

Collecting Cocktail Lounges

by
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Neither cocktail lounges nor cocktails were new in the 1930s when both became quite popular. Far back into the 19th century, men enjoyed lounging at bars and tables in hotels and other places while they imbibed cocktails, along with cobbler, fixes, fizzes, flips, juleps, and more. Cocktails became popular after the Civil War and a regular pre-dinner habit in the 1890s.

In those times, drinking in public was a male enterprise. Later, during Prohibition in the 1920s, when it became illegal to sell alcoholic beverages, drinking in the home, formerly rare, became common. Women who had generally shunned drinking in public began to indulge. Since bootleggers made more money from concentrated alcohol than wine or beer, cocktails rose in favor with both sexes.

Upon repeal of Prohibition in the early 1930s, hotels and restaurants made plans to capitalize on cocktail drinking, ushering in the era of luxurious cocktail lounges that could attract women as well as men. According to one report in 1934, the new spaces attained a level of respectability by avoiding the old term “bar room,” preferring instead to be called cocktail bars, cocktail lounges, Persian rooms, palm rooms, and tap rooms. Cocktail “hours,” often accompanied by a tinkling piano, were instituted to encourage patronage.

In some senses, though, Prohibition hung around for years, even decades. Some states and towns did not permit cocktail lounges, while others only allowed men to be served at bars. The latter rules favored having a lounge with tables.

Hotels were prominent among the places where cocktail lounges were installed, and they still remain in many today, providing meeting places for socializing with friends or doing business with associates. Some, such as the new lounge at the Hotel Jermyn in Scranton PA in 1935, were quite glamorous with their bright colors, shiny surfaces, and over-the-top interpretations of art deco motifs.

It isn't too far fetched to say that in the 1930s New York cocktail lounges were swankier than the restaurants they accompanied. Creative uses of materials such as metals, glass and leather, modern furniture, mu-

rals, and clever lighting set a tone quite unlike earlier decades. Color choices were striking, especially on surfaces not usually painted brightly, such as tabletops and ceilings.

But women didn't really love the hard, smooth yet cold, ultra-modern look. According to a 1934 article in *Restaurant Management* titled "The Ladies Must Be Pleased," they actually preferred Colonial themes, something that designers would have realized if they had paid attention to the tea rooms of the 1920s.

The advantages of setting off a space for a cocktail lounge made good sense for restaurants because it drew people in. And there was always a good chance that some who came in for a drink would decide to stay for dinner. Plus, the lounge served as a waiting place for diners. Liquor offered higher profits than food, and having an attractive lounge extended the flow of traffic both before and after the dinner hours. Of course, space was at a premium, with high rents in some cities, New York in particular. Anyone attending Goldie's supper club in New York in 1955 was going to be crammed into a tight space with the club's owner, pianist Goldie Hawkins. How servers maneuvered around his piano without spilling drinks on the well-dressed patrons is a mystery.

Cocktail lounges were rarely found in small cafes, and pretty much never in commonplace lunch rooms. But they *were* found in a number of Chinese restaurants that adopted a nightclub style, as well as some California drive-ins, a restaurant type quite different than the standard drive-in, and often referred to as the California coffee shop. The Tiny's drive-in chain in the San Francisco area had it all: carhops, a dining room, and a cocktail lounge.

Yet, clearly, America was never totally comfortable with cocktail lounges, or bars, and regulated their numbers. Even as the Chicago suburb of Glen Ellyn eased its liquor law, allowing restaurants to serve mixed drinks, it capped cocktail lounge seating to 25% of seating in a restaurant's dining areas. The 1980s saw the cocktail lounge recede somewhat as a restaurant feature when movements to reduce drunk driving took hold and the cost of liability insurance rose. Consumption of cocktails and hard liquor generally shrank as wine grew in popularity. These trends continued into the 1990s as cities restricted the number of liquor licenses granted.

In recent years, cocktails have become popular once again. [<https://restaurant-ingthroughhistory.com/tag/cocktail-lounges/>]

