

CITY LIFE

SINGAPORE

The city-state's roster of award-winning drinking dens includes stellar hotel bars, sleek speakeasies and reimagined Chinatown shophouses. For a real taste of Singapore's spirit, there's no better introduction than its cocktail scene

WORDS: DELLE CHAN. PHOTOGRAPHS: LAURYN ISHAK





It's almost dinnertime in Singapore and I'm about to polish off an Oyster Omelette. I'm not at one of the city's celebrated open-air hawker centres tucking into the beloved local dish — a glorious mass of crispy, gooey eggs studded with succulent bivalves — but I'm sitting in a bar, enjoying a cocktail of the same name.

The bright yellow concoction is creamy and delightfully rich in umami — startlingly reminiscent of the dish it pays homage to. As bartender Josh reveals, the cocktail's base is a distillate of oysters harvested from the waters off Pulau Ubin, a small island north-east of Singapore's mainland. The drink is topped with miso-cured egg foam, coriander shoots, a smattering of Kampot pepper and a dash of Shaoxing rice wine. And it's served in a cup made from oyster shells, no less.

The oyster omelette is one of many inventive tipples at Native, a laid-back, two-storey bar in Singapore's Chinatown, where colourful heritage shophouses sit in the shadow of the city's soaring skyscrapers. Opened in 2016, the bar celebrates local and regional spirits, ingredients and flavours, while producing as little waste as possible (which explains the creative barware). To this end, many of its ingredients are cured, pickled or fermented to extend their shelf life. "In a small place like Singapore, sourcing can be a challenge," says owner Vijay Mudaliar. "Sometimes we get great produce, so I'm always thinking of ways to extract and lengthen those flavours. And other times we get produce that isn't as fresh, but can be fermented," he adds, gesturing to the rows of pickling jars lining the shelves.

This, along with the bar's composting and upcycling efforts, has effectively created what is practically a zero-waste operation. "The amount of trash the bar throws out every night could fit into the palm of your hand," says Vivian Pei, a cooking instructor, writer and senior academy chair of the annual World's 50 Best Bars list. She's one of my guides for the evening, the other being Gan Guoyi, co-founder of the Jigger & Pony group, a local hospitality behemoth. Both women also head up the Singapore Cocktail Bar Association, a

nonprofit organisation that promotes the city's craft cocktail culture.

Native isn't the only bar in Singapore spotlighting local and regional ingredients. We visit nearby Sago House, another buzzy watering hole in Chinatown. Occupying the top floor of a shophouse near the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple — a majestic red-and-white structure built in the Tang dynasty style in 2007 — it offers a weekly rotating cocktail selection shaped by what's available in local markets. Scrutinising the menu options scrawled in marker pen across a windowpane, I plump for a highball containing Korean Chuga soju, coconut vodka, citrus and *tieguanyin*, a Chinese oolong tea widely enjoyed in Singapore. The cocktail is light and smooth with a subtle vanilla undertone, making for easy drinking.

I glance around the small, dimly lit bar, which is, unsurprisingly, a hive of activity on a Saturday evening. It's what Vivian describes as a "labour of love": opened during the pandemic, its three co-owners built the interiors almost entirely by hand using upcycled materials, including coffee sacks salvaged from local roasters. The result is a raw, eclectic space enlivened by a colourful cartoon mural and an R&B-heavy soundtrack. "It feels like I'm coming to a friend's house," says Vivian. "It's not shiny, flashy or super swish, but that's part of the charm."

After draining our glasses, we step out into the muggy night, threading our way through bustling, lantern-festooned streets and past groups of elderly men playing Chinese chess on the sidewalk. Our final stop this evening is one of Guoyi's bars, Gibson, housed in a former *huay kuan* (Chinese clan association) building dating back to 1935. Guoyi's late grandfather was the founding chairman of the Gan Clan cultural association here, and the family legacy lives on through Gibson today.

"For me, it was a natural decision to take on the property. One of the things I love about the building is its heritage, so I wanted to retain its original facade and structure," says Guoyi, pointing to the beautiful stained-glass windows and antique ceiling. In the same



Q&A with Rusty Cerven, bar manager at Manhattan

HOW HAS SINGAPORE'S CRAFT COCKTAIL SCENE EVOLVED RECENTLY?

