



The Tasting Kitchen Bartender Justin Pike

# BYE BYE BOTTLE SERVICE

Exploring the State of the Bar in L.A.

By JOSHUA LURIE

Even though TMZ still shows celebrities stumbling out of Hollywood nightclubs on a regular basis, a band of hopheads, oenophiles and spirited tastemakers have finally helped to render bottle service and vodka tonics passé in L.A. The focus has shifted to flavor, value and community, which is more consistent with the economy and culture.

The Sunset Strip was the longtime destination of choice for Angelenos and weekend warriors before the scene shifted to Hollywood's Cahuenga Corridor. Now, community-focused neighborhood bars are spanning the city. According to Ryan Sweeney, who co-owns beer-focused **Verdugo Bar** and **The Surly Goat**, "People are more concerned with authenticity and quality, because they've been in a city for so long that's been doing the opposite."



Ryan Sweeney at The Surly Goat

One sector that's seen explosive growth is craft beer, with a new wave that started washing over the city in 2007, when Sweeney, Kyle Bilowitz, Brandon Bradford and Cherith Spicer partnered on **Verdugo Bar** in out-of-the-way Glassell Park. **Blue Palms Brewhouse** proprietor Brian Lenzo launched another influential establishment the following summer beside Hollywood's Henry Fonda Music Box Theatre.



*Pliny the Elder at Blue Palms Brewhouse*

Lenzo sees the recession as a big reason for craft beer's rise in L.A., saying, "People were all about bottle service and excess. The recession hit, and people cut back. With craft beer, people found out they could still get a world class product at a reduced price."

Unlike most other cities, it's bars that are driving L.A.'s craft beer boom, not breweries. That's primarily because L.A. County was dormant for decades when it came to opening breweries, aside from stalwarts like Mark Jilg's **Craftsman Brewing Co.** However, Sweeney predicts that dynamic will shift as more breweries open.



*Mohawk Bend Patio*

Tony Yanow is contributing to both sides of the supply chain. He just opened **Golden Road Brewing** with Meg Gill in freeway-friendly Atwater Village and previously debuted **Tony's Darts Away** in Burbank last year, sourcing beers within state borders and adhering to eco-friendly business practices, another California hallmark. He recently opened **Mohawk Bend** in Echo Park, doubling the taps, adding California spirits and an even larger stage.

Finding success in two sleepy neighborhoods inspired another Yanow mindset: "If you pour it, they will come. If you get good beer, and you take good care of your beer, and you take good care of your customers, they'll find you."

Outlets like *Draft Magazine*, *RateBeer* and *Beer Advocate* seem to agree. They've started ranking establishments like **Tony's Darts Away**, **Verdugo Bar**, **Blue Palms** and **38 Degrees** with America's best. As Yanow said, "Just because the size of our market, and the cool things that are happening, we're starting to make a little noise."

Lately, the noise has often been harmonious. Earlier this year, Lenzo, Sweeney, Yanow and 38 Degrees co-owner Clay Harding teamed on a series of craft beer pop-ups around town, dubbed **COLLABORATION**, and the city's on the verge of the 3rd Annual LA Beer Week.

Last year, Dustin Lancaster hand-built **Covell** in Los Feliz with every intention of becoming a wine bar, but early on, beer accounted for almost half the sales. He quickly came to appreciate that Angelenos crave diversity and new experiences, saying, "Most things that open in L.A., they'll go



*Covell owner Dustin Lancaster*

check out, which is a nice credit to the city. You just need to make sure you deliver on the goods so that people continue to come back.”

Another influential Eastside wine bar is shaped like a square and can be found inside **barbrix**, a globally inspired restaurant with a classic California patio that seasoned wine pro Claudio Blotta and wife Adria Tennor delivered to Silver Lake in May 2009.



barbrix Exterior

Blotta has seen Angelenos become more open minded about experimenting with different



barbrix owner Claudio Blotta

varietals. He said, “It makes my job easier and fun because I can buy different grape varietals. I don’t have to have a wine list like in the old days where there were 20 Chardonnays, 10 Cabernets and 10 Merlots, and most of them were boring.”

