By using pressure politics on legislators, the Anti-Saloon League achieved their goal of nationwide prohibition during World War I, emphasizing the need to destroy the political corruption of the saloons, the political power of the German-based brewing industry and the need to reduce domestic violence in the home.

Although drinking did decline as a whole, there was a rise in consumption in many cities along with significant increases in organized crime related to its production and distribution. Large quantities of liquor were smuggled in from Canada, along the Atlantic coast, overland and via the Great Lakes.

Nothing was going to come between the gentrified and their gin, so secret drinking dens in basements and back rooms started to spring up throughout the U.S. and particularly New York and Chicago. Escape from the law was always a high priority, so these would



typically take the form of a sizeable, seldom used storeroom with plenty of different doors and routes back up to the street. They would have a plain, unmarked door with a sliding peephole and to gain entry, not only was it essential to be on the guest list, but it was also important to speak slowly and clearly to avoid any misunderstanding and thus mistakenly being shot. Hence, speakeasy bars.

Today, the definition of a speakeasy bar is a little blurred. While prohibition has long passed, the tradition of the 'unmarked door' is very much alive. The covert entrances that once served to disguise the most lavish parties from the law now serve as an artful asylum from the tourists and masses.

"When we opened, everyone said, 'This is a speakeasy.' As a cocktail historian, I said, 'We're absolutely not a speakeasy.' Speakeasies were illegal bars that served bootlegged or adulterated hooch, they didn't serve culinary cocktails. Identity is equal parts, or some balance of, what you think you are and what others think you are. After a million people called us a 'speakeasy' I gave up. Alright, we're a speakeasy, but we're a modern speakeasy," laughs Jim Meehan, manager of PDT.

**MUM'S THE WORD  
PDT in New York  
City's East Village  
and the Crif Dogs  
diner that it's  
attached to. Far  
right: the secret  
bookcase doorway  
in the Back Room  
Bar on Manhattan's  
Lower East Side**



"The bar space used to be a Japanese bubble tea lounge run by another operator. It was failing and Crif Dogs next door had a liquor license that wasn't being used," he explains.

"So they took over the lease, built the bar and I came in as a consultant. If we had a separate entrance on the street, we would have needed a new liquor license."

Mr Meehan, 36, has finished for the week and is unwinding before making his way

home, also in East Village, to spend the weekend with his wife and baby daughter. He is currently considered one of the industry icons in New York cocktail circles and Mr Meehan's way of unwinding is to sit in another popular bar and sample their new, experimental mixes.

"At the time we opened there were already a few really good low profile cocktail bars. They all have nondescript doors, which I definitely think of when I think of speakeasies. I would say we were like a tipping point: all these places existed, and we connected the dots. When PDT opened, everyone thought, 'Holy shit, this is a trend.' And I feel like we were one of the places that helped establish that – but I don't think we actually started it."

Another such modern speakeasy is Bathtub Gin, located in Manhattan's trendy Chelsea district. This time you have to look out for an outlet of the Stone Street Coffee Company, a genuine Brooklyn-based 'roaster in hand crafted coffee'. The only indication that there might be a bar somewhere inside is the fact that two no-nonsense-looking gentlemen can be found hanging out here almost every night. Upon approach, they will ask if you have a reservation, tick your name off a list secured to a clipboard and hidden in the pages of a New York Post, then with almost Herculean might, one will push on the seemingly solid wall that slowly opens to reveal an Aladdin's cave of alcoholic indulgence.

This interpretation of a prohibition-inspired speakeasy is a more theatrical affair. The bar and seating area is significant, 20s-style piano music plays in the background, the waitresses are dressed in costume befitting the period and the bartenders are uniformly outfitted in smart-looking waistcoats. The gaudy damask wallpaper, pressed tin ceilings and silk couches complete the time-travel experience.

The copper bathtub in the heart of the room is a prop for Facebook photos. 'Every night, people get drunk, sit in it and take pictures,' Dave Oz, co-owner tells me. He also tells me he is still mulling over the idea of displaying a collection of such snapshots on the walls.