The use of regional craft spirits has grown, with the Philippines, South Korea and even Singapore producing their own gins brimming with tropical botanicals. Local ingredients are now also at the heart of our cocktail culture. With all these ingredients at our fingertips, there's so much to work with and so many stories to tell.

WHAT'S THE SECRET TO A GREAT COCKTAIL?

A genuine smile! Anyone can make a good cocktail with some practice, but one that's made and served with great hospitality will always be impactful and unforgettable.

WHAT ARE YOUR THREE FAVOURITE BARS IN SINGAPORE?

No Sleep Club, Republic Bar and Atlas [see page 139]. In that order, you'll encounter a friendly neighbourhood bar, unparalleled service and hospitality, and jaw-dropping interiors. They're all so different in their DNA. nosleepclub.sg republicbar.com.sg

Previous pages: Marina Bay, Singapore

Clockwise from top: Yugnes Susela, owner and bartender of Elephant Room; The Peranakan cocktail at Native Bar; grilling prawn and mutton satay at Lau Pa Sa



vein, Gibson's back bar has been tiled with (newer) stained glass, adding to the vintage vibe of the space.

Like Native and Sago House, Gibson sources many of its ingredients from local and regional producers. This ethos shines through in my cocktail of choice, Urban Farmer No. 3, a light, fragrant medley of gin from Singapore-based Brass Lion Distillery and passionfruit marigold, granny smith apples and lime from local urban farm Edible Garden City.

Savouring my tittle, I reflect on just how far Singapore's craft cocktail scene has come. In the late 2000s, cocktail bars were few and far between, with beer and whisky being the poison of choice for most drinkers. Fast forward 15 years and the city is peppered with world-class venues, many of which are championing local and regional flavours in their craft. As Guoyi puts it, these are places where "you honestly won't get a bad drink". I couldn't agree more.

A taste of the city

Over the next few days, I hit up yet more bars to find the city further reflected in inventive beverages. First on my list is Nutmeg & Clove, a bright, airy space on Purvis Street known for its Singapore-inspired cocktails.

"When we opened eight years ago, there were a few cocktail bars in Singapore, but they were mainly quite international," says owner Colin Chia. "I wanted to set up something that

we could proudly call a Singaporean cocktail bar." He tells me that the bar's menus always have something to do with Singapore. The latest iteration features 10 tipples inspired by a traveller's account of visiting the city.

Singapore's infamous chewing-gum ban is overtly referenced in the tongue-in-cheek Can Bubble Gum?, a saccharine, mezcal-based concoction topped with a light candy-flavoured foam. However, the cocktail that catches my fancy is Garden City, which is also Singapore's nickname. There's a surprising amount of nature woven into Singapore's urban fabric, from tree-lined streets and verdant parks, to the Cloud Forest at Gardens by the Bay and the UNESCO-listed Singapore Botanic Gardens. It's an abundance of greenery encapsulated in the drink — a light, herbaceous tittle made with gin and Ayuuk (a smoky spirit), and infused with musk melon, lime, shiso and a touch of honey.

The emphasis on place continues at Shangri-La Singapore's Origin Bar, a swish space decked out in dark wood, gold accents and peacock-blue tones. Here, bartenders shake up creative cocktails inspired by the city's six key districts. Following bar manager Adam Bursik's recommendation, I opt for two rum-based creations: ID Please, a refreshing mix of Chalong Bay rum, cacao white, yuzu and lemongrass; and Tropez, a rich, smoky blend of chocolatey Matusalem rum, vermouth and Buddha's hand (a fingered

INSIDER TIPS

Bottled cocktails are booming in Singapore, and you can easily get some delivered to your hotel room. Smoke & Mirrors offers a wide range of ready-to-drink libations in three different sizes: 100ml, 250ml and 500ml. smoke-mirrors-shop.myshopify.com

Planning to spend an evening bar hopping? It's best to get around using Grab, the Singapore equivalent of Uber, although you'll have to contend with price surges during peak periods. grab.com

Time your trip to coincide with the annual Singapore Cocktail Festival, which is due to be held in late 2022 (dates TBC). Participating bars will shake up themed concoctions, and there'll also be bar crawls and boozy brunches to look forward to. singaporecocktailfestival.com

citron native to Asia). As Adam explains, both cocktails pay homage to the historic Balestier neighbourhood. "Balestier used to be a sugarcane plantation, hence the rum," he says.

