

Party like it's prohibition

One hundred years after prohibition was imposed across the USA, **Tamara Hinson** toasts Washington D.C.'s flourishing speakeasy scene, which pays homage to rule breakers new and old

Photographs **Jennifer Chase**



It's certainly one of the strangest messages I've received prior to an interview: "See you at 10am – just walk through the freezer door". If you hadn't guessed, the Washington D.C. venue I'm heading to is a speakeasy, albeit one where quality cocktails and a passion for the city's past take precedence over the identikit bells and whistles often associated with similar venues. Yes, the door to Backroom (a nondescript industrial freezer-esque door inside Capo Deli) is disguised as exactly that, but the biggest surprise isn't a ridiculously strict dress code or the discovery that I need a password to enter (I don't). It's the lack of pretentiousness and a menu filled with innovative cocktails.

Given that speakeasies were created as safe havens for rule breakers, it's ironic that the originals bear little resemblance to many modern incarnations, where rules often govern everything from passwords to footwear. However, it's hard to imagine this fate befalling the ones you find in Washington D.C. these days.

Perhaps it's hardly surprising D.C. does speakeasies so well. After all, the city experienced prohibition earlier than everywhere else. Prohibition was imposed



Hidden in plain sight

The entrance to Backroom, inside Capo Deli (above). A bartender mixes cocktails at Backroom (right). Deke Dunne greets guests with a smile and shaker at Allegory (previous page)

nation-wide in January 1920, but D.C. went dry in 1917. Senators were keen to make the city a shining example of abstinence – ironic, given there were more illegal speakeasies during prohibition than legal bars beforehand. Estimates hover at around 3,000, and many patrons were hard-drinking senators who'd backed prohibition.

Jim Hewes, a cocktail historian and bartender who's worked at the historic Willard InterContinental's Round Robin bar for 34 years, has served countless presidents, including Reagan, Clinton and Obama. This cosy, wood-paneled bar, metres from the White House, has always been the preferred watering hole of D.C.'s elite (many of whom frequented the speakeasy hidden on the 10th floor during prohibition).

Ironically, it's D.C.'s political gravitas that could be behind its explosion of speakeasies. D.C. was the only US city where alcohol could be served legally during prohibition – you →



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Come on in

The entrance to The Gibson (above), a speakeasy with softly-lit booths and alcohol prescriptions on the wall. Julia Ebell, creative director at The Gibson (right) has created a menu packed with obscure cocktails



just had to enter another country. “You’ve got embassies, which are foreign soil,” says Hewes. “When you entered the British embassy, you were in Britain. During prohibition, if the French embassy held a Bastille Day reception, you’d want to be there – they had the best Beaujolais.”

The need to conceal alcohol consumption had another peculiar effect. “Prohibition spawned creativity,” says Hewes, explaining that mixers such as tomato juice were used to mask alcohol. “This led to the evolution of highballs – you could sit there drinking what resembled a glass of juice. These drinks became cocktails such as the Bloody Mary or the Screwdriver.” Shorts such as Manhattans became increasingly popular. “You drank fast and furious, because there was always the risk of getting busted.”

That creativity continued after prohibition when there was a newfound thirst for these drinks – and no shortage of obliging bartenders, many of whom had honed their mixology skills in Europe during prohibition.

“Prohibition spawned creativity and led to the evolution of highballs”

At The Gibson, a beautiful speakeasy with intimate, softly-lit booths and framed alcohol prescriptions on the wall, several cocktails pay tribute to one such bartender. “I created an obscure classics menu featuring lesser-known cocktails from the Savoy Cocktail Book, written in 1930 by Harry Craddock,” explains Julia Ebell, the bar’s creative director. “Like many bartenders, Craddock fled the US during prohibition. His book is a wonderful reflection of the creative renaissance they experienced. Recreating these drinks for modern tastes shaped how I think about cocktails.” →



Given D.C.'s close ties with prohibition, it's hardly surprising that today's speakeasy owners aren't content to simply stick moustachioed mixologists behind the bar and Sinatra on the jukebox. Take The Mirror. Yes, the door's disguised as a mirror, but that's where the gimmicks end. Co-owner Jeff Coles believes the idea of conforming to rigid standards is the opposite of what speakeasies are about. "They were places to break the rules, so the idea of handlebar moustaches and braces seems like the antithesis of that," he points out.

