



The return of the speakeasy

The one-time American colony is seeing a boom in Prohibition-style secret bars –dark, discreet, sophisticated cocktail bars where the focus is on high-quality drinks. [Mike Aquino](#) time-travels back to find the 1920s speakeasy fits surprisingly well into the modern cityscape

[Photos / Tammy David](#)

During the Philippines' stint as a US colony between 1898 and 1945, the locals adopted much of American culture without question – but they stopped short of adopting Prohibition in the 1920s, when Americans banned alcohol, a black market proliferated in booze and there was a surge in secret, late-night “speakeasies” where people partied illegally. Back in Manila, Filipinos ate cheeseburgers and donned zoot suits with the best of them, but continued to drink legally through the Americans' dry years.

It's surprising and somewhat ironic, then, to find hard-partying Filipinos looking back to the Roaring 'Twenties with nostalgia: beginning with Blind Pig in 2011, speakeasies have carved a singular niche in Manila's nightlife. Despite a lack of actual historical precedent, the capital's bar entrepreneurs have turned to the speakeasy concept to meet a growing demand for exclusivity and discretion.

Local speakeasies avoid overt self-promotion, relying on word of mouth to attract a discerning regular clientele. “Because you have to find it, there's a sense of exclusivity and mystery,” explains Gene Tiongco, a plastic surgeon and avid speakeasy patron. “And the drinks are crafted – the bartenders know their drinks, and take their time putting them together.”

They may be pricier and quieter than your average watering hole, but Manila speakeasies offer added cachet that Filipinos are willing to pay extra for. “You're not just buying excellent drinks,” Gene says. “You're buying privacy, your chilled and relaxed moments.”

BLIND PIG

Though it's only a meagre four years old, Blind Pig is the granddaddy of Manila's speakeasies. The sorely missed New York joint Milk & Honey provided both inspiration and instruction, sending its top mixologist Mickey McIlroy to train Blind Pig's barkeeps.

Before you can get to Blind Pig's mint juleps and Smokey Old Bastards, you'll need to get past the door – if you can find it. The only clue to its location is a raised brass sign rendered in braille. Entry isn't guaranteed; the compact interior only seats about 45, and if there's no more space they will turn people away.

The low-lit, intimate interiors recall actual speakeasies of the 1920s: brick walls, muted candlelight and pewter finishes look back to those nery times “when alcohol was prohibited and people had to be careful when enjoying their libations,” barman Joey Cerdinia tells us. “We try to honour the speakeasy concept as much as possible.”

One thing the Blind Pig is not, is “roaring”: regulars must follow house rules like “mind their manners and those of their guests”, and “keep drinks, tempers and voices down”. It's the kind of respectful ambience that allows patrons to enjoy each both others' company and the cocktails. Ask for a “Bartender's Choice”, and Joey will whip something up based on your personal attributes.

Signature drink: Joey Cerdinia's Bequest, his entry to the Bacardi Legacy Cocktail Competition, is a nicely layered number combining Bacardi Superior, Aperol, lime juice and elderflower liqueur.

227 Salcedo St, Legaspi Village, Makati City, +63 (0)917 549 2264; blindpig.ph. Sunday–Thursday, 6pm–2am; Friday & Saturday, 6pm–3am

FINDERS KEEPERS

If you're less about the jazz and more about the rock 'n' roll, head to Finders Keepers for a speakeasy that speaks your language. But first you'll have to hunt it down: turn into a side street off Pasong Tamo (just south of Makati's central business district) and look for Joe's Meat Shack in a recycled shipping container. A nondescript door in the building behind Joe's takes you into Finders Keepers, its name emblazoned in neon above the long bar.

Finders Keepers seats about 30 people in an industrial-chic-meets-your-grandmother's-parlour interior; the long bar offers the best seats in the house, where you can chat with the barkeep or with new friends over a '70s funk, hip-hop and indie-rock playlist.

Like Blind Pig, Finders Keepers presumes to impose house rules upon its guests, but they have the effect of enhancing in-house camaraderie. “Offer a seat and make a friend”, for example, is immediately followed by “For f---'s sake, NO SMOKING”. The black-shirted bouncers make sure guests stick to the rules, but they're friendly fellows otherwise.

Signature drink: Finders Keepers' Beergarita exemplifies the bar's unfussiness – a margarita mix swizzled with the Filipino dark lager Cerveza Negra.