Other offerings on the current menu include the Crystal Mojito, a contemporary take on the classic cocktail. Instead of muddling mint leaves and lime juice, Adam distils both ingredients to create a clear concoction. It's an innovative technique that nods to the ultramodern Marina Bay district, which is known for its spaceship-shaped hotel and solar-powered Supertrees vertical gardens.

Over at The Elephant Room, the spotlight is entirely on the vibrant enclave of Little India, where colourful markets are thick with the scent of spices, and street sellers hawk everything from flower garlands to gold jewellery. According to co-founder Yugnes Susela, "everything in The Elephant Room has some sort of reference point to Little India". For instance, the menus and coasters are embroidered with fabric offcuts from the neighbourhood's sari shops, and the bar counter is built on russet-hued *jaali* (ventilation blocks common in Indian

architecture). In the same vein, the shelves are lined solely with Indian-made spirits, while ingredients are sourced from Little India's markets on a weekly basis.

Yugnes wastes no time serving me his bestselling drink, Buffalo Road: gin infused with pink guavas purchased from the eponymous street in Little India. "Gin and tonic was actually born in India, during the colonial era," he says. "We decided to give it a twist, adding a bit of vetiver [a grass native to India] to give it a woody note." Next, he offers me a taste of The Mango, a carbonated rendition of mango lassi (a yoghurt-based drink) topped with ginger foam. Yugnes says that mangoes are considered a "celestial fruit" in some Indian cultures, often featuring at important occasions such as weddings.

"Many locals don't really know very much about Little India beyond the Mustafa Centre [shopping mall], and that's kind of sad," says Yugnes. "But when customers exit our door, they learn something new." Leaving the bar an hour later, replete with yet more culturally inspired cocktails, I can declare that I certainly feel enlightened.

From left: The Cloud Forest at Gardens by the Bay; colourful heritage shophouses near Chinatown; making prata in Tekka Market in Little India



Six Singapore establishments feature on The World's 50 Best Bars 2021 list, with highest-ranking entry Jigger & Pony coming in 9th.



Clockwise from top left: The Dai-Ginjo cocktail at Gibson Bar; Jay Gray making a cocktail at Sago Club; Buddha Tooth Relic Temple, built in the Tang dynasty style in 2007 in Chinatown; street market in Chinatown, where shophouses have been reimagined as intimate bars and restaurants

TOP 8

Creative cocktail bars

ATLAS

BEST FOR: GIN GALORE

This stylish bar is renowned for its opulent art deco interiors and enormous 26ft-tall drinks cabinet, which houses around 1,300 varieties of gin from as far afield as Iceland, Moldova and Argentina. The sheer scale of its encyclopaedic menu can be overwhelming, but you can't go wrong with one of the classic juniper-based tipples like the Martini — shaken by a spiffily suited mixologist who looks like they've stepped straight out of *The Great Gatsby*. atlasbar.sg

MR STORK

BEST FOR: DRINKS WITH A VIEW

Perched atop Andaz Singapore, Mr Stork certainly delivers when it comes to spectacular views. Here, you can drink in expansive vistas of the Singapore skyline while sipping on creative cocktails such as the Balinese-inspired Barong — a mix of spiced rum, palm sugar, pineapple, lime and bitters. Book one of the bar's in-demand teepee huts, which are ensconced among tropical greenery in a nod to how storks build large stick nests in the trees. hyatt.com

ANALOGUE

BEST FOR: VEGAN TIPPLES

The brainchild of Native's Vijay Mudaliar, this vegan bar was a first for Singapore when it opened in 2021. Sustainability is at its heart, from the tables fashioned out of recycled plastic and mycelium (a type of fungus) to the 100% plant-based menu. Try the refreshing Cactus — a mezcal-based concoction made with prickly pear, pink dragon fruit and aloe vera — which pairs perfectly with dishes such as pumpkin dumplings and celeriac ratatouille. analogueinitiative.com

