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CITY SCOPE: BOSTON • MARKETING WINES TO WOMEN

Crafting A Revolution

Boston's burgeoning craft cocktail scene finds an audience amid beer-focused college bars and tourist-friendly taverns

BY EUGENIA WILLIAMSON

Although the TV series "Cheers" ceased production 20 years ago, reruns air in perpetuity, and the bar that appears in the sitcom's exterior shots remains a top Boston tourist destination. But the beverage alcohol scene emerging in Beantown is very different from the place where everybody knows your name. Changing demographics and an influx of capital have fomented a citywide interest in mixology, craft beer and fine wine, creating venues that would be almost unrecognizable to the show's beloved Cliff Clavin.

At 48 square miles and with a population of around 625,000, the biggest city in New England is relatively tiny. But the Boston metro region, known as the Hub, is much larger: The dense cluster of towns in Middlesex and Suffolk counties surrounding it make Boston the 10th-largest city in the United States with more than 4.6 million people. And thanks to a thriving constellation of colleges and universities, including Harvard and MIT, it boasts the highest concentration of young people in any U.S. city. What's more, the Hub's major industries—higher education, health care and biotech—are largely immune to the economic downturn. This unique confluence of well-heeled 20-somethings and affluent professionals has resulted in a thriving on-premise scene that has recently come to national acclaim.

"Drink put Boston on the national scene," says Jackson Cannon, co-owner and beverage director of Eastern Standard, Island Creek Oyster Bar and The Hawthorne, three adjoining venues in the Hotel Commonwealth in Boston's Kenmore Square. He's referring to Barbara Lynch Gruppo's award-winning bar, opened in 2008 and acclaimed for its innovative beverage program, which serves cocktails based on customers' tastes rather than offering a menu.

Cannon has won kudos for his takes on classic cocktails like Eastern Standard's Whiskey Smash (\$10), made with W.L. Weller Bourbon, lemon juice and mint, but he doesn't see himself as a challenger. "The city's venues aren't so much in competition with each other, as we are collaborating to raise the bar of better drinking in Boston," he says.

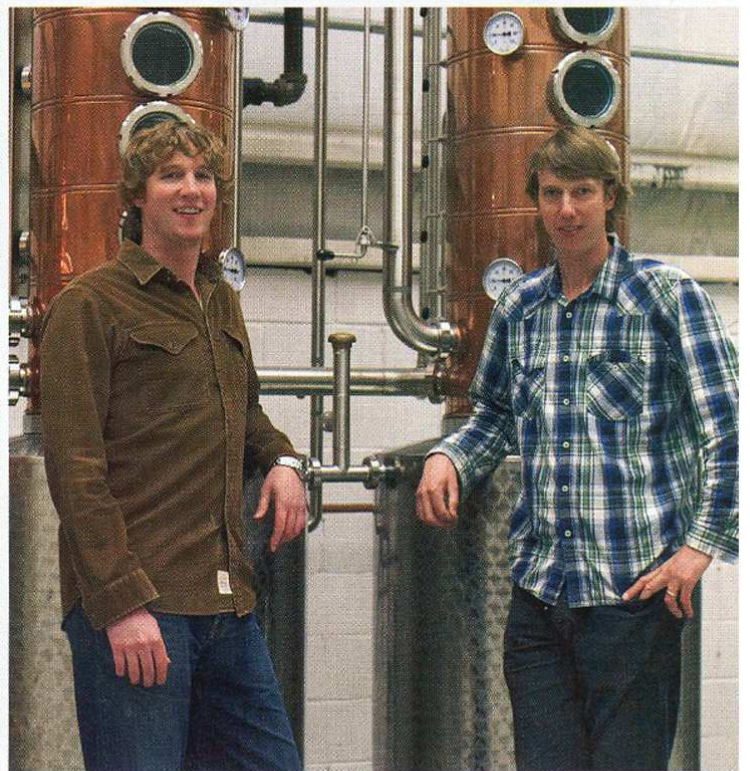
However collaborative, the transition from "Cheers" to craft cocktails has been far from effortless. A state-imposed cap on the city's liquor licenses—a quantity decided almost a century ago—drastically limits their number as well as their type; many venues can only serve beer and wine. What's more, the city's public transportation system shuts down at 12:30 A.M. on weekdays, an hour later on weekends, stranding patrons who stay until bars close at 2 A.M. Laws affecting the off-premise are almost as restrictive, as stores must close at 11 P.M. In spite—or perhaps because—of these difficulties, Boston has birthed an on- and off-premise sector focused on making beverage alcohol sales count.

