SAN FRANCISCO’S COCKTAIL bars have much in common with the city’s restaurants. They embrace vibrant seasonal produce. They borrow from diverse, global culinary traditions. And even the most ambitious tend to cultivate a relaxing, casual atmosphere. Arguably the birthplace of the craft-cocktail movement, San Francisco is responsible for introducing many drinks into the canon — the martini, the Pisco Punch and the Irish Coffee among them — and even as bars here have struggled to stay in business during the pandemic, today they remain as innovative as ever.

The 19 bars on this list exemplify all that the city has to offer, from upscale mixology dens like the Linden Room and True Laurel to historic landmarks like Elixir and House of Shields. A couple of caveats are in order. First, while there are many restaurants in the city with excellent cocktail programs, we’ve limited this collection to places that are primarily bars, not restaurants (though some do serve food). And as much as we love a good dive bar, this list is not about them. If a dive bar’s what you’re after, check out our Ultimate Guide to Classic S.F. Bars.
Explore the bars
Check the boxes to filter by features or click on the images to get info on each location.

☐ ☐ Serves food  ☐ ☐ Outdoor Seating
15 Romolo

15 Romolo Pl., San Francisco

Show on map

A North Beach hideaway for Spanish-inspired drinking.

Romolo Place, a tiny alley in North Beach, used to be home to the Basque Hotel, famous for its family-style Spanish meals. When bartenders Greg Lindgren and Jon Gasparini took over the place more than 20 years ago, they wanted to honor that legacy — and they made 15 Romolo into one of the best places in the Bay Area to drink Sherry, the Spanish fortified wine. The dark, moody bar offers several Sherrys by the glass, plus a smart selection of Iberian wines, from crisp Verdejo to bold Tempranillo. Sherry makes appearances in the cocktails, such as in the Velvet Jukebox, which mixes manzanilla with jammy sloe gin and Tequila, but other drinks aren’t particularly Spanish-inflected. Try a Pimm’s Cup, exploding with fresh flavors of ginger, cucumber and mint, or a bracingly cold frozen daiquiri.

Open: 5 p.m.-2 a.m. daily
415-398-1359 • 15romolo.com

ABV

3174 16th St., San Francisco

Show on map

Understated cocktails and some of the best bar food in the city.

The cocktails at ABV are deceptively simple. Most have only three or four ingredients, but they pull off layers of complexity, whether in the Señora Sol — which combines citrusy gin and floral vermouth with manzanilla Sherry for an ultra-refreshing take on a martini — or the Gin & Celery, which adds just a hint of vegetal crunch to the gin-and-tonic template. Also on offer is exemplary bar food, all of which is intended to be consumed without utensils: an excellent cheeseburger, a plate of fries topped with blackened octopus, a heap of spicy fried cauliflower florets. (Hand wipes are provided.) The real treasure here is the spirits selection, and if you’re curious to try a new gin, mezcal or whiskey neat or on the rocks, it would be worth asking one of the knowledgeable bartenders for a recommendation.

Open: 4 p.m.-2 a.m. daily
415-294-1871 • abvsf.com
The Alembic

A pioneering craft-cocktail bar reimagined under new ownership.

The Alembic helped steer San Francisco's craft-cocktail revival after it opened in 2006, as part of a new wave of bars in the city sourcing high-quality ingredients for classic cocktails. After owner Dave McClean, also the founder of Magnolia Brewing, declared bankruptcy in 2015, the fate of the bar was uncertain. But in 2018, a new team came in, and the Alembic today is better than ever. The fun nighttime energy of the original iteration is still very much alive, and these days you can get an extra dose of Haight-Ashbury street life by sitting in the outdoor parklet. (When it's cold, they'll give you a space heater.) If you need something warming, try the indulgent Brown Butter Old Fashioned, made with roasted sugar; if not, go for the spicy Night Market, whose cucumber-lemongrass shrub and St. George Botanivore Gin gets a pungent kick from the addition of Thai chile.

Open: 4 p.m.-midnight Thursday-Sunday
415-666-0822 • alembicsf.com

Anina

Hayes Valley's best spot for day drinking.

