GREAT BARS OF NEW YORK CITY

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30 OF MANHATTAN'S FAVORITE STORIED DRINKING ESTABLISHMENTS

PRESTEL

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"IF YOU WANT TO KNOW ABOUT A CULTURE, SPEND A NIGHT IN ITS BARS."

ERNEST HEMINGWAY

After the publication of our latest book, *Store Front NYC: Photographs of the City's Independent Shops, Past and Present*, we were pleased that our ongoing work documenting the city's beloved neighborhood store fronts was again met with acclaim and critical praise. There is a physical beauty to these small shops that native New Yorkers, visitors, and even those who have never been to New York can instantly see. Yet we realized there was more for us to tell, and we knew what direction our story must take: we were going to concentrate on what many consider to be the heart of New York City's culture and neighborhoods—its bars. We also wanted to showcase our interior photography, something we have never featured in any of our previous books.

Bars have always been melting pots; they're places where people from all backgrounds and cultures can mingle and share stories while enjoying a drink, and where relationships often start. Above all, in New York City, where millions of people are crowded into a relatively small amount of land but often live in isolating apartments, the bar serves as a home away from home, an antidote to loneliness, or even a workspace.

When selecting the thirty locations to feature in this publication, we decided to concentrate on only the borough of Manhattan. We've chosen to showcase many historic establishments, often elegant in appearance, which evoke stepping back into a grander time. These include the Campbell, designed as a thirteenth-century Florentine palace for railroad tycoon John W. Campbell, King Cole Bar, which is credited as the birthplace of the Bloody Mary cocktail, and Old Town Bar and Restaurant, known as a gathering place for many literary greats (as well as for its iconic shoulder-height ceramic urinals).

We've also included many former speakeasies that sold illegal alcoholic beverages during the Prohibition era—from 1920 to 1933—including Holiday Cocktail Lounge in the East Village and Pete's Tavern in Gramercy Park. (Pete's was the only bar that legally remained open during Prohibition due to its proximity to Tammany Hall, the city's political machine at that time—the bar's main room was even disguised as a flower shop so that politicians could enter under the pretense of looking for flowers).

We additionally feature many lesser-known dive bars, including some that open at 8 a.m., a rarity in New York. These include Milano's Bar, Spring Lounge, and Rudy's Bar & Grill, one of the city's last affordable "working man" bars, where you can still get a beer and a whiskey and not break the bank while eating a free hot dog.

Most of the photography included in this book was completed in 2023, as we wanted to concentrate on bars currently in business. However, there are a number of establishments that we photographed in the past and would have loved to highlight—including the renowned Lenox Lounge in Harlem, Mars Bar in the East Village, and Chumley's in the West Village—which unfortunately all fell victim to economic pressures, increasing rents, and rapidly changing demographics.

We invite you to pay attention to the often-overlooked details inside the bars we've photographed. A few notable examples are the two human leg bones hanging from the ceiling at P. J. Clarke's that are known as an Irish American good luck charm; the stained-glass windows and backbar insets made by the world-famous Tiffany & Co. at Peter McManus Cafe; the original sign that hangs in the entrance of the Stonewall Inn indicating that the establishment was a raided premises by the New York Police Department in 1969; the turkey wishbones hanging at McSorley's Old Ale House, put there during World War I by doughboys projecting hopes for a safe return from the war; the oil paintings found above the wood paneling at Minetta Tavern depicting scenes of Greenwich Village, painted by Holden D. Wetherbee in 1953; and the saloon licenses dating back to the 1800s hanging at Fanelli Cafe.

We hope our book encourages you to visit one of your neighborhood bars so that they stay in business for many more generations to come. And just as the sign posted inside Jimmy's Corner advises its patrons, "Let's not discuss politics here," and instead have a friendly conversation while sitting over a drink and escaping the noise and stress of urban life.

JAMES T. & KARLA L. MURRAY

McSORLEY'S OLD ALE HOUSE

15 EAST 7TH STREET, EAST VILLAGE

In a city once brimming with Irish pubs, McSorley's Old Ale House stands out not only as one of the oldest still in operation but also one of the most iconic and beloved. It has remained standing through numerous moments of social upheaval in America, from the years before the Civil War to Prohibition, during which it continued to secretly serve alcohol by advertising it as "near beer."

