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Paying Homage to The Roaring '20s

Denver Speakeasies are an Intoxicating Adventure

By Eric Elkins

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hat is a speakeasy, really? Back during prohibition, a super-secret entrance was a necessity when it came to serving up illegal booze under the radar. But now? Slipping through a sham facade to get into a dimly lit cocktail bar is more a matter of storytelling than hiding out from the feds. Still, surrendering to the spell of a well-crafted tale can be its own special pleasure.

Especially when you're soaking up spirits by the glassful.

Denver is replete with speakeasy cocktail bars, from the throwback feel of **Williams & Graham** to the decidedly modern style of **Retrograde**. What they all have in common, though, is a meticulous approach to every aspect of the customer experience — from the way you get through the door, to the sources of ingredients and spirits, to the overall vibe of the room.



The granddaddy of them all is **Green Russell**, part of chef Frank Bonnano's empire of chef-driven restaurants. You might miss the entrance if you're not looking for it as you stroll along Larimer Square's many options for bites and beverages. Follow the signs down the stairs to Wednesday's Pie (three kinds daily), a legit storefront that leads into the subterranean bar itself.

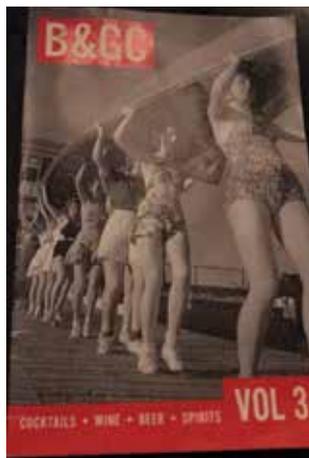
And though it may be a tad fussy in its "house rules" — standing at the bar is prohibited and use of your cellphone for a call is an ejectable offense — the array of botanicals, fresh herbs, and unique, handmade bitters and sodas is truly impressive. Sure, you could select a cocktail from the menu, but if you really want to try something different, give your bartender the flavor profiles you're craving (Base spirit? Sweet or spicy? Spirit forward, or not so much?) and let him or her concoct something special just for you.

For the full-on, prohibition-style, speakeasy experience, make your way over to the LoHi neighborhood for a visit to **Williams & Graham**, nominated as Best American Bar at the Spirited Awards several years in a row. What looks like a corner bookstore (do they make those anymore?) is actually an essential stop on any Denver drinking adventure. If you can't get a reservation, your best bet is to arrive a little before opening and stand in line. Behind a swing-out bookcase, you'll find a novel-length cocktail menu broken down by spirit preference. But the seasonal specials are where you'll want to kill some brain cells. And don't forget to dig into the small plates and desserts created by the talented Chef Matthew Thompson.

Insider tip: The lookout booth is the best spot in the house. From there, you can watch the stellar bartenders at work while taking in the comings and goings of Denver's cocktail lovers.

Interested in the speakeasy experience but not so excited about the mustache and suspender crowd? **Retrograde** in Uptown may be more your thing. You'll wonder if you're in the right spot when you enter the brightly lit Frozen Matter ice cream shop, with its inventive flavors and homemade sodas. But don't be fooled; that stainless-steel walk-in freezer door opens to a cozy Willy Wonka-esque bar that's cool in all the right ways. I'm particularly fond of the Fox Mulder cocktail, but you'll find your own rocket to outer space on the sci-fi-inspired menu.

Millers & Rossi is another speakeasy with a contemporary feel. The front room is a spacious art gallery with an eclectic rotation of modern works, but walk through the door at the back, and you'll find yourself in a warmly lit den that almost feels like a friend's living room (if that pal were partial to Edison bulbs and a wraparound bar). The cocktails range from updated classics (Smoked Old Fashioned, anyone?) to locally sourced creations. The bar is a bit out of the way, so maybe stop in for a drink or two before walking a couple blocks to Hop Alley for dinner, then make a night of it and visit RiNo Art District's many hip joints and art galleries along Larimer Street.



