

## IMAGE

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## BARS

QUENCHING  
EVERY THIRST

There are swank clubs, updated dives, tiny speakeasies, high-end cocktails. Options keep growing.

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Poppi Monroe has an enthusiastic prediction for Swill Automatic, the wine bar she plans to open this month on warehouse-chic Industrial Street in downtown L.A.: "People will want to come from all over the city," says the buoyant actress-cum-bar-manager.

It could be an anthem for a slew of entrepreneurs who are opening new bars in downtown's core or along its still-underserved edges. They are all banking on the same thing — that Angelenos in search of the latest drinks trend — whether it's pre-Prohibition or Tiki cocktails or wines by the ounce — are increasingly willing to venture into neighborhoods that were last popular in the 1930s (or never even drew crowds at all).

Faster than you can say "martini, extra dry with a twist," it seems that another cocktail or wine bar has popped up — eight and counting since just this spring (and that's not including the bars at the new Ritz-Carlton/JW Marriott). All this is in addition to an already burgeoning downtown drinking scene that might be considered ground zero for the city's classic-cocktail revival.

Santa Monica may have its beachy watering holes and Hollywood its plushy lounges, but ask any imbibing aficionado: Downtown seems to have it all. Tucked-away speakeasies, swank supper clubs, updated dives, high-end restaurants with sophisticated cocktail programs, and spirit-specific bars that are altars to mezcal, whiskey or rum.

Mignon is the new, extra-diminutive wine bar on 6th Street that references its former incarnation as a tailor shop, complete with clothes-hanger chandeliers and walls sketched with how-to-

tie-a-tie diagrams. The Falls debuted last month on Spring Street, where owner Michelle Marini — who opened Hollywood's Lava Lounge in the early '90s — presides over a woodsy-themed, '70s-rock cocktail den. Think gold-painted tree-stump tables and bartenders sporting butterfly collars (warning: They play fast and loose with a soda gun).

Villains Tavern also opened last month, in a space at the end of Palmetto Street. Its charming, light-strewn patio belies its gritty location in a largely unexplored part of the-arts-district-meets-East-L.A., next to a muay Thai kickboxing studio that was once a meatpacking plant. Villains is the latest venture from Dana Hollister, a designer/scene maker who has a reputation for spotting diamonds in the rough in overlooked neighborhoods (once it was Silver Lake, now it's downtown).

"I fell in love with this forlorn building on the edge of nowhere," Hollister says. "This area has so much promise. Unlike the historic core [downtown's center between Hill and Main streets and 3rd and 9th streets] you can feel what isn't here anymore, what it once was. Ultimately it has its own sex appeal."

Despite worries about a double-dip recession, some of the latest bars here lean less toward the work-a-day and more toward the glamorous. When's the last time you saw a hostess in a full-length evening gown?

At 4-month-old supper club First & Hope the look is grand despite its strip-mall locale. The staff are outfitted in dresses and uniforms designed by Allison Leach, a "Mad Men" costume designer, and crystal chandeliers hang from the ceiling. It's an appropriately svelte ambience for a brandy Alexander or Seelbach — that's Woodford Reserve bourbon, orange curacao, bitters and a little Champagne. The drinks list is curated by cocktail gurus Aidan Demarest and Marcos Tello.

Downtown bar mogul Cedd Moses, the man behind a cocktail empire that spans neighborhood favorites Tony's Saloon and Seven Grand (both whiskey-centric), has embraced the trend to focus on a single spirit. In the spring, he opened Las Perlas, where agave spirit obsessives can indulge in tastings of

esoteric mezcals (about 180 of them). Bar manager Raul Yrastorza also makes a mean poblano Escobar (poblano chile, pineapple, cumin and mezcal).

"The great thing about downtown," Yrastorza says, "is that you have a blank canvas and people who are receptive to things that are new."

Rum your thing? Just weeks after unveiling Las Perlas, Moses completed the transformation of his formerly private club, the Doheny, into Cana Rum Bar, an homage to tropicalia where the daiquiri comes five ways, including one with 12-year anejo rum.

And nobody here is knocking the mojito, the Cuban quaff that fueled too many cocktail parties in 2005. "Nothing wrong with a mojito," says general manager Allan Katz. "It's just that people started taking too many shortcuts. You've got to stir until you see beads on the outside of the glass."

Meanwhile, the vest-and-suspenders-wearing bartenders at the likes of the Varnish and Cole's Red Car Bar are still dedicated to making drinks from the early 20th century or before (sometimes with a modern interpretation) such as the 1930s version of a Poet's Dream — more gin than French vermouth and Benedictine. And fresh ingredients — limes, cucumbers, plums, berries, etc. — continue to be the focus at the bars at restaurants Rivera and Drago Centro, the former with a Latin inflection and the latter with an Italian twist.

As for the cheekily named Swill Automatic, wines from around the world will flow from several banks of Enomatic machines — you insert a prepaid card into one of the machines and it dispenses the wine of your choice. Partner-manager Monroe lives in the building next door in downtown's less-populated wholesale district. "This neighborhood is like New York's meatpacking district before it flipped.

"It feels like you're at the beginning of something that in a few years will be the coolest thing in the world."

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