The allure of Anina is its spacious patio. It was a great place to drink before the pandemic, and it's even better now, with ample space for social distancing and taking in the sunshine on a warm Hayes Valley afternoon. Unlike Brass Tacks, the owners’ other bar next door, the decor and the drinks at Anina are insistently light, with a menu dominated by aperitifs and other low-alcohol drinks based on Sherry and vermouth. (Of course, there are boozy options too.) The Logroni is a textbook example of the style, a concoction of an Italian aperitif, a mellow California amaro and nutty manzanilla Sherry; its gentle sweetness and perfectly proportioned bitterness go down easy.

Open: 1-6 p.m. Sunday, 4-8 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday, 2-9 p.m. Friday-Saturday
aninasf.com

Blackbird
2124 Market St., San Francisco

Straightforward, balanced, unintimidating cocktails.

Blackbird is the rare San Francisco cocktail bar that doesn't seem like it's trying to be a destination. Instead, it feels built for its neighborhood. Located near the intersection of the Castro and Mid-Market, the space is lowkey and welcoming, with comfortable red-leather booths and light streaming in from Market St. There's no shame in ordering a basic drink like a whiskey-ginger ale or a vodka-soda, but if you put yourself in bar manager Matthew Grippo's hands, you won't be disappointed. He has a knack for subtle drinks that never taste too sweet, like the No Bad Days, whose blend of rums, coconut, passionfruit and cacao could taste cloyingly tropical but instead taste balanced.

Open: 2 p.m.-midnight Sunday, 4 p.m.-midnight Monday-Wednesday, 4 p.m.-2 a.m. Thursday-Friday, 2 p.m.-2 a.m. Saturday
415-872-5310 • blackbirdbar.com

Chezchez
584 Valencia St., San Francisco

The Trick Dog's team newest bar leans into aperitivo culture.

If you've been to Trick Dog, one of San Francisco's most acclaimed bars, you know it loves an elaborate cocktail with eccentric ingredients. (For now, Trick Dog is still closed, operating instead as a hot dog stand.) The team's latest effort, Chezchez, takes the opposite approach. It opened in August on Valencia St. in the space that formerly housed Bon Voyage, and the new bar celebrates refreshing, before-dinner drinks like spritzes, sparkling wine and Bloody Marys. Try the creamy Beans a la Buvette with a briny-tasting Coastal Martini.

Open: 4:30-10 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 4:30-10:30 p.m. Saturday
415-658-7878 • chezchezinsf.com

Elixir
3200 16th St., San Francisco

Making great drinks in the Mission since 1858.

As San Francisco's second-oldest bar, Elixir has plenty of charming, antique touches — dark, carved wood, old posters, a big “SALOON” sign outside that looks like something out of the Wild West. But there's nothing outdated about this Mission District tavern, thanks to owner H. Joseph Ehrmann's
sophisticated bartending sensibilities. Among the best drinks on the menu is the Pamplemousse, which tastes like a less juicy version of a Paloma: Grapefruit liqueur, smoky mezcal, a spicy pepper cordial and citrus bitters result in a clear, irresistibly quaffable cocktail. Still, don’t be afraid to order a shot and a beer here (the house special is Four Roses yellow label with a Pabst Blue Ribbon). It’s not fancy.

Open: 2-10 p.m. Sunday, 4-10 p.m. Monday-Wednesday, 4 p.m.-2 a.m. Thursday-Friday, noon-2 a.m. Saturday
415-552-1633 • elixirsf.com

House of Shields
39 New Montgomery St., San Francisco

Downtown San Francisco’s requisite stop for a classy drink.

Walking into the House of Shields feels like entering into a different era of San Francisco, when bartenders wore black ties and light fixtures were a little more grandiose. The watering hole has stood strong on New Montgomery St. since 1908, and during its lifespan, it’s acquired more than a few myths — including a rumor that President Warren Harding might have been poisoned here (then whisked away in an underground tunnel to the Palace Hotel, where he died). Since 2009, it’s been owned by veteran restaurateur Dennis Leary, who has maintained its quirky charm. The cocktails are old-school classics: This is where you order a Bee’s Knees (gin, honey, lemon), a Pisco Punch (Pisco, pineapple, lemon) or a Hemingway Daiquiri (rum, lime, maraschino liqueur). Familiar, tried and true and unfailingly well executed: That’s the House of Shields’ enduring appeal.