For much of its history, the bar enforced a strict no-women policy, gaining notoriety for its slogan, "Good ale, raw onions, and no ladies." However, in 1970 women filed a lawsuit against the bar, *Seidenberg v. McSorleys' Old Ale House*, which ultimately resulted in McSorley's law, prohibiting sex discrimination in bars, hotels, restaurants, airplanes, golf clubs, and other public accommodations.

Now, McSorley's has earned the distinction of being one of the longest continuously operating bars in America. And despite its great age, it has remained remarkably unchanged: one of its most noted features is its perpetually sawdust-covered floors, a holdover from a time in which sawdust was used to soak up moisture from the muddy, damp shoes of workers coming in from blue-collar jobs.

McSorley's is most frequently said to have been opened in 1854, by Irish immigrant John McSorley. First called the Old House at Home, the bar catered largely to his fellow countrymen, many of whom worked labor-intensive jobs at factories and breweries. It also served as a space for political mobilization within the Irish diaspora. By the late nineteenth century, when it was owned by McSorley's son, Bill, it had become a meeting place for the Ancient Order of Hibernians, an Ireland-based organization that provided aid and assistance to Irish Americans. It was also a favored rendezvous for members of the Democratic political machine Tammany Hall.

While these everyman origins are part of the bar's timeless appeal, it's also noted for its long roster of A-list patrons, which have included US presidents going back to Teddy Roosevelt and beyond, including Abraham Lincoln—who in 1860 allegedly ran to McSorley's after delivering the Cooper Union address that's often cited as helping him win his party's presidential nomination.

McSorley's was considered to be notable starting in the early twentieth century, having been central to the Ashcan School of art, a movement that included artists like George Bellows, John Sloan, and Robert Henri, who focused on illustrating quotidian life in working-class neighborhoods. By its heyday in the mid-1900s, McSorley's patronage had come to encompass a who's who of literary and cultural luminaries from various decades, including Harry Houdini, F. Scott Fitzgerald, E. E. Cummings, and *New Yorker* writer Joseph Mitchell. In the latter half of the century, it's believed Hunter S. Thompson and John Lennon were among those who had visited.

The ownership of McSorley's has always remained close to its original community. It was kept in the family for nearly a century until 1936, when descendant Bill McSorley sold it to longtime employee Daniel O'Connell. His daughter, Dorothy O'Connell Kirwan, took it over next—initially resisting demands to allow women to enter. In 1977, Dorothy's son Danny Kirwan sold it to longtime bartender and night manager Matthew Maher, who, like original owner John McSorley, was an Irish immigrant. Upon Maher's passing in 2020, his daughter Teresa Maher de la Haba took over, maintaining and upholding its traditions. She is, notably, the first woman to work behind the bar.

Today, you can pull up a seat at the bar to enjoy its two styles of house beer: the flagship McSorley's Ale, an Irish-style malted ale, and the McSorley's Dark, a heavier variety. It's recommended that you bring at least one friend, since the bar has a tradition of serving beer in a pair of small mugs, called schooners, as opposed to a single pint.

While you're there, seek out the many items that tell of the bar's past—from a real wanted poster offering a reward for the capture of Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth, to a bust memorializing a visit from John F. Kennedy before he became president. Last but not least are the turkey wishbones hanging from an old gas lamp. "Many of the turkey wishbones were hung up by doughboys during World War I as wishful symbols of a safe return from the war," Maher de la Haba explains. "When they returned, they would remove the wishbone they had placed there. The bones left dangling represent those who never came back."

Relics like these speak to McSorley's lasting significance and emotional connection to those who've visited. "Some things customers left at the bar just because they wanted to add to our collection," Maher de la Haba adds. "We have a good number of old fireman hats, and the orange one is from a fireman who was at the World Trade Center on 9/11."

ABOVE *McSorley's was originally an all-male establishment, known by its slogan, "Good ale, raw onions, and no ladies."*


Geoffrey Bartholomew
4211
22548

OPPOSITE TOP *The golden rule at McSorley's is "Be good or be gone."*

OPPOSITE BOTTOM *Customers leave items at the bar, including a number of old firefighter hats. The orange one is from a firefighter who was at the World Trade Center on 9/11.*


Be good or be gone


28
6
343
CORNED BEE
FRIED CHICKEN
BURGER 6


Geoffrey
Bartholomew
162
4211 NY
22548


IRISH

OPPOSITE BOTTOM *The turkey wishbones on the vintage gas lamp were hung by doughboys hoping for a safe return from World War I. When they came back, they would remove the bone they had placed. The ones left dangling represent those who never returned.*

ABOVE *McSorley's still has its original bar taps, wooden bar, and the pot-bellied stove from when it opened in 1854.*

THE CAMPBELL

GRAND CENTRAL TERMINAL, 15 VANDERBILT AVENUE, MIDTOWN EAST

Although the Campbell has only been operating as a swanky cocktail bar since 1999, it's been a famed room for far longer. Set clandestinely within Midtown East's Grand Central Terminal, the space, also referred to as the Campbell Apartment, was once used as the offices—and man cave—of a mysterious Jazz Age financier named John W. Campbell.