At PDT standing is not allowed and the only sound is conversation and the clink of glassware, but at Bathtub Gin they have a larger space and a louder clientele.

"We've definitely taken the look and feel of a speakeasy, but we like to crank it up a bit," Mr Oz smiles. "Walk-ins are welcome until we're at capacity, but reservations are certainly recommended." ➤➤➤



**'NOT  
HAVING  
A SIGN IS  
A CLICHÉ  
THESE DAYS'**

Later in the evening the piano jazz gives way to more modern music and the party begins proper. But just like PDT, the drinks menu here is made up entirely of gin and whisky-based cocktails.

There are many more unmarked modern speakeasies spread through Manhattan, some are tucked away like Attaboy that's just a plain door on what appears to be an ordinary, albeit slightly unfriendly-looking house. This was actually the home of the very first Milk & Honey. Here they ask you what you kind of mood you're in and then make up a specific cocktail just for you. Death and Company is another popular haunt. You'll only find this somber-looking saloon if you know the address and there's a strict, no-standing policy here too. However, the doorman will happily take your mobile number and call you when there's a space.

Like PDT and Bathtub Gin, the Cash Bar employs a quirky disguise to ensure its exclusivity. Sitting up against a wall in an otherwise unassuming bar is what looks like an ATM with an 'out of order' sign stuck to it. This hides a door with stairs behind that lead to a secluded drinking den with a distinct affluence-inspired aesthetic.

"My husband and I were both looking for a bar idea, but we wanted something more Wall Street-themed and then when we saw this place hidden basically in another bar, that's where I thought maybe we should keep the idea of the money theme, but make it more vintage, prohibition-era and concentrate on somewhere guests could enjoy hidden parties," co-owner Melanie Lemieux explains to me.

However, if you want hidden parties proper, there's only one place in all of Manhattan to go, the Back Room. What makes this particular drinking den so special is that it actually was a prohibition-era speakeasy – one of only two in New York City and the only one that's still operating as a bar. As a result, it's almost impossible to find and positively drips in history.

The only clue to its existence is a faded old sign for the Lower East Toy Company precariously hanging on a gate that serves as an entrance down a flight of steps from street level to a very long and very dark alley. Either side there are rubbish bins and bolted delivery doors to the shops and restaurants up above on the street, fire escapes hanging down and even the occasional scurrying rat.



At the end of the alley on one side is a small flight of steps leading up to an equally dubious doorway, a few faded wooden crates bearing the Lower East Toy Company logo are the only clue that you're in the right place and there's even a sliding peephole in the solid-looking wooden door.

While I was waiting for the bar to open and to meet owner Johnny Barounis, I sat on the steps by the big, battered, black door and smoked a cigarette to kill 15 minutes. As I sat in the darkness I heard voices of other eager punters by the gate in the street and I thought I might have a little company, but then one said, "Ah man, there's no way it's down there..." And off they went. A testament to how hidden away this speakeasy is.

Before long, I heard the sound of half a dozen heavy-duty deadbolts sliding back and the door eventually opened. Inside it's styled like an old-fashioned gentlemen's club with period-perfect chandeliers, velvet paisley wallpaper, tin ceilings, a candlestick phone and sundry Victoriana. The cocktails themselves are served in white china teacups and bottled beer is brown-bagged before being given to a customer, a throwback to the days of illicit intoxication.

A giant fake bookcase leads to the real 'back room' – a VIP-only lounge with gorgeous copper ceilings and Art Nouveau knick-knacks, but this is only made available for special occasions and the most exclusive of guests, like Robert De Niro, Joe Pesci, Paul

McCartney and Robert Plant, for example.