Open: 2 p.m.-2 a.m. Monday-Friday, 5 p.m.-2 a.m. Saturday-Sunday
415-769-8109

The Interval at Long Now
2 Marina Blvd., Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture, Building A, San Francisco

A cerebral, library-esque bar operated by musician Brian Eno’s nonprofit.

There’s no bar quite like the Interval at Long Now, nestled next to Green’s Restaurant in Fort Mason. It’s operated by the Long Now Foundation, a nonprofit whose stated goal is to “foster long-term thinking and responsibility in the framework of the next 10,000 years,” co-founded by composer Brian Eno. Accordingly, the bar is full of abstract artwork, walls of books and a striking, winding staircase at its center. The menu has a strong point of view, with lengthy descriptions for each of its drinks. Try the drink
called I’ve Grown to Love Life Too Much, an allusion to a line from “The Brothers Karamazov.” It’s a rich concoction of Cognac, pear liqueur and crème de cacao, with a separate glass of sparkling wine on the side to cut the intensity. If you want a drink that looks as beautiful as this bar’s interior, try the Improved Calvados Cocktail, which tastes like apples plucked fresh from an orchard. Served over a sloped ice cube, the glass appears to be only half full (or half empty, depending on how you see things).

Open: 1-10 p.m. Sunday, 10 a.m.-10 p.m. Monday, 4-11 p.m. Tuesday-Wednesday, 10 a.m.-11 p.m. Thursday-Friday, 1-11 p.m. Saturday
415-496-9187 • theinterval.org

10/19
Junior
2545 24th St., San Francisco

A comfy haven for mezcals and natural wine.

Although owner David Ruiz swears he didn’t set out to open a mezcals bar, Junior certainly passes for one. The menu offers some great mezcals cocktails — including a top-notch margarita — but enthusiasts will enjoy the chance to drink a copita the way it’s served in Oaxaca, with orange slices and tangy sal de gusano served on the side. Straddling the border of the Mission and Potrero Hill, Junior strikes a comfortable, neighborhood-focused mood, with plenty of natural light indoors and sidewalk seating for groups of coworkers who come in for a drink after shifts at nearby Zuckerberg S.F. General Hospital. There’s an uncommonly smart selection of local craft beers (from the likes of Ghost Town, Cellarmaker and Half Moon Bay) and natural wines from producers like Santa Cruz’s Florez and Berkeley’s Hammerling.

Open: 4-10 p.m. Tuesday-Wednesday, 4 p.m.-midnight Thursday-Saturday
415-814-2107 • juniorbarsf.com

11/19
Kona’s Street Market
32 3rd St., San Francisco

Eclectic cocktails inspired by international food traditions.

The menu at Kona’s Street Market, which opened downtown in the spring of 2021, is organized by region — Asia, Americas, Europe, Africa and Middle East — with each section highlighting goods that would be found at their street markets. In the Asia chapter, that means ube, which gets fashioned as a kind of adult Dole Whip in the Red + Blue, blended with rum, Sherry and coconut. The bold flavors offered here
will be familiar to anyone who frequented Pacific Cocktail Haven, the bar owned by one of Kona's partners, Kevin Diedrich. While Pacific Cocktail Haven remains closed following a fire, Kona's is a great place to get your juicy, tropical drinking fix. The service in this dark, cozy-feeling spot is uncommonly personable, with knowledgeable bartenders who will patiently advise on the drink selection for anyone wondering what exactly a sumac-cold brew-and-Calvados concoction might taste like (that's the Milk Was a Bad Choice cocktail, by the way, and it’s delicious).

Open: 3-11 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 1 p.m.-1:30 a.m. Friday-Saturday
konasstreetmarket.com

Linden Room
292 Linden St., San Francisco
Show on map

Elegant, exacting cocktails in lilliputian quarters.