Instead, Coles honours prohibition in more authentic ways. A large chunk of wall space is filled with books about the history of mixology. "We focus almost exclusively on classic cocktails, replicated with a great degree of historical accuracy," he explains. "For example, we'll look at what type of gin was used in a certain drink and try to replicate it."

One of the most popular cocktails is the whisky-based Scofflaw (its name references Americans who continued to drink during prohibition – scoffing at the law). "It was

Glass half full

Co-owner of The Mirror, Jeff Coles, kicks back with a classic cocktail (above). The mural at Allegory (right) follows the journey of civil rights hero Ruby Bridges who attended an all-white school in 1960

invented in Harry's New York Bar in Paris," reveals Coles. "Expats hung out there and it was a way of poking fun at prohibition."

What sets D.C.'s speakeasies apart is their hidden depths. A brilliant example of this is Allegory, a gorgeous bar (think huge leather couches and vast expanses of polished wood) accessed via a door hidden among the books in the lobby at the Eaton Workshop hotel. At first glance, the stunning wraparound mural covering its walls appears to pay homage to *Alice in Wonderland*. However, the plait-sporting girl is Ruby Bridges, the first African American to attend an all-white school in 1960. "There's a photo of her being escorted into school by four white marshals, who are represented by the donkeys," explains bar supervisor Deke Dunne. "As the mural wraps around you've got a →



“We just want to make great cocktails and be inclusive”

rebalancing of power, signified by chess pieces tumbling down. At the end, she's a grown woman who's tackled huge issues.”

Like the other bartenders I spoke to, Dunne hasn't got time for the box-ticking. “We don't play old-timey music or have handlebar moustaches. We just want to make great cocktails and be as inclusive as possible.” This inclusivity is another trait of prohibition, when people from all walks of life were thrown together through a love of liquor.

Here, the few gimmicks which do exist almost always have historical significance. Take the bathtub gin and tonics served at the Graham Georgetown hotel's Alex Craft Cocktail Cellar & Speakeasy. They are nods to the homemade gin brewed in bathtubs during prohibition. Today, the gin isn't made in bathtubs, although it's steeped inhouse.

But that doesn't mean that D.C.'s modern speakeasies are devoid of fun. Take Backroom, the atmospheric cocktail bar hidden within Capo Deli, an Italian eatery best known for its gut-busting subs, or Chicken + Whiskey, a speakeasy hidden behind a refrigerator door in a chicken restaurant. Both are light-hearted nods to an era which shaped D.C., rather than a feature designed to restrict access to those in the know – at Chicken + Whiskey, waiters happily point sheepish-looking visitors towards the refrigerator.

The hardest speakeasy to find turns out to be Left Door – not because the entrance to 1345 S



This left feels right

The entrance to Left Door (above), the most hidden-away speakeasy in Washington. Bar manager Faith Alice Sleeper (right) has ensured that Left Door has the feel of a cosy living room

St NW is disguised as a bookcase but because at first glance, the paint-peeled door and steep staircase beyond make it easy to mistake for a private residence. And while that's admittedly part of the image, it's also another example of how D.C.'s speakeasies defy convention. Left Door is in a largely residential area, next to a laundrette, and just outside the immediate city centre, but its status as one of D.C.'s best-loved speakeasies is testament to its quality.

“The aim was to create an intimate bar which served quality drinks,” says bar manager Faith Alice Sleeper. The first-floor bar feels like a cosy living room – complete with flowery china cups hanging on the wall.

It's this reluctance to play by the rules which has allowed D.C.'s speakeasy scene to evolve into something infinitely more exciting and long-lasting than bars which simply mimic well-worn concepts. The best bit? Everyone's welcome – no password required. **b**



Travel notes



✓ **Where to stay**

From The Jefferson Hotel (inspired by the founding father) to the more affordable American Guest House, where you'll feel like a local, there's a lot of choice.

americanguesthouse.com;
jeffersondc.com

✓ **Where to eat**

After sampling cocktails at the city's best speakeasies, soak up the alcohol with a giant slice at Jumbo Slice Pizza – a cheap and cheerful D.C. institution, known as the 'King of D.C.'s Late-Night Food'.

jumbo-slice.business.site

✓ **Don't miss...**

The American Enterprise exhibit at D.C.'s National Museum of American History, which includes a look at prohibition-era bootlegging. Items on display include a medicinal whisky bottle.

americanhistory.si.edu

✓ **Remember to pack...**

Some comfortable walking shoes – D.C. is a city built for walking – and a camera to snap all the sights, celebrities and politicians you simply can't avoid as you explore the capital.