

The Best Cocktail Bars in San Francisco

San Francisco

Blackbird



11,548

There's a lot to love about San Francisco, but perhaps our favorite aspect of the city is the abundance of legitimate watering holes. Of course, all bars are not created equal, and although [we love a good dive bar](#), couldn't live without [SF's best craft-brew havens](#), and have even been known to [hang out in a wine bar](#) from time to time, we would be completely and utterly bereft without San Francisco's best cocktail bars. Specifically, we're enamored of these spots, which offer a combination of killer cocktails and the kind of ambiance that makes you want to stay for a second (or third) round. Note: we focused exclusively on places where the hero is the cocktails, which means certain gems, like ABV, Absinthe, Bellota, Beretta, Maven, Pabu, Tosca, and so many others weren't up for the role... only because their delicious food steals the spotlight.

[Blackbird](#)

Duboce Triangle

Blackbird calls itself a neighborhood bar, but if there were neighborhood bars like this all over SF, we'd never venture more than a few blocks from home. Luckily, Blackbird is in a fairly central location, so you can probably find an excuse to stop into the gorgeous bar. Check out their latest art show, play a game of pool, and, most importantly, sip on cocktails from the seasonal menu, or our favorite: order a Pimm's Cup on *draught*.

[Pacific Cocktail Haven](#)

Union Square

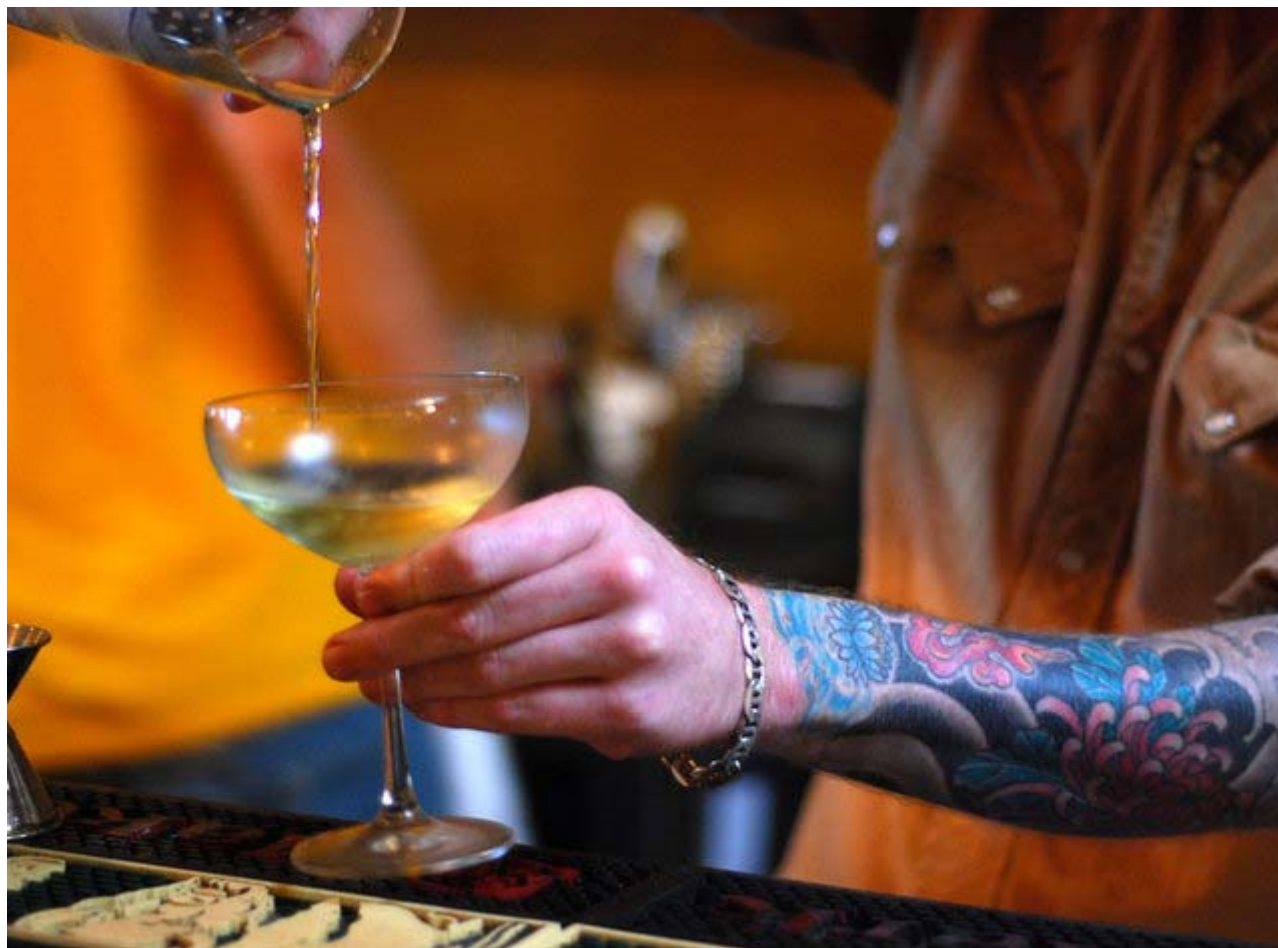
We [were pretty elated](#) when notable bartender around town Kevin Diedrich officially opened PCH in June, so it's no surprise that this joint made the list. The vibe is pretty chill during the week (go at your own risk on a Saturday night), which means there's a good chance you'll be able to get a seat at the bar to watch the magic happen. There are 19 innovative cocktails on the menu, sorted by spirit, with a couple of low-ABV options and decidedly non-low ABV punches (which serve five to eight people) as well.