Eric's Best Bets

Though the speakeasies change up their menus often, most of them have a set of signature cocktails. Here are some favorites to try:

Green Russell: *Barrel Aged Blend*

The concoction changes regularly, but whatever's been aged is going to have a mellow, oaky flavor to complement the spirits inside. Always a winner.

Williams & Graham: *Blackberry Sage Smash*

Sweet and herby, with a hint of lemon. It tastes fresh and delicious, like an afternoon hike in the foothills.

Retrograde: *Fox Mulder*

It's not actually on the menu anymore, but the bartenders will make it for you if you ask nicely. With two kinds of whiskey, chocolate bitters, and Yellow Chartreuse, you, too, will want to believe.

Millers & Rossi: *The Wakeup Call*

A whiskey-based cocktail with the bite of Byrrh, but what makes the drink special is the espresso and custom chocolate sourced from Hotbox Roasters and Temper Chocolates, just a few blocks away.

B&GC: *Suit Separates*

An unexpected pleasure, with Suntory Whiskey and Plymouth Sloe Gin, all warmed up with sherry and pineapple gum syrup. Try not to guzzle it down.

Ste. Ellie: *The Loneliest Monk*

Rye, Yellow Chartreuse, Underberg bitters, and one giant rock. My favorite bittersweet comfort cocktail always makes me feel a little less lonely.

Union Lodge #1: *Red White Blue Blazer*

The fiery floor show is just the beginning.

Sometimes a speakeasy is less about the secret entrance and more about how you find it in the first place. **B&GC** in Cherry Creek North is a gem, hidden away in the bowels of the Halcyon hotel. Text (don't call) 720.925.8598 for a reservation, and you'll be directed to ring the bronze bell outside an alley door. A host will lead you down a stairwell, past HVAC equipment, and along a hallway to the intimate room, which is well-equipped with some of the most adept bartenders in the whole damn city. The cocktail menu is eclectic, and you'll be enchanted by the array of potions along the top of the bar.

What's the line between a speakeasy and one that elicits the style and experience of one? The elegant **Ste. Ellie** doesn't have a secret entrance or a storefront façade. And though the frosted glass door to the bar on Platte Street is understated, it certainly isn't hidden. But descend the stairs to the sister bar and restaurant underneath big brother **Colt & Gray**, and you'll find one of the loveliest rooms anywhere. Whether you settle into a cushy round booth or post up at the gorgeous marble bar, the Ellie's friendly staff will set you up with some of the best food and drink you'll find in Denver. Choose from the dynamic cocktail menu, or request a bartender to do up something unique. Ask Minetta to make you one of her signature tiki-inspired cocktails in a fish-shaped vessel, if you're feeling especially courageous.

The food menu is affordable and delectable, too, and the kitchen is open until 1 a.m. Don't miss the signature sticky toffee pudding for dessert.



Is **Union Lodge No. 1** a speakeasy? Not strictly, no. Set in a storefront on Champa Street downtown, there's nothing hidden about the place. But step inside, and the vibe is pure vintage, from the 19th century pre-prohibition cocktails to the old-timey attire (and attention to detail and customer service) of the staff. Co-owned by **Williams & Graham** alum and award-winning bartender Jason Patz, **Union Lodge** has everything you'd want in a speakeasy experience. The intimate room is warm, the bartenders are ridiculously friendly, and you can even order a drink they'll set on fire.

Whichever speakeasies you choose to visit, embrace the romance of the experience. Chat with your servers and bartenders and learn what their favorites are. Let them know your tastes and preferences so they can steer you to something new and delicious. And always, always tip well. 

Eric Elkins spends way too much time and money on cocktails and delicious dishes. He's the CEO of WideFoc.us Corp, a social media agency celebrating 10 years in business, and writes young adult novels on the side. His blog about being a single father is datingdad.com.

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