

RESTAURANTS

Meet the Very Extra (and Very Popular) Phoenix Bars Where Cocktails Are Theater

At these three bars high-end cocktails are folded into storytelling—including drinks that pummel smoke and changing scenery

BY LANE E LEE

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The Desiré Street Market at Platform 18 in Phoenix Arizona. Kelsey McClellan

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Imagine being a stowaway in the dark bellows of a clipper ship, complete with the sounds of creaking wood and portholes with sea views and changing weather patterns. Or hop on an elegant early 20th-century train, sip a high-end cocktail, and enjoy scenery of fog rolling in over Louisiana's bayou. These aren't far-off voyages. They're the settings of bars in Phoenix's emerging world of cocktail theater—where elevated cocktails accompany immersive, performance art-esque settings.

Over the past few years, Phoenix has become home to three unorthodox spaces for these very realistic theatrics. Though bars have long hosted live acts like bands or burlesque, the bars Platform 18 (train themed), UnderTow (ship themed), and 36 Below (botanical wonderland) are a new breed. In these spaces, a bar becomes the stage and bartenders are the directors. Flip to the back of the menu at Platform 18 or UnderTow, and instead of just drink descriptions, you'll meet the plotline of the night. Maybe it's the fictional Hollis Cottley Pennington's bootlegging adventures in the Rockies, or the story of Captain Mallory's possible journey to find a shipwrecked Undertow. Read carefully and you'll notice the cocktail names are weaved into the story as destinations or characters.

"We are storytellers," says Mat Snapp, vice president of operations at Platform 18 and UnderTow. "Creating an environment to entertain that is positive, fun, full of wonder, nostalgia, and emotion is our goal."

While elaborate storytelling is key to these bars' appeal, the drinks play a starring role. Platform 18 and Undertow offer encyclopedia-sized menus featuring complex concoctions—classics and originals, alike. At Platform 18, you'll find funky historical cocktails like Hot Pants (a bright pink, 70s-era recipe that melds tequila, grapefruit, and mint into an inexplicably delicious drink) and house-made boozy ice creams, like the Grasshopper. UnderTow offers tiki drinks, original and classics, such as the Scorpion Bowl cocktail—rum, cognac, orgeat, orange, lemon and nutmeg — served in a bowl complete with pools of flames on the rim. Grab some friends; you'll need help.

Hidden in the basement of a coffee shop, 36 Below is a wonderland of lush greenery. There are wall-to-wall digital naturescapes and cocktails served in dramatic glassware, like a stone chalice shaped like a Greek goddess. The bar displays digital art, like fish swimming by from the porthole of a submarine, and even diffuses the room with aromas that reflect a quarterly theme, such as Roman Ruins or Aquatic Mediterranean.

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Now, you might be rolling your eyes, wondering if all these bars amount to a cheesy show with crappy, overpriced drinks. Your skepticism is valid. But these bars are not like those overplayed speakeasy concepts where you squeeze through, say, a popcorn maker and click your heels twice to enter. The cocktails are pristine. In 2022, Tales of the Cocktail *Spirited Awards*, like the Oscars of hospitality, honored Century Grand—the complex that houses Platform 18, UnderTow, and sister bar Grey Hen Rx—as one of the top ten “Best U.S. Cocktail Bars in the West.”

Visiting these spots takes some planning. Much like going to a Broadway show, you should try to reserve your seat in advance, dress to impress, and plan to be there for the entire experience—roughly an hour and a half. Take a look inside these Phoenix bars, where plenty of smoke, buried treasure, dramatic vibes, and most importantly, damn fine drinks are available.

Cocktail photography by Kelsey McClellan

36 Below

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An outdoor lover's dream, the nature theme changes quarterly at this subterranean bar. The one pictured here is a previous theme. Currently, it's Aquatic Mediterranean, complete with a submarine view of fish and orcas swimming by on the giant, LCD screens, sounds of a waterfall, tropical flora accents, and even a salty sea aroma in the air.



The Antediluvian at 36 Below in Phoenix, Arizona

Antediluvian

Is this drink served in the head of Aphrodite? Athena? Or Demeter? No matter what Greek goddess you think this is, make sure to toast her for good luck. The Antediluvian is a spicy bourbon and sotol based drink, topped with aloe air foam and edible flowers.

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Plato's Atlantis

Featuring thyme- and tomato-infused gin, strawberry, Suze, lemon and cucumber, the Plato's Atlantis cocktail was inspired by Plato's mythical island that sank into the sea. Make sure to try the kinome leaf garnish—a mint-like plant with a touch of heat.



Buried Fortune

The Buried Fortune comes in a smoke-billowing bowl, then you “go fish” for your treasure by picking up the glass from within. It strongly tastes of bourbon—yet is nutty from the sunflower seed syrup.

Platform 18

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Platform 18 in Phoenix, Arizona Grace Stufkosky

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Don't be surprised to see clientele dressed in period costumes—think flappers and Scarface Capone-style mobsters—at Platform 18, a bar fashioned like a 1927 Pullman train car.



Single Track South

If you like Palomas, you're going to love the Single Track South. A sour-style (base liquor, citrus, and a sweetener) cocktail, the glowing green drink features Ojo de Tigre mezcal, Heirloom Genepy (an herbal alpine liqueur), coconut liqueur, grapefruit liqueur and grapefruit oil. For a funky vegetal note, the glass is rimmed with house-made fennel pollen salt.



Gentleman's Heist

The Gentleman's Heist is an Old Fashioned-inspired cocktail featuring cognac, sherry, passionflower, and elderflower liqueur. It comes with an incense-like garnish—a rosemary sprig lit on fire.

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UnderTow



Undertow in Phoenix Arizona Grace Stufkosky

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UnderTow is intended to look like the 19th-century clipper ship of a character named Captain Mallory. Voyages, told through the story at the back of the menu and the scenery seen from your porthole, change regularly.



Madame Emilie's Effects

Madame Emilie, an apothecary selling bootleg "medicine" in the story at the back of Platform 18's menu, and the drink named after her is a spendy showstopper (\$57). With base spirits of vintage rum and rum agricole, the drink is presented tableside in a smoke-filled wooden chest. The bartender chooses a bottle from the box and the drink is poured over a giant ice cube into a rocks glass.



Clear Skies & Tropical Winds

As opposed to the more in-your-face intensity of most tiki drinks, The Clear Skies & Tropical Winds is a very delicate clarified milk punch. It features notes of guava, red mango tea, citrus, and grassiness from the rum agricole.

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