

From top: The Darling's flower shop facade opens into The Library, its ornate first-floor lounge, pictured here; the Guava Rum cocktail at Bar Sótano; behind this clean-lined record shop, Dorian's awaits.

Prohibition NOT REQUIRED

The modern-day speakeasy is a walking contradiction, but a smattering of new Chicago bars deftly redefine the concept for 2019.

BY ARIEL CHEUNG

The booze is not bootlegged, the locations are listed and it's all (usually) above board at the speakeasies of today. The term has become winking shorthand for bars featuring an element of mystique—and with four new such spots in Chicago, we couldn't be happier the secret is out.

Just how secretive these neo-speakeasies are, though, varies widely. "It's an art, not a science, but you can't go too far," says celebrity chef Rick Bayless, whose new subterranean **Bar Sótano** (443 N. Clark St., barsotano.com) is accessed via the alley it shares with Three Dots and a Dash. "If it takes a few minutes to find us, we're happy, but if customers have been looking for a half hour, we've gone too far," Bayless notes. Inside, Bar Sótano proves more mezcal than mystery; the speakeasy elements are rolled into his grander concept, pulling from Oaxacan markets to create upscale Mexican bar food and cocktails that range from spicy to herbaceous.

In similar form, **The Darling** (905 W. Randolph St., thedarlingchicago.com) folds its speakeasy-styled surprises into two floors of richly adorned fixtures and velvet-lined comforts, complete with absinthe service and delicious bites from former A10 chef James Martin. "I would go to dinner in the West Loop and wouldn't know what to do afterward," says owner Sophie Huterstein. "It felt like there was an obvious need for a nonformal dining experience that still provided great food and drinks." While its foyer masquerades as a flower shop (which will actually sell flowers come spring), it's the covert performance spaces—hidden behind paintings and fake walls throughout The Darling—that elevate the mystique. Drag artists and eclectic music acts are interspersed throughout the night, meaning the surprises keep coming with each visit.

While the newcomers are hardly the first Chicago speakeasies of the modern era—The Violet Hour blazed that trail 12 years ago—there are still new ways to interpret the concept. Getting as close as possible to the real thing, for example, is what Jovanis Bourgoub hopes to achieve with **The**



Hyde (5115 S. Harper Ave.). A portrait of Al Capone oversees the velvet-curtained, cognac-focused bar, where Bourgoub asks guests to dress "like you're really going out" and keep cellphones out of sight. Hopeful visitors must request the nightly password from the bar's Instagram or risk getting turned away, and Bourgoub says he's not afraid to deny entry to those who don't play along. "If anybody can walk in, that's not really a speakeasy," he notes. "If people hate it, that's too bad."

Perhaps the most convincing front comes in the form of a working record shop, stocked with over 600 rare finds and other records, plus a clean-lined listening booth. Head through the booth's back door, and find yourself inside **Dorian's** (1939 W. North Ave., throughtherecordshop.com), a lush ode to the 1960s. The Wicker Park space has been remade to feature emerald-toned booths, complex cocktails from The Aviary alum John Hess and tantalizing bites from chef Brian Fisher. As a whole, Dorian's now encapsulates what co-owner Zack Eastman says most bargoers are searching for. "People are looking for quality food and drinks, but we're also looking for an experience," Eastman says. "It's less about the Prohibition era and more about giving guests something that's transformative. That's what draws people."