Downtown Tourism

Boston annually ranks as one of America's most walkable cities. The Freedom Trail, a path that winds its way through historic sites of the Revolutionary War and the city's No.-1 tourist attraction, follows suit. Every summer, the 2½-mile circuit brings tens of thousands of visitors downtown. Blocks from the Freedom Trail, in the center of the theater district, is Jacob Wirth Restaurant. Founded in 1868, the city's second-oldest establishment is popular among tourists and locals for its piano sing-alongs, German food and capacious beer selection: It has 44 draft lines and 50 bottled beers (\$4 to \$13 a bottle or draft pour), at least 17 of which are German.



Boston's on-premise venues run the gamut from upscale seafood restaurant Island Creek Oyster Bar (interior pictured top) to farm-to-table establishment Puritan & Co. (bottom left). Demand for craft spirits in the city has opened the doors for companies like Bully Boy Distillers (brothers Dave and Will Willis pictured bottom right).





Backbar's Sam Treadway (top left) brings cocktail culture to Boston's Somerville neighborhood, while Eastern Standard (bottom left) in Kenmore Square touts signature drinks like the Gin Flip (above left) and Island Creek Oyster Bar (above right) focuses on fish dishes, such as the oyster sliders (top right), along with a variety of craft brews.

BOSTON BY THE NUMBERS

- 4.6 million:** The number of people who live in the Boston metro area
- 33:** The rough percentage of Boston residents between 20 and 34 years of age
- 675:** The number of full liquor licenses in the city of Boston
- \$450,000:** The highest sticker price on record for a Boston liquor license
- \$560,000:** The amount paid, at auction, for an outdoor parking space in Boston's Back Bay neighborhood

"I think our appeal is similar to that of 'Cheers'—everybody knows your name," says bar manager Meghan Fitzgerald. "Plus, we have swinging double doors and a 90-foot long bar, similar to bars in Western movies." Although Jacob Wirth has a full liquor license, beer remains its top-selling product. Since the weather has warmed, customers have favored Leinenkugel Summer Shandy (\$6) and Boston's own Samuel Adams Grumpy Monk (\$6).

While Sam Adams remains the city's most famous alcohol brand, other, scrappier beverage companies are staking their claim. Just ask Doug Epstein, one of the owners of Sav-Mor Spirits, a retailer with four locations around the Hub that carries 700 varieties of craft beer. "There are so many great craft spirits distillers and brewers in the area," Epstein notes.

PHOTOS BY (BACKBAR) KRISTIN TEIG; (EASTERN STANDARD) MIMI RITZEN CRAWFORD; (ISLAND CREEK) MICHAEL PIAZZA; (PURITAN & CO) MARC ANDREW DELEY

"We can stock brands that don't have distribution." His customers respond to local offerings in a big way—even cash-strapped college students. In the not-so-distant past, coeds would buy the most beer for the least amount of money. "Now they come in and price out what they want for a case of craft beer and they'll work their order to get a discount," he says.

An even bigger boon for craft producers has been the proliferation of new restaurants. "Boston is a great scene because you have so many on-premise accounts that are using these products," Epstein says. "People want to replicate craft drinks at home."

One new local craft player is Bully Boy Distillers, the first distillery to open within Boston city limits since Prohibition. "It was a lot of extra red tape, time and expense to set up here," says Will Willis, who runs the distillery with his brother, Dave. "Certainly it would have been less arduous to get a license in another part of Massachusetts, but we wanted to incorporate ourselves into the whole Boston ethos." Willis also notes that the city has great recognition across the United States. "We looked at other consumer brands in this area that have gone on to do great things—brands like Sam Adams and New Balance sneakers," he says.

Bully Boy launched in 2011 with a vodka, white whiskey and white rum (all \$28.99 a 750-ml. bottle). The company released its American straight whiskey (\$34.99) in 2012 and rolled out a dark rum (\$31) in June. The products are currently distributed throughout Massachusetts, Rhode Island and parts of New Hampshire.

An unexpected result of Bully Boy's efforts: foot traffic. "We're not on the Freedom Trail," Willis says. "We're in an industrial part of town that's off the beaten path, but there's been a lot of interest."

Willis sees his company's tourist appeal as part of Boston's recent romance with spirits: In 2007, female mixologists and spirits enthusiasts formed a local chapter of Ladies United for the Preservation of Endangered Cocktails (LUPEC). Last year saw the debut of the Boston Cocktail Summit, an event with seminars, tastings and hotel parties.