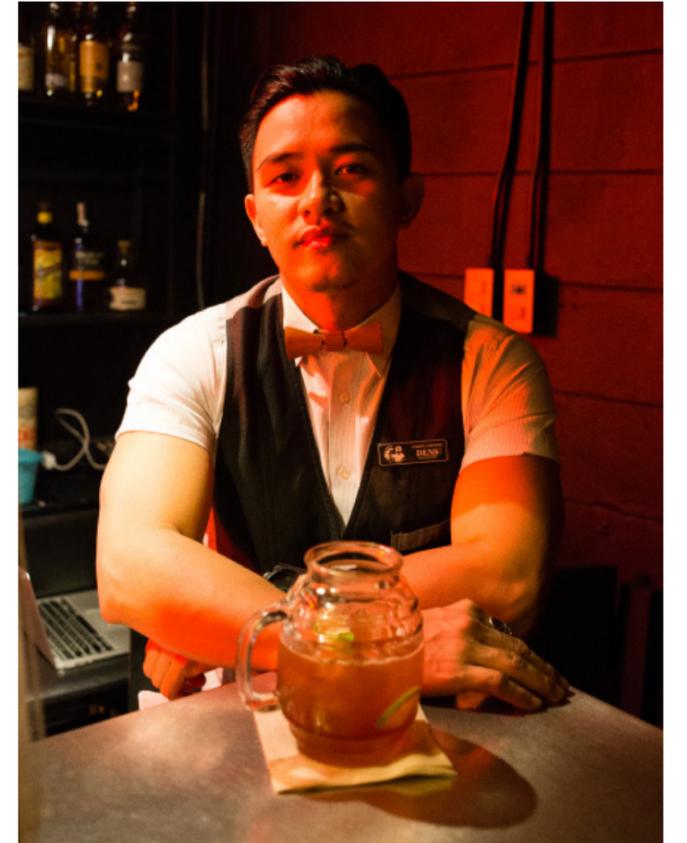
Warehouse 5, La Fuerza Plaza, 2241 Don Chino Roces Ave corner Sabio St, Makati City, +63 (0)908 813 5622; facebook.com/finderskeepersMNL. Tuesday–Sunday, 9pm–5am



The brooding interior of Blind Pig. Above / Blind Pig barkeep Joey Cerdinia



Inside Finders Keepers,
Opposite / Finders
Keepers' beergarita





Sit at the long bar and wait for the cryptic question to be put to you: “Would you like to try the Red Rabbit?”

Mixing things up at Red Rabbit

ABV

Every Narnia needs a wardrobe, and for ABV, it's a telephone booth inside a burger joint at 22 Jupiter Street's basement. An out-of-the-way button activates the electric lock; the door swings outward, and suddenly you've moved from a vaguely 1950s diner setting into ABV's Prohibition-era vibe.

Al Capone himself would have felt right at home in these throwback digs, where dim incandescent bulbs overhead cast an amber glow over the cane chairs, mirrored walls and black-and-white checkered floors. Period jazz plays over the speakers; the nattily dressed bartenders proffer a cocktail list that combines classic drinks like the Sazerac with in-house creations like the Señorita Marquesa and Jupiter Street.

The bartenders are consummate cocktail fanatics, and it shows: barkeep Kenneth Bandivas made the world finals of Diageo Reserve's Bartender of the World competition, and the bar runs a popular Master Class mixology program that accepts F&B professionals and drinks enthusiasts alike.

Signature drink: Try ABV's Corpse Reviver 20: a base of Tanqueray Gin and Caol Ila single-malt scotch makes easy company with camomile syrup, lemon juice and pear brandy, with an absinthe rinse making the drink complete.

22 Jupiter St corner Galaxy St, Bel-Air, Makati City, +63 (0)917 520 1608; abv.com.ph. Monday-Sunday, 8pm-2am

RED RABBIT

You approach this speakeasy by stages. First, enter Bugsy's in Salcedo Village, then head into the enclosed smoking area. Sit at the long bar and wait for the cryptic question to be put to you: "Would you like to try the Red Rabbit?"

Upon hearing "yes", the bartender swings a wall open: you'll walk into a black-walled private room with stark white moulding, and colourful chalk handwriting on the walls describing the cocktails and food. Despite the stark, modernistic décor, the vibe is decidedly casual, as befits the Boracay provenance of the bartenders, helmed by mixologist Anthony White.

Cold cuts and the bar's signature 21-day aged steak go very well with the Red Rabbit's cocktail selection: a playfully pun-filled list ranging from Mumm's Apple Pie (which includes apple cider and rum) to Elderflower Fashioned (which features St Germain elderflower liqueur).

