

[I'm Always Drunk in San Francisco: Classic Drinks in the City by the Bay](#)

By [Katie Robbins](#)

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"I'm always drunk in San Francisco," goes the 1962 standard, a favorite of Bay Area crooners. "I always stay out of my mind. But if you've been to San Francisco, they say that things like this go on all the time." Truer words have never been belted. From the whiff of marijuana on every corner to the famously booze-infused Bay to Breakers, to the partying in the streets of the Castro, San Francisco earns its moniker as Fog City for more than just the weather.

However, while a good deal of this imbibing isn't the most discerning in nature, those with a palate for a finely concocted cocktail would do well to park their bar stools in the City by the Bay. "San Francisco is one of the best, if not the best, cocktail cities in the world," says Jeff Hollinger. "Them's fighting words, but Hollinger has the pedigree to back up the claim.

Author of [The Art of the Bar: Cocktails Inspired the Classics](#), Hollinger helped create one of the nation's most esteemed cocktail programs at San Francisco's Absinthe—home for another few weeks of *Top Chef* favorite [Jamie Lauren](#)—by serving up inventive, ingredient-driven cocktails. While he loves pushing the envelope (he's recently been experimenting with mushroom-infused beverages), Hollinger's real love is the classic cocktail. Such drinks have staying power, he says, because they "fall in the realm of simplicity." He compares them to comfort food, explaining that these are the drinks that you'd pair with that infamous dying meal. His choices?

A perfectly roasted chicken and a Manhattan.

So taken is Hollinger with the classic cocktail that last December he stepped down at Absinthe to open a sister property, the [Comstock Saloon](#), which he'll run with Jonny Raglin, another Absinthe bar alum. Hollinger and Raglin have converted the massive San Francisco Brewing Company space into a bar and restaurant reminiscent of a turn-of-the-century saloon. Slated to open May 20, Comstock will feature ragtime jazz piano, seafood cocktails and potted meats and a drinks menu finely focused on the old standards. "It's almost as simple as you can get," he says of the cocktails that will consist almost entirely of martinis, Manhattans, and negronis. "We're getting away from trying to reinvent the wheel."

And while he admits that San Francisco has a reputation for more culinary-inspired drinks, he insists that Comstock is part of a backlash against the perception that, unlike New Yorkers, San Franciscans don't drink the classics. Below some other key Bay Area beverages that he'd include in his cocktail primer.

The Ginger Rogers and the Sacred Heart at [Absinthe](#).

Naturally, Hollinger starts at his former bar, which he says is still going strong, run by "cocktail geeks" like himself. Because it's his old stomping grounds, Hollinger allows Absinthe two classics. The Ginger Rogers, created by Hollinger's predecessor Marco Dionysus, is a mojito-like concoction of gin, ginger beer and mint and has been on the bar's menu since day one, proving its classic potential by becoming a staple of the twelve-year old program. The Sacred Heart earns its spot in Hollinger's pantheon because it was Absinthe's first cocktail to include its namesake liquid when the green fairy was legalized. Unlike other absinthe-based beverages, this one is subtle and layered, combining with pomegranate infused tequila, limoncello, and a splash of lemon-lime juice.

The Manhattan at [Bix](#).

Classic in every sense of the word, this supper club, a city favorite since 1988, is tucked away on tiny alley in Jackson Square. The space immediately sends you back to the glamour of the speakeasy with waiters and bartenders in captain's coats and a menu that highlights oysters, steak tartare, and a classic Cobb. "When I walk into Bix," says Hollinger, "I immediately want to drink a whisky cocktail." He usually goes for the Bix Manhattan, made with Maker's Mark Bourbon and Carpano Sweet Vermouth. But it's not the precise jiggering or a perfect shake that garners Hollinger's praise. "The shape of the glass," he says swooning over the curvy, delicate vessel into which the red-hued liquid is poured. "It's a sexy glass."

The Margarita at [Tommy's](#).

When asked why the margarita at Tommy's, a family owned Mexican stalwart in the Inner Richmond district, makes his list, Hollinger shakes his head and laughs. "It keeps me from drinking too many shots of tequila with Julio," says Hollinger of the temptations of bar master Julio Bermejo's world-class selection of tequilas. But Julio's famous margarita, which has been mimicked around the world, isn't just a less potent distraction from the hard stuff. "Julio reinvented the margarita," explains Hollinger. "No cointreau. Just agave, tequila and lime juice." And boy is there ever lime juice. Sitting at the bar, patrons are treated to a show, as bar backs, powerfully wielding manual juicers, work their way through seemingly endless crates of limes, to create an explosion of citrus in every glass.

The Sazerac at [The Alembic](#).

Part of Hollinger's love for The Alembic stems from the awesome playlist constantly on rotation at this paean to American whiskey. "They play Nashville Pussy so loud you can't even think," he murmurs in awe. "That's my dream." Hollinger also praises the humble creativity shown behind the bar. "It's a whiskey bar, but it's not trying to make a big deal about it," he says. "It's simple and inventive." Co-owner and mixologist Daniel Hyatt's ballsiness extends past his willingness to blast lewd psycho-billy tunes. The Alembic incorporated absinthe into its signature Sazerac before the ban on the green fairy was lifted, an act that earns the New Orleans inspired cocktail a place on Hollinger's list.

The Irish Coffee at [Buena Vista](#).

"It's the only thing they do," says Hollinger of the Irish coffees poured in this almost century old bar. In an unabashedly touristy part of town, with the sounds of cable cars rattling past and a view of Fisherman's Wharf across the street, Bay Area visitors pull up seats at the long bar and watch as practiced bar tenders pour countless rounds of Tullamore whiskey, hot coffee and cream into the waiting rows of glass mugs.

White Manhattan at [Nopa](#).

Although Hollinger believes that the days of the sexy, uber-constructed cocktail may be numbered, he has faith that Neyah White, the man behind the bar at San Francisco hot-spot NOPA will persevere. When White is tending bar, Hollinger opts for bartender's choice, sipping whatever concoction of house-made ingredients and selection of unaged white whiskies that White cares to make. But Hollinger calls NOPA's White Manhattan, made with white whiskey, Dolin blanc, Benedictine, and orange bitters, "a simple stroke of genius." "When I tasted it," he says, "I thought, of course, why the hell wouldn't you?"

And at the end of the day, er, night, it's that sense of predetermined perfection that makes a classic and keeps it so.