[15 Romolo](#)

North Beach

15 Romolo is sort of like the Room of Requirement in *Harry Potter* -- it becomes whatever you need it to be,

whether that's a cozy spot for a first date, a place to go with out-of-town friends, or just a neighborhood bar that serves damn good, handcrafted cocktails. Go during happy hour (from 5 to 7:30pm daily) for the \$7 Pimm's Cup made with "anything but Scotch", but don't be surprised when you're still there hours later, feeding dollar bills to the jukebox and sipping perfectly executed drinks.



[The Alembic](#)

Upper Haight

When The Alembic opened in 2006, it was the first time a lot of San Franciscans had the opportunity to taste -- and subsequently fall in love with -- craft cocktails. Over a decade later, this spot is still one of the best places to go for a serious drink that feels playful going down. Alembic expanded its dining room recently, but when you're drinking, you'll still want to choose either the bar or one of the front hi-tops. The cocktail list is two pages with 60+ word descriptions that will require you to actually read (they're worth the effort); one side is Alembic originals, while the other offers "The Canon Cocktails," served with a metaphorical twist. Get (at least) one from each.

[Benjamin Cooper](#)

Union Square

First things first: here's how to find this contemporary cocktail and oyster bar. (Trust us, you'll need the help.) Even though navigating your way to this spot can be a bit confusing, it's worth the effort once you're settled into this cocktail den, where bartenders serve up a rotating menu of adventurous drinks with creative ingredients -- and three types of oysters with which to enjoy them.



Comstock Saloon

North Beach

Comstock is another place where you instantly feel like you've stepped back in time when you walk through the front door. The 20ft mahogany bar from 1907 is original to the space, as are the tile floors. And the wallpaper, antique fans, and hardwood booths lining the walls only add to the Barbary Coast ambiance. But the drinks and the spirits list are the real hero of this watering hole: the cocktail list has all of the pre-Prohibition classics you love, including a Manhattan, Sazerac, and Pisco Punch, but you don't want to miss out on the famous Cherry Bounce (bourbon, cherry brandy, lemon, Angostura, Champagne) nor, for that matter, the \$7 shot-and-beer combo during happy hour.

