

**GREAT BARS <sup>OF</sup>  
NEW YORK CITY**



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GREAT BARS <sup>OF</sup>  
NEW YORK CITY

**30 OF MANHATTAN'S  
FAVORITE STORIED  
DRINKING ESTABLISHMENTS**

PRESTEL

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## INTRODUCTION

**“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.

# 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."*