"After watching other cities gain national attention, in the last year and a half, bar staff and bartenders are getting tired of hearing about other places and are now ready to pound their chests," Willis says. "They're a really vibrant and creative group of people, and they want to be recognized."

Over The River

Inman Square, a small Cambridge enclave about equidistant from Harvard and MIT, was once a quiet Portuguese neighborhood. In recent years, it has become a culinary destination and features more than 50 bars and restaurants, from the East Coast Grill, a casual oyster bar and barbecue joint, to Phillip Tang's innovative New England-Chinese fusion restaurant East by Northeast.

The debut of Will Gilson's Puritan & Co. earlier this year marked a new direction for Inman Square. Where its neighbors are markedly casual establishments, Puritan & Co.

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Bell's Brewery,
Kalamazoo, Mich.

offers farm-to-table haute cuisine, New England-style. While its menu changes regularly, representative fare might include wood-roasted Muscovy duck with parsnips, fiddleheads and mushrooms (\$27) or a salad with lemon, shallots, mustard, herbs and Boston lettuce from the Gilson family farm (\$10).

In its brief tenure, Puritan & Co. has built up a devoted clientele without the benefit of a full liquor license. Although the city of Cambridge may eventually grant one, for now the fledgling restaurant is relegated to serving only beer and wine.

Josh Cole, Puritan & Co.'s beverage director, maintains a positive attitude about the licensing issue. "With our produce and our meats and seafood, we have a seasonally inspired farm-to-table approach," he says. "At a farmhouse in Provence, people aren't going to show up with a bottle of gin."



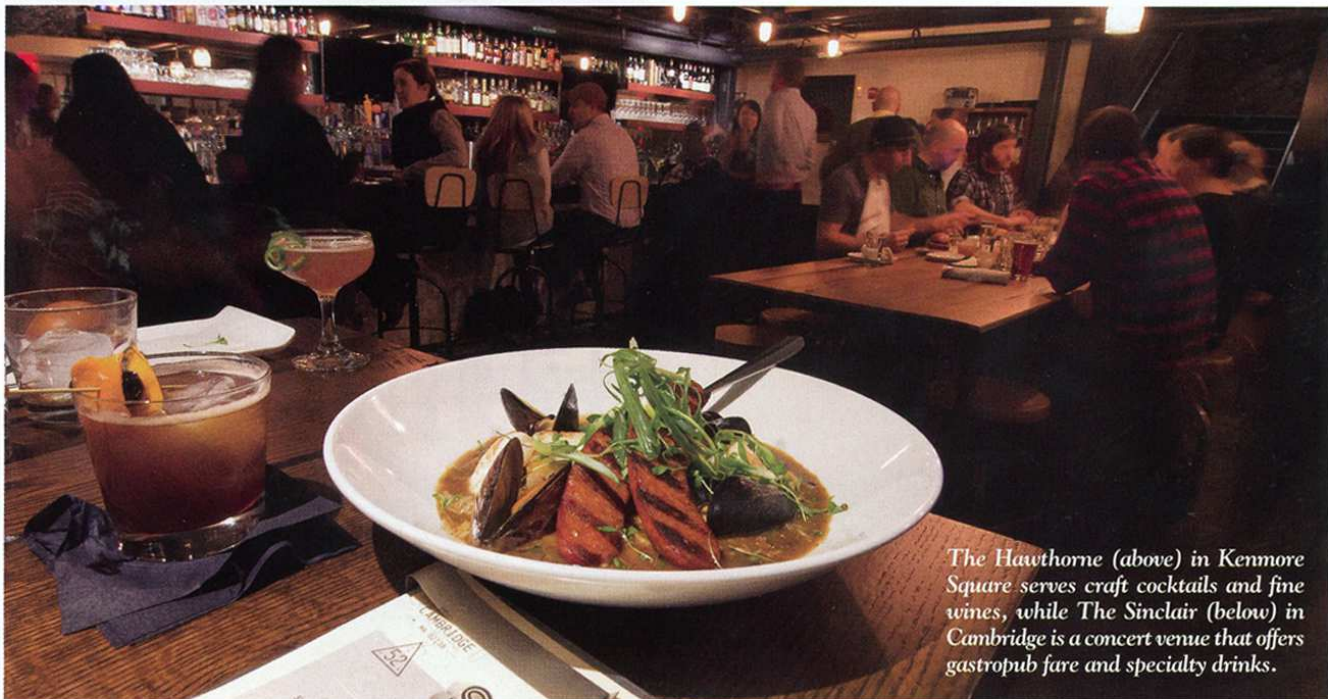
Instead, Cole's beverage program focuses on what he describes as "unique and funky table wines" and local micro-brews that pair well with whole animal cuts. All but one of his draft lines contain Massachusetts-brewed beer. The exception, Peak Organic's Nut Your Average Ginger (\$7), is brewed in Portland, Maine, using ingredients from the Gilson family farm.

