



In San Francisco, the cool cats hang in the alleys

By Jesse Mckinley

While Paris has its boulevards and Miami its beaches, San Francisco's lure is its labyrinth of back alleys, those mysterious midblock detours that seem to offer, in equal doses, the promise of discovery and the slightly scary possibility of getting lost — really lost.

Built in haste after the discovery of California gold in 1848 and rebuilt in a bigger hurry after the 1906 earthquake and fire, San Francisco has all manner of concrete crannies, quaint cobblestone back ways and remote waterfront hide-outs like the Ramp, a sunset margarita spot whose front deck literally drops into the bay. In the tradition of a city whose literary legacy includes both the Beats and Sam Spade, those out-of-the-way addresses also include hipster bars and Zagat-rated speak-easies like Bix, an alley-front favorite whose Jazz Age ethos includes tuxedo jackets and torch songs.

Indeed, unlike many cities that have built over or ignored their old service streets, San Francisco has embraced them, with tourist-friendly spots like Belden Lane downtown, which is home to a row of restaurants specializing in everything from Spanish food (B44) to vodka (Voda). Cast an eye down pretty much any alley near the Union Square shopping district and you'll find a different national cuisine, including French (Cafe Claude, Anjou), bar-top bar food (Azul), Vietnamese (Le Colonial) or Irish (the Irish Bank), though much of the "eating" there seems to be the liquid variety.

But there are also less obvious places found throughout the city, including in such tony neighborhoods as Laurel Village, near Pacific Heights, where Sociale, an elegant little restaurant, is hidden in a vine-laden inlet off Sacramento Street. Telegraph Hill, meanwhile, has Julius' Castle, which is literally pitched on the edge of a cliff, while in the area around City Hall you can hunt for the Hotel Biron, a tiny wine bar on Rose Street, where imaginary musical instruments adorn the walls. The nook known as South Park is so cloistered that it's accessible only by side street. And unlike the television show that shares its name, South Park is pretty, quiet and home to several sweet little spots, including the South Park Cafe, a one-rose-to-a-table French restaurant....

If you go

S.F. eats and drinks

The Ramp

A popular spot with local college students and former dockhands alike, with a large outdoor deck and a view of the bay; \$7.50 margaritas are a specialty. 855 Terry Francois St. (China Basin); 415-621-2378; www.ramprestaurant.com.

Bix

A speak-easy-style hideout — jazz, gin and gentlemanly service — whose only entrance is off an alley. Pacific oysters (\$13.75 a half-dozen) and ginger gimlets (\$10) are ordered early and often. 56 Gold St.; 415-433-6300; www.bixrestaurant.com.

The Irish Bank

A genuine-looking pub whose patrons and pleasant vibe spill into the patio outside. Guinness, naturally enough, is on tap (\$5.50), as is Irish stew (\$9). 10 Mark Lane; 415-788-7152; www.theirishbank.com.

Sociale

Tucked away along a street of high-end boutiques, Sociale serves Italian cuisine indoors and out, under a pair of lovely striped awnings. The fried olives (\$8) are a treat. 3665 Sacramento St.; 415-921-3200; www.caffesociale.com.

South Park Cafe

About the only thing open late on a sleepy little urban oval. The prix fixe is \$34 and gives you the choice of everything from red beets and rémoulade to venison and vegetable couscous. 108 South Park St.; 415-495-7275; www.southparkcafesf.com/.

Harlot

One of the city's more fashionable places to be, and be seen, and everything that entails, from pricey cocktails to bottle service to a VIP room upstairs. 46 Minna St.; 415-777-1077; www.harlotsf.com.

Alfred's Steakhouse

The picture of the cow on the menu says it all: This is steaks taken seriously. Whiskey, too; the menu includes a San Francisco rye, Old Potrero (\$14), found in only a few other places and scotches from the Isle of Skye (\$11) and the Isle of Mull (\$6 and \$10). 659 Merchant St.; 415-781-7777.