Signature drink: The Gin Garden combines Hendrick's gin with apple juice, lemon juice, mint and cucumber: the latter two offset the drink's kick with a refreshing botanical topnote. PHP420 (US\$8.88)

Unit 1 Paseo Parkview Tower, Valero St corner Sedeno St, Salcedo Village, Makati City, +63 (0)926 624 4685; facebook.com/redrabbitph. Monday-Saturday, 6pm-2am >

EXIT BAR

This hidden gem in Salcedo Village is Blind Pig's less exclusive little brother, but don't let that put you off. "The Exit's philosophy is to keep things simple," Joey Cerdinia explains. "We don't try to be fancy – we enjoy serving great beer, solid cocktails, fantastic yet familiar bar food, and classic rock."

To get in, look for Corinthian Plaza's ground-floor café, and head for the door marked with an "Exit" sign near the café's foyer. Punters make a jarring transition from a well-lit casual diner to a shadowy, Art-Deco-inspired watering hole; the only illumination in the room comes from the back-lit long bar.

Unlike other speakeasies, the Exit Bar makes beer drinkers feel at home with an eclectic selection that includes Amstel, Hitachino, Kronenbourg 1664 and Stella Artois. Exit Bar's cocktail list favours simpler, more straightforward mixes, made (and priced) for patrons just dipping their toes into the possibilities.

Signature drink: De Rigueur leans towards the Filipino penchant for sweet and fruity drinks that pack a kick: a blend of bourbon, grapefruit juice and honey.

Corinthian Plaza, 121 Paseo de Roxas, Legaspi Village, Makati City, +63 (0)2 551 1283. Monday-Sunday, 5.30pm-2am

BANK BAR

The 7-Eleven convenience store at RCBC Savings Bank's headquarters in Bonifacio Global City harbours a secret in its storeroom. Walk past the stacks of instant noodles through a swinging wall to access the absurdly spacious hidden bar immediately adjacent. The effect is not unlike stepping into a police call box that turns out to be Doctor Who's TARDIS.

Bank Bar's interior blends industrial design with a touch of the post-apocalyptic. Vaults on the wall opposite the bar frame a reproduction of a Banksy artwork found in the New York borough of Queens. At the far end of the hall, a low-ceilinged, glass-walled room accommodates smokers.

The bar, naturally, boasts the best seats in the house. The establishment's bartenders love indulging in theatrics, whether by wearing bulletproof vests on top of their uniforms, or producing miniature fireworks as they sprinkle cinnamon powder onto a flaming beverage.

Signature drink: The Mariang Bastos ("Bawdy Maria") combines Philippine Don Papa Rum with orgeat syrup, Cointreau, citrus mix and island bitters; Overproof Demerara Rum is lit and garnished with powdered cinnamon. PHP445 (US\$9.41)

Ground Floor, RCBC Savings Bank Corporate Center, 25th St, Bonifacio Global City, Taguig City, +63 (0)2 544 5776. Monday-Saturday, 5pm-2am

CURATOR

Curator's proprietors have a passion for both coffee and cocktails, and the cosy, living room-like space within Cyrano Wine Bar ably accommodates both. Baristas hold the fort in the daytime, serving espressos and cold-pressed juices. At 7pm, the bartenders' shift kicks in.

Even with dimmed lights, Curator's interior feels homey and lived-in: the concrete walls are adorned with playful, cartoonish artwork, videogame-inspired sticker visuals, and odes to both coffee and alcohol. Make your way to the wooden-topped bar to peruse the drinks list, an eclectic selection that shows off the bartenders' creativity. If none of the drinks takes your fancy, the barman on duty will be happy to make you a customised cocktail depending on your preferences.

Signature drink: The bartenders decline to name a number one among their picks, but Vida is as good a place as any to start. Aldrin Ivan "Poch" Ancheta combined Bulleit bourbon, Suze, Aperol, Fernet-Branca, Solerno and chocolate bitters to produce a heady drink that hits like a Whitney Houston torch song: loud and bittersweet. PHP495 (US\$10.46)

134 Legaspi St corner Carlos Palanca St, Legaspi Village, Makati City, +63 (0)916 355 4129; thecurator.com.ph. Monday-Saturday, 7am-2am



Bank Bar. Above / Blind Pig's little brother Exit bar. Above right / Curator



The [Dusit Thani Manila](#) has undergone an ambitious overhaul of all 537 rooms and suites. Grab a drink at the new Dusit Club Lounge, which has a panoramic view of the Makati cityscape, or eat at farm-to-fork restaurant The Pantry.