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Alexandra Kearney serves up ice-cold refreshment at the Top of the East.

# Hotel Bar Safari

Romantic cocktail-hour getaways can be found within the city's luxury lodgings. BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER

**W**hat is it about a hotel bar? That's easy. First, there's the thrilling illusion that you're a sophisticated traveler visiting the super-hot dining destination city of Portland. This is followed by the smug knowledge that you live here, and all these other people don't. (That is, until you start bumping into people you know, fellow escapist seekers of the same illusion...)

## A 'TINI AT THE TOP

Spring arriving a little too late for your liking? Here's a tip. Push away

from your desk at 5 p.m. one night this week and head for High Street. Let the all-glass doors whoosh open and sweep you into the lobby of the Westin Portland Harborview. Stride across the polished, twinkling lobby like you own the joint, punch the elevator button, and select '15' once you're inside. You're going all the way up.

The Top of the East is a guaranteed attitude adjustment, no matter how many times you've been there. Seeing Portland from way up is a thrill. The Channel 6 signal tower is *right there*, along with Back Cove, Portland Harbor, the bridge. A platoon of bartenders in black shirts & ties and cocktail wait-

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## HUNGRY EYE

resses in little black dresses glides among the black, white, and sepia furniture. It's all right-angled, modernist, and understated.

"I like the Last Night in Oaxaca," says Alexandra Kearney, our bow-tied barkeep. It's a mezcal-based concoction involving cranberry tea and Gran Marnier. "The most popular is probably the Portland Sour. It's really good, too—Double Cross vodka, lemon, brown sugar, and port." The menu of intricate specialty cocktails ranges in price from \$10 to \$15. But we've come for happy hour, so we choose unbranded drinks. Alexandra strains one vodka martini and one cosmo into martini glasses of the size Joan Collins used to wave around on *Dynasty*. The glasses are frozen, the first sips bracing, and the happy hour price for each is just \$6. A small dish of spicy, salty, crunchy things appears before us.

Within minutes of our arrival, groups of friends, travelers, and clusters of business folk have touched down in droves, nearly filling the vast space.

"You can't rent the entire room, but we have lots of smaller parties here, pretty much every night," says Alexandra. One flock of about 30 near us is perched on bar stools around a long, high island; they're snacking on fresh, house-made potato chips and dips.

Alexandra's name tag includes the information that her passion is dance. Her posture and movements are graceful, so we inquire.

"I was trained in ballet in New York City, but an injury sidelined my career." (If you need further proof that ballerinas really are everywhere, turn the page.) "I've been in Portland a little more than a year, and now I'm too busy even to dance at the clubs." Her smile is brighter than the arty little filament bulbs hanging from the ceiling in neat rows above her. "It was time to get out of New York anyway."

## UNDER MILK STREET

"We make a lot of espresso martinis," says Ben Bragdon, a bartender at the Armory Lounge. The wood-paneled cave is tucked downstairs at the Portland Regency; if you've been there, you know what a valued hideaway it is to Portlanders.

"That's our most popular cocktail right now. On Fridays and Saturdays at cocktail hour, groups of friends come in and we just line up the glasses and make batches of them." The Armory has a martini menu,



The Hyatt's glittery Glass Lounge is a good spot to pause for reflection.

but most of the drinks on it are the antithesis of the lean, dry cocktails of Turner Classic Movies. It's all about the sugar nowadays. Flavored vodkas, dashes of Frangelico, Cointreau, infused simple syrups—even maple syrup—dominate. The espresso martini consists of Stoli Vanil, Kahlua, Bailey's, and chilled espresso. "The Almond Joy's been a favorite for ages, too," says Bragdon. "And the Apple Crisp and Chocolate Cake Martini. People who don't want it too sweet like the Blood l'Orange—it's tart, and finished with a little champagne."

Whatever happened to the craft beer craze or a decent glass of pinot noir?

"I mean, we *sell* wine and beer," says Bragdon. "But we're making cocktails here."

## TEMPTATION

A walk up a steep, carpeted staircase delivers you into Portland Harbor Hotel's plush reception area, which flows seamlessly into the restaurant and bar.

Eve's at the Garden overlooks the hotel's inner courtyard through a wall of glass, one of the city's best views from a restaurant table. The restaurant, bar, and lobby are a pleasing mix of wood, leather, brown corduroy, and muted terracotta and orange upholstery. Loveseats flank a fireplace where flames dance above a zenlike pile of oval beach rocks. A dowager sits in a wing-back armchair at a window table, flanked by what appear to be her son and daughter-in-law; they're having prosecco. Guests are coming, going, dining, drinking—it's a movie set for a travel story.

Eve's bar has a happy hour from 4 to 7 p.m., Sunday through Thursday, during which time Sugar & Spice White Russians and Passion Fruit Martinis go for \$5 and the Bar Bites menu offers such treats as Merguez Sausage Empanadas for \$13.

"We get a lot of people from Boston on weekends," says Helena Crothers, who is making drinks at the bar, which is backed

by library-like shelves lined with bottles and glassware. The hotel's prime location on the corner of Fore and Union streets seems ideal for visitors to city food events.

"It's not really about restaurant week or things like that. People just really want to *eat* in *Portland*. We make reservations all the time. But when they ask, can I get them into Fore Street tonight?" She laughs and shakes her head. "That's like a two-months-ago situation."

James, a waiter, pauses at the bar. "We have a really nice woman who lives here, in the West End. She stays with us for a night every month or so." He smiles conspiratorially. "She likes to get away."

## FISHBOWL ON FORE STREET

By comparison, Glass—the bar at the new Hyatt Place—feels the most like a traveler's super-modern way station. If not for the reassuring sight of Gorgeous Gelato across the street you might be sipping that Smoking Glass Manhattan in the VIP lounge at Any Airport USA. It's all straight edges, cold surfaces, and a solid wall of windows. Three rectangular columns of marbled blue plastic arranged behind the bar between mirrors—all of which climb to a very high ceiling—make the room look like a giant aquarium at night when the columns are illuminated. The underwater sensation is reinforced with a spectacular ceiling fixture in shades of gold and orange that resembles a mass of floating kelp ribbons overhead.

"We show movies from the '60s and '70s on the flat screen," says the beverage manager, Josh Miranda. "Things like *American Graffiti*—it's a lot of fun. We definitely get a local crowd in here. This is the Old Port, right on Fore Street. This is *Broadway*." ■



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