As for wine, Cole strays farther afield: His two-page wine list (\$32 to \$125 a 750-ml. bottle) focuses on French and Italian varietals. De Conciliis Selim Spumante (\$51) is a staff and customer favorite.

Cole thinks his wine menu wouldn't work on the other side of the Charles River. "You couldn't do this list in Boston," he says. "People here have a different mind-set. With Harvard and MIT in proximity, there's a very educated and traveled clientele interested in trying new things."

The Sinclair, another new Cambridge venue in nearby Harvard Square, is decidedly different. It opened earlier this year as a joint project between celebrity chef Michael Schlow and New York City-based concert booking agency The Bowery Presents—the latter's first foray into the restaurant world. The Sinclair's 525-person-capacity theater hosts independent comedy and musical artists, while its 175-seat restaurant—helmed by chef Marcellus Coleman, a winner of the Food Network cooking competition show "Chopped"—focuses on gastropub-inflected American fare like fried chicken with butter-braised collards, roasted corn and pickled chilies (\$21) and disco fries with chorizo gravy and cheese sauce (\$9).

Harvard Square—both named for and largely owned by the nearby university—is a bustling commercial center with dozens of high-end clothing shops and restaurants. Although the neighborhood saw the opening of noted cocktail bar Russell House Tavern in 2010, The Sinclair stands alone as



The Hawthorne (above) in Kenmore Square serves craft cocktails and fine wines, while The Sinclair (below) in Cambridge is a concert venue that offers gastropub fare and specialty drinks.

PHOTOS BY (TOP) MICHAEL YOUNG; (BOTTOM) SAM GRAY



Puritan & Co., which serves New England-style haute cuisine, local beers and unique wines, benefits from its proximity to Harvard and MIT.

a concert venue aimed at a younger crowd. It is also the first and only concert venue in Boston with a craft cocktail-focused beverage program.

"I wasn't sure that people would embrace the cocktail culture in a place like this, but it's been way more successful than we expected," says beverage director David Werthman. "People order cocktails more than anything else."

In addition to the venue's impressively varied beer list (\$4 to \$20 a bottle, can or draft pour), The Sinclair's two main bars offer 20 craft cocktails, including such classics as the Sazerac, featuring Old Overholt rye whiskey and an Herbsaint liqueur rinse (\$10), and originals like the top-selling Big Sky (\$11), made with Rittenhouse rye whiskey, Punt e Mes vermouth, Luxardo Maraschino, Angostura and Regan's orange bitters and a float of Laphroaig Scotch whiskey. The venue has also started serving batched cocktails (\$9), such as the Truant, comprising strawberry- and basil-infused Wodka vodka, St-Germain elderflower liqueur and Dibon Cava.

Finding Balance

Werthman calls the balancing act between traditional bar fare and craft cocktails a "weird dichotomy" that involves some finesse in navigating. "Recently, a guy came to me to set up a Jägermeister machine, and at first I thought, 'No way,'" he says. "Then I realized that we actually need to get one."

At Backbar by Journeyman in Somerville's Union Square, two miles northeast of the Sinclair and three miles away from downtown Boston, bar manager and co-owner Sam Treadway faces a similar balancing act. The neighborhood, once a down-at-the-heels industrial zone, has exploded: Backbar, a craft cocktail oasis located on an unassuming traffic island surrounded on two sides by four-lane motorways, abuts Journeyman, its high-end farm-to-table parent restaurant. The venues share a block with two beer halls, a tapas place and a restaurant that serves \$25 schnitzel.

Throughout his two-year journey at Backbar, Treadway has maintained a healthy perspective about his role as a purveyor of expertly mixed spirits. Although he serves drinks like the Off Kilt (\$11), a blend of Dewar's 12-year-old Scotch with lavender-honey syrup, fresh lemon and house-made ginger syrup, he keeps a "Tradesman" section on his menu with \$7 drinks for fellow bartenders and local workers that includes concoctions like the Mezcal Pickle Back, a shot of El Bujo mezcal and a shot of house-made pickle juice.

"There are new bars that are all about the cocktail, but that's only a couple places," Treadway says. "More venues have a fun and relaxing atmosphere and happen to serve really good drinks. In Boston, we don't need to do super fancy, ridiculous cocktails. Nobody wants to wait for those." mw

Eugenia Williamson is a Boston-based freelance writer.