Though not officially the smallest bar in San Francisco (that distinction belongs to the Marina’s 7-by-19-foot Black Horse London Pub), the Linden Room is arrestingely tiny, with space for only eight chairs. Since it doesn’t take reservations, it can be tough to snag one of those seats; be prepared to wait outside, on the little Linden Street alley. The bar is attached to the upscale Nightbird restaurant, and the drinks here are subject to the same ingredient-sourcing standards as the dinner menu. This place has been doing the green-juice cocktail (imagine adding Tequila to a smoothie of cucumber, apple, ginger and kale) since before it was cool. The Ralphie Boy, a whiskey cocktail, is always on offer, but its fruit syrup changes based on the season. Right now, it’s peaches, and topped with a smoked, whipped egg white that recalls a meringue.

Open: 5 p.m.-midnight Tuesday-Thursday, 5 p.m.-1 a.m. Friday-Saturday
415-829-7565 • nightbirdrestaurant.com

Lost & Found
1439 Taraval St., San Francisco
Show on map

A funky, laid-back retreat in the Outer Sunset.

This under-the-radar cocktail spot is worthy of a trip to the Outer Sunset for the warm, generous service and the juicy, not-too-boozy drinks. It’s the sort of place where bartenders introduce themselves by name, and if you’re a first-time customer, they may even throw you a bonus mini cocktail as a way of saying welcome. That could be the creamy J-Town Matcha, made with the Japanese green tea and oat
milk, balanced by ginger and pungent whiskey. Or it could be the Punchline, a drink that's periwinkle-colored thanks to the addition of butterfly pea flower tea. Aloe liqueur gives it a barely herbal undertone.

Open: 2-10 p.m. Sunday, 5 p.m.-midnight Monday-Wednesday, 5 p.m.-2 a.m. Thursday-Saturday
415-662-3636 • lostandfoundbarsf.com

Moongate Lounge
28 Waverly Pl., San Francisco
Show on map

A lunar-inspired bar above Mister Jiu’s with ambitious culinary leanings.

Chinatown restaurant Mister Jiu’s always mixed a good drink, but it took its cocktail game to a new level in 2019 by opening an upstairs bar, Moongate Lounge. Aesthetically, the place is mesmerizing, with plushly textured furniture and a pink-and-blue color scheme that’s begging for selfies. The drinks are as precise, colorful and flavorful as the food downstairs. Curly strands of corn husk garnish the spicy, ultra-savory Grain in Ear, made with mezcal, yellow chartreuse and chile crisp. Elsewhere, the mild taste of Chinese wintermelon counters the intense sweetness of bourbon in the Major Heat, with bitters made from tart hawthorn berries.

Open: 7 p.m.-midnight Thursday-Saturday
415-857-9688 • moongatelounge.com

Rye
688 Geary St., San Francisco
Show on map

Nob Hill’s best spot for whiskey.

While 15 Romolo is Greg Lindgren and Jon Gasparini’s celebration of Sherry, Rye is their temple to whiskey. It's a sleek, modern place with exposed brick, a wall of crawling ivy on the facade and bartenders who take whiskey very seriously. They do dark, spirituous drinks well here — not only classics like manhattans and Old Fashioneds but also original creations like the War Bonnet; the cocktail mixes rye with Cognac, dry vermouth and amaro for something that's hearty and bitter enough for the end of the night but still refreshing enough for happy hour. If you’re not in the mood for brown spirits, try the fruity, frothy Hoi Oligoi, made with multiple vermouths, sparkling wine, a botanical-inflected gin and salty olive bitters. Though there’s no fully outdoor seating, there is a semi-outdoor section that feels relatively open-air.