"When we have big parties back here – a celebrity party, or something like that – I want them to get the full feel of the place, and to really feel the history here. And that back entrance – that back entrance is really the underbelly of New York past. It doesn't exist anymore, there's no places where you can go, there's no frontier in Manhattan anymore and for us, we have a little piece of it saved, from back in the 20s, and stuff, so it's pretty cool," Mr Barounis explains to me in his thick New York accent. Not only has he agreed to talk to me since he freely admits he never does interviews, but I am actually sitting in the legendary 'back room', supping a delicious gin cocktail in a teacup complete with saucer.

Father of three and owner of four bars in the New York area, it's clear that Johnny has a huge interest in the history of the prohibition era.

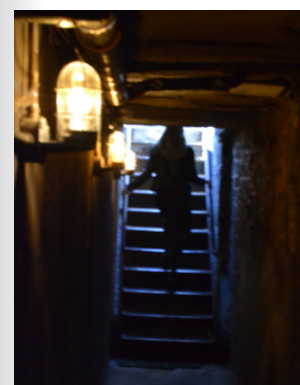
"Not having a sign is a cliché these days. It's the concept of the different directions, the way different people have interpreted it. They're still quirky, they're still interesting, they're still fun – but I've got the historic angle covered here, which is awesome."

Known simply as the Back of Ratner's, the original speakeasy played host to many theatre and movie actors of the Roaring Twenties, as well as famous gangsters of the time, including Bugsy Siegel, Lucky Luciano and Meyer Lansky.

Should you time your visit for the first Monday of the month, you can take part in



**A LIFE OF GIN**  
Far left: the sytlish interior of the Back Room. Left: the dark alleyway that leads to it. Above: Bathtub Gin in West Village



an interactive murder experience. Researched and written by Cynthia von Buhler, who believes her grandfather was shot and killed by gangster Dutch Schultz, Speakeasy Dollhouse is the regular re-enactment of this mobster mystery on the Lower East Side.

The story is brought to life in three hours by rich characters – including gangsters, authorities and burlesque girls – who interact with the crowd as the action unfolds. Emails are even sent to ticketholders in advance of the event and include news articles, court documents and autopsy reports.

"It's selling out," Mr Barounis beams. "It's like this thing that started small and just keeps growing." He continued, "We have people come back who have been to every show. We see many of the same faces."

"Just last Monday, last month, somebody called 911: shots fired in the alley. I had the real cops here, the NYPD...shots fired..." he laughs. "And that's how real it is."

The definition of a speakeasy was still slightly blurred to me; I believe it to be many things. Be it a so-called modern speakeasy with a secret entrance or just an unmarked door or even a genuine prohibition-era bar, as long as concepts like these continue, they make for fantastic places to visit. ■

**Please Don't Tell** 113 St. Marks Place (between 1st Ave and Ave A) East Village, (212) 614-0386, open Sun–Thu 6pm to 2am, Fri–Sat 6pm to 4am, pdtnyc.com  
**The Back Room**, 102 Norfolk St (between Delancey St and Rivington St), Lower East Side, (212) 228-5098, open Tue–Wed 7:30pm to 2:30am, Thu 7:30pm to 3am, Fri–Sat 7:30pm – 4am, Sun 7:30pm to 2am, backroomnyc.com  
**Bathtub Gin**, 132 9th Avenue (near West 18th Street), (646) 559-1671, open Sun–Tue 6pm to 2am, Wed–Sat 6pm to 4am, bathtubginny.com  
**The Cash Bar**, 58 ¾ E 34th St (between Madison Ave and Park Ave) open Mon–Thu 4pm to 2am, Fri 4pm to 4am, Sat 8pm to 4am, istthecashbar.com You should almost certainly also visit...  
**Attaboy**, 134 Eldridge St (between Broome St and Delancey St) Lower East Side, open daily 6:45pm  
**Death and Company**, 433 E 6th St, (between 1st Ave and Ave A) Lower East Side, (212) 388-0882, open Sun–Thu 6pm to 1am, Fri–Sat 6pm to 2am, deathandcompany.com

## 'THAT BACK ENTRANCE IS REALLY THE UNDERBELLY OF NEW YORK PAST'