28 HONGKONG STREET

BEST FOR: SPEAKEASY VIBES

Also called 28HKS for short, this atmospheric venue is often credited with putting Singapore's cocktail scene on the map. Like most speakeasies, it's pretty much hidden from plain sight, tucked behind the unmarked door of a nondescript 1960s shophouse. But once you seek it out, you'll be rewarded with US comfort food and top-notch tipples such as the Lazy Bear (gin, vermouth, peach liqueur and French herbs), all served to a '90s hip-hop soundtrack. 28hks.com



Chinese checkers is a game played every day in Chinatown



GETTING THERE & AROUND

Singapore Airlines offers nonstop flights from London Heathrow and Manchester. British Airways and Qantas also operate a direct London to Singapore route. singaporeair.com ba.com qantas.com

Average flight time: 13h30m.

To get around, you can rely on Singapore's comprehensive — and extremely clean and comfortable — public transport network, which comprises MRT (Mass Rapid Transit) trains and buses. Alternatively, hail a metered taxi or download the Grab rideshare app.

WHEN TO GO

Hot, humid Singapore is a fantastic year-round destination, with temperatures consistently hovering between 25C and 33C. Because of the city's tropical rainforest climate, showers and even thunderstorms are a regular phenomenon, especially in the afternoons, so remember to pack an umbrella.

WHERE TO STAY

The Fullerton Hotel Singapore, Central Business District. From £248, room only. fullertonhotels.com

The Warehouse Hotel, Robertson Quay. From £171, room only. thewarehousehotel.com

MORE INFO

Visit Singapore. visitsingapore.com
Lonely Planet Singapore, £13.99

HOW TO DO IT

Hayes & Jarvis can personalise a Singapore and Bangkok tour, during which you have three days to explore the Lion City at your leisure before boarding the luxury Eastern & Oriental Express train to Thailand. From £5,199 per person for 10 days in 2022 (prices for 2023 TBC). hayesandjarvis.co.uk

JIGGER & PONY

BEST FOR: A CONVIVIAL ATMOSPHERE

This beloved hangout ranked second on Asia's 50 Best Bars 2021 list, and for good reason. The drinks are superb, and the menu (loosely styled on an issue of *Monocle* magazine, complete with full articles and photoshoots) is perhaps the most creative around. But it's the ambience that'll keep you coming back. You'll find that the atmosphere is relaxed but never raucous, while the friendly bartenders are more than happy to engage in conversation. jiggerandpony.com

MANHATTAN

BEST FOR: BARREL-AGED COCKTAILS

Manhattan isn't your typical hotel bar. It's fancy, sure, with lots of leather and dark wood, inspired by the glamour of 1920s New York. However, its drinks menu — 'a pictorial essay of cocktails' showcasing famous Manhattanites — is a cut above the rest. Home to the world's first in-hotel rickhouse (whisky-ageing cellar), the barrel-aged cocktails are a must-try. The Rickhouse Trolley tasting flight includes the Paper Plane (Maker's Mark 46 bourbon, Amaro Montenegro, Aperol, lemon). manhattan.regentsingapore.com.sg

PAPA DOBLE

BEST FOR: LITERARY LIBATIONS

Formerly The Old Man Singapore (an outpost of the original in Hong Kong), the newly rebranded Papa Doble continues to celebrate the life and work of Ernest Hemingway, who was affectionately known as 'Papa' in Cuba, where he lived for some 20 years. Its experimental drinks menu is inspired by the author's experiences — try the #1927 (Rémy Martin, Madagascar bean vermouth, maraschino and bitters), a bold, robust cocktail that pays homage to the writer's vivacious second wife, Pauline Pfeiffer. papadoblesg.com

PLATFORM

BEST FOR: LOW-ALCOHOL OPTIONS

Head to this minimalist space for low-alcohol beverages; nothing on the menu is above 11% ABV. Its spritzes focus on 'the art of dilution', exploring how melting ice can change the character of a drink over time. Go for the Spicy Pepper 04, which features ripe mango, green cardamom, *togarashi* salt and black pepper wine. It's a punchy but light-profile drink you won't feel guilty downing at noon, when the bar opens. platformstudio.co