Open: 4-10 p.m. Sunday-Thursday, 4 p.m.-midnight Friday-Saturday
Sea Star
2289 3rd St., San Francisco

For a bar that’s been around since 1899, the Sea Star doesn’t have as much notoriety as you might expect. The saloon has gone by many names over the course of its long history, and has been operated as the Sea Star only since 2015; in that time, it’s won a loyal customer base. It exists quietly in Dogpatch, catering to nearby residents who come here for easygoing mixed drinks, good craft beer and games of pool. Co-owner Alicia Walton is in charge of the cocktails, and one of her best standards is the Czechs & Balances, a drink that counters intensely smoky and acidic flavors from fernet and lemon juice with sweeter flavors from bourbon and honey. Eight cocktails are available on draft, which makes for speedier service.

Open: 2 p.m.-midnight Sunday, 4 p.m.-midnight Wednesday-Thursday, 4 p.m.-2 a.m. Friday-Saturday

Third Rail
628 20th St., San Francisco

Cocktails, shots and the most extensive selection of jerky you’ll ever find.

Few bars — or restaurants, for that matter — lean into jerky as strongly as Third Rail, a cocktail spot on a side street in Dogpatch. These dehydrated strips of meat (or not meat; there’s also a vegetarian option) do turn out to be good drinking snacks, salty enough to keep you thirsty. It’s perfectly acceptable here to order a trio of jerky, beer and a shot, but it’s also very much worth perusing the cocktail menu to try one of bartender Jeff Lyon’s creations. He divides the menu, helpfully, between citrusy cocktails and spirit-forward cocktails (what other categories do you really need?). You might as well go with the signature order, also called the Third Rail, which tastes like a more interesting, floral whiskey sour, adding Lillet aperitif and honey to a base of bourbon and lemon juice.

Open: 2-8 p.m. Sunday, 4-10 p.m. Wednesday- Thursday, 4 p.m.-midnight Friday, 2 p.m.-midnight Saturday
**True Laurel**

*753 Alabama St., San Francisco*

Show on map

*Click the dots to see more images.*

High-concept, Michelin-approved drinks and food from the Lazy Bear team.

The Mission District, two-Michelin-starred restaurant Lazy Bear created True Laurel as a spinoff bar in 2017. Nicolas Torres is the mastermind behind the drink menu, and he doesn’t shy away from bold, modern-feeling flavor combinations, like blueberry and Madeira, or shiso and dill. One item that encapsulates the mood is the Mai o Mai. Like a classic mai tai, Torres’ creation combines light and dark rum with lime juice, Curaçao and orgeat. But in this case, the orgeat is a housemade syrup with pistachios and orange flowers, rather than the traditional almond. The light rum is made into a clarified milk punch, rendering the typically orange-colored drink crystal clear. Meanwhile, the dark rum is infused with coffee beans and left to float on top of the rest of the drink, adding a burnt orange-colored rim. The result is strikingly beautiful and meticulous, which describes just about everything at True Laurel. This is one of those bars that can sometimes feel like a restaurant, with such thoughtful food items and full table service. Right now, this verdant stretch of Alabama St. makes it particularly pleasant to sit outdoors.

**Open:** 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Sunday, 4-10 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday, 4-11 p.m. Friday, 11 a.m.-11 p.m. Saturday

415-341-0020 • truelaurelsf.com

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**White Cap**

*3608 Taraval St., San Francisco*

Show on map

*Click the dots to see more images.*

A surfer’s paradise near the Pacific.

Just a few blocks inland from Ocean Beach in the Outer Sunset is White Cap, a bar by surfers and for surfers. Bartender Carlos Yturria, a co-owner of the downtown bar the Treasury, is in charge of the drinks here, and many convey a restrained beachy attitude — whether it’s the addition of seaweed in the Monkey Wrench, a rum-based slushie, or the vibrant hit of guava in the Electric Avenue, made with Tequila and St. Germain. Because this is San Francisco, though, a beachy vibe is also a chilly vibe. To ward off the post-surfing chills, White Cap keeps a fire going indoors, and usually has one hot drink on the menu, like the currently available Beach Blanket, made with pumpkin, chai and coconut milk.

**Open:** 12:30-11 p.m. Sunday, 3-11 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 3 p.m.-12:30 a.m. Friday, 12:30 p.m.-12:30 a.m. Saturday

415-682-4215 • whitecapsf.com
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