Campbell first acquired the lease for the 25-by-60-foot (8-by-18 meter) corner office in 1923 from none other than his friend and contemporary scion William Vanderbilt, who was then chair of the board of the New York City Railroad. Equipped with a kitchen, balcony, and 25-foot (8-meter) high ceilings, it was the perfect location for the tycoon, who lived with his wife nearby on Park Avenue.

The legendary design was undertaken by Augustus N. Allen—an architect known for masterminding grand Long Island estates and Manhattan townhouses—who took inspiration from a thirteenth-century Florentine palazzo (a reflection of the decadent tastes of the era). Located above the terminal's main concourse, it boasted leaded glass windows and a hand-painted ceiling.

Some of the Campbell Apartment's original furnishings included an oversized stone fireplace featuring Campbell's family coat of arms, as well as one of the world's largest hand-knotted Persian rugs that is estimated to cost over $5 million at the time of writing this book. After installing a grand piano and pipe organ, which would be used for performances by famous guests, Campbell regularly held decadent receptions for up to sixty people. He also employed a butler named Stackhouse.

The high-society revelry would go on until Campbell passed away in 1957. Over the years, the Campbell Apartment fell into disuse, and the furniture mysteriously vanished. In the following decades, the space was unceremoniously converted into a signalman's room before becoming an MTA police station and later a gun storage area. A small jail even sat where the bar sits today.

In 1999 Mark Grossich, CEO of Hospitality Holdings, Inc. (which also owns Midtown West's Carnegie Club), took ownership of the lease of the dilapidated Campbell Apartment. "There was water damage, wires hanging down, all the colors had faded, every piece of furniture was gone," Grossich told the *New York Post* of the space's condition at the time he took over. Through a painstaking $1.5 million renovation, he reincarnated the bar to its bygone splendor, filling it with dark wood trimmings and hiring painters to restore the colorful designs of the faux-wood ceiling beams. Modernizing the bar in the mixology-centric era of the early aughts, he also introduced premium liquors and classic cocktails that were enjoyed in the moody, dimly lit atmosphere.

In 2007, feeling that the bar was showing signs of age, Grossich tapped London-based interior designer Nina Campbell (no relation to the original owner) to execute a second renovation costing $350,000. Not wanting to close even for a night, Grossich asked the team to complete the entire process—which included laying carpet and installing new banquettes—in just twelve hours.

Early in its twenty-first-century reincarnation, the Campbell Apartment enjoyed—and continues to enjoy—a status as one of New York City's most beloved special occasion bars. Over the years, countless celebrities, politicians, and business owners would visit. These included former president Bill Clinton and actors like George Clooney and Scarlett Johansson. During this time, the bar was famously known for enforcing a no-sneakers dress code that sometimes drew bemusement for its old-school attitude.

After seventeen years running the bar, Grossich gave up the lease in 2016 to Scott Gerber and the Gerber Group, proprietors of trendy bars and clubs, who performed additional renovations and restorations to bring the bar back to its original glory. Today you can enter through a staircase from the terminal's balcony level to enjoy not only cocktails but trussed-up bar bites, like a charcuterie plate and fancy grilled cheese. Though the new owners have since adapted to modern times by doing away with the dress code and including the occasional pop song with the usual jazz tunes, the Campbell still offers a sense of grandeur that harkens back to an earlier time.

OPPOSITE *The Campbell is tucked away in a discreet corner of Grand Central Terminal, at Forty-Second Street and Vanderbilt Avenue.*


THE CAMPBELL

The Campbell was originally the office of railroad tycoon John W. Campbell, who commissioned architect Augustus N. Allen to design the room as a thirteenth-century Florentine palace, complete with leaded windows, a hand-painted plaster of Paris ceiling, and a mahogany balcony with a quatrefoil design.