Bourbon & Branch

Tenderloin

Sure, Bourbon & Branch no longer has that mysterious speakeasy appeal it did when it first opened, but just because this place is now much easier to get into doesn't mean its value has declined. After all, the only thing that's changed is its accessibility, and we'll argue that's a good thing. When you walk inside, it feels like you're going back in time, to an era when alcohol was outlawed (the space was a real speakeasy during the Prohibition, and the secret tunnels and passages still exist to prove it). Make a reservation at the main bar if you can, but if not, stop by the library, where you don't need one (ring the buzzer and use the password "books" to be admitted). Just leave your cell phone in your pocket, and don't even think about Instagramming your cocktails, gorgeous though they are. The "House Rules" prohibit both. Oh, and be prepared to wait for your drink: the cocktails are complicated. That's another good thing.

Forgery

Mid-Market

This 2,000sqft bar was once home to a printing press and a glass blowing studio, and though those things are both pretty cool, we've found that we have a lot more appreciation for the open space now that it's home to a laid-back cocktail bar that serves quality cocktails without the mustache wax and pretense you'll find at some other SF spots. There are over 300 spirits to choose from, but we always start with a "Forgery Original" before moving on to one of the classics with a twist. (The Fall Gimlets and Sour Cherry Negroni are also favorites.)

The Interval at Long Now

Fort Mason

It's worth the trek to Fort Mason to experience The Interval at Long Now, which is part bar, part café, and part

museum, but has one of the most extensive cocktail menus you'll find, including drinks from around the world and some of the earliest cocktails ever poured. While you sip, explore the space, which dates to the 1930s, when it was a forge and machine shop, and be sure to check out prototypes of Long Now's 10,000 year clock and The Chime Generator, a mechanical computer that generates a unique bell sequence every day for 10,000 years.

[Rickhouse](#)

Financial District

It can be hard to find a seat at Rickhouse -- especially right after work when everyone crowds the bar -- but that's not a reason to pass up the chance to drink some of the most superior beverages in the city. The spirit selection is so extensive that a rolling ladder is required to reach the bottles on the highest shelves, but whiskey is the real hero here. As it should be.

[Tradition](#)

Tenderloin

Like Bourbon & Branch, Tradition is another cocktail bar where a reservation isn't required, but will only elevate your experience. Plus, that's the best way to be seated at one of the "snugs," the nickname for one of their nine nooks, each of which pays homage to a different drinking culture. There's also a good selection of house-blended and aged spirits, plus huge punch bowls to share.

[Trick Dog](#)

Mission

Thanks to a fun and creative rotating menu with different themes (previous iterations have included the Pantone color wheel, SF tourist map, Chinese restaurant, and a calendar of dogs), it's pretty much imperative that you visit Trick Dog at least once every six months to check out what the guys behind the bar are pouring. This place gets packed, and it can be hard to find a seat (despite the fact that there are two levels) but that's all part of the fun, as it's one of the few places in SF where people seem to chat with strangers; everyone's always curious to know what you're drinking, and if they should order that next.

[Wildhawk](#)

Mission

After years of reclaimed wood tables and concrete floors, we're beyond elated that Wildhawk is bringing back glamour and sex appeal to the SF cocktail bar. The bar itself is stunning, with tin ceilings, original floors, and lots

of color and texture, and is the kind of place where you can get ensconced in a comfy chair and stay a while. The menu has a heavy focus on vermouth, but there are also specialty cocktails, including a Cocoa Puffs-infused Breakfast Negroni and a house martini (that's two servings), so there's truly something for everyone.

[Whitechapel](#)

Tenderloin

You don't have to love gin to appreciate the ambiance and drinks at this stunning Victorian-era/abandoned London Underground station-themed bar, but it will certainly help, considering that this place offers over 400 types of the spirit on the menu, and over 120 cocktails that feature or include it. Don't worry though; this isn't like the gin drinks you drank in college that turned you into a bit of a lunatic (or... was that just us?), this is the kind of gin experience you can enjoy in elegant surroundings, and not even regret a little bit the next day.

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[Daisy Barringer](#) is a freelance writer based in SF who really can't complain that her job involves things like researching the best cocktail bars. Tell her your favorite places to drink on Twitter [@daisy](#).

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I confirm I am at least 21 years old