At barbrix, you’re just as likely to find

a dry, aromatic Croatian wine as you are a bold Bordeaux.

When it comes to cocktails, **213** and **Cedd Moses** made the first power play, delivering eight bars to downtown, foremost among them, **Seven Grand**, which arrived in 2007 and launched the careers of industry leaders like Aidan Demarest (The Spare Room), Marcos Tello (The Varnish, 1886) and Damian Windsor (The Roger Room).

L.A.’s laidback, often unconventional cocktail scene has become so magnetic that New Yorkers migrated from America’s longtime cocktail Mecca to run bars out West, including Alex Straus at **Hemingway’s**, Allan Katz at **Caña** and Alex Day, who left iconic **Death & Co.** to launch L.A. establishments with business partner Dave Kaplan.

In Hollywood, Matt Biancaniello waves a farmers market flag from behind the **Roosevelt Hotel’s Library Bar**. He shops at local farmers markets five days a week to craft cocktails like the Shiso Gimlet, Mulberry Daiquiri and White Peach Basil Mojito. Biancaniello is grateful for ready access to fresh produce, and understands it’s site specific. He said, “Everybody always used to say to me, ‘Oh, you’d be great in Napa, and in all these great food towns,’ and what I’d try to explain to them every single time is that I couldn’t do what I do year round. So I would never leave Los Angeles.”

Justin Pike, who previously bartended in Boston and Portland, has become known for his uniquely medicinal approach to cocktails at **The Tasting Kitchen** on Abbot Kinney in Venice. He believes local bars are especially adept at “finding that



The Tasting Kitchen Bloody Mary Trio

line between the old and the new,” highlighting only-in-L.A. establishments like **The Edison**, a subterranean pleasure palace that occupies a former downtown power plant, and Pasadena’s **1886**, which fills the back of the caretaker’s cottage for The Raymond Hotel, built in 1886.

Pike’s own place of employment has a sense of place, a high-design district blocks from the beach. He said, “I don’t know that it would work in



*Covell Indian Motorcycle*

other parts of L.A. I think that's kind of the point."

Eric Alperin, who co-owns **The Varnish** with Moses and NYC bar icon Sasha Petraske, has been excited by L.A.'s burgeoning movement, saying, "There's more of a meditation on not just bar culture, but bar process and hospitality at the bar."

He appreciates that restaurateurs are finally factoring in bartenders from the beginning, adding,

"Chefs are starting projects with bartenders in mind. That's important, bringing bartenders on not just as consultants but as partners."

Now that Angelenos are no longer the "new kids on the block," Alperin's convinced the L.A. bar scene is getting enough respect nationally. However, he cautions, "If bars forget good old fashioned hospitality then there is no point for our guests to come spend time with us."

What is it that ultimately unifies the cocktail, beer and wine bar worlds? According to Lancaster, "You need to know what you are, whether you're a tiki bar, whether you're a wine bar, whether you're a biergarten, whether you're a whiskey bar, if you stay true to what you are."

He went on to describe a recent trip to New York, saying, "It was funny that everyone hypes New York so much. I was like, we're doing this. We have this. You just maybe have to look a little harder in some areas."

# Cocktail Recipes

*From the Staff at The Varnish:*

## **BRAZILIAN FIX**

3/4 oz fresh lime juice  
3/4 oz house made honey syrup  
2 oz Cachaca

Whip it and dump into a double rocks glass. Fill with Crushed ice and then float or dash a full barspoon of Yellow Chartreuse atop the cone of crushed ice. Then slap a sprig of mint in there and add a straw. Voila! Perfect for end of summer...

*From Justin Pike at The Tasting Kitchen:*

## **CRAZY HORSE**

Take liter bottle of silver tequila, add 2 small halved Serrano peppers, or 1 large... let sit no more than 24 hours and strain.

2.5 oz. infused tequila  
3/4 oz. lime  
3/4 oz grapefruit  
1/2 oz. grenadine  
1/2 oz. yellow chartreuse

Shake strain into Collins glass with large ice.