

ANOTHER SIDE OF PARADISE

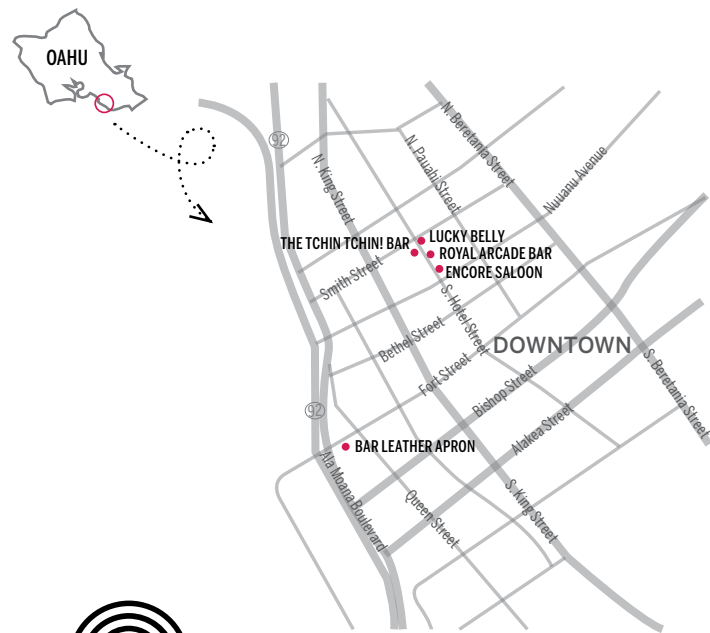
Downtown Honolulu stirs up Hawaii's coolest cocktail scene. BY AMY CASSELL



PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEVIN J. MIYAZAKI



The Wishlist (Cocchi Americano, Gran Classico, beet syrup, and lemon bitters) from Royal Arcade Bar. Opposite: Sunset entertainment at Halekulani's House Without a Key.



ALOHA

and welcome to Honolulu, where ordering a mai tai, a Blue Hawaii, or a “world-famous rum punch” is a vacation rite of passage. While travelers descend on Hawaii’s capital city for palm-lined Waikiki Beach, postcard sunsets at resort bars such as Halekulani’s House Without a Key, and plentiful shopping options, “sophisticated cocktail scene” doesn’t tend to rate high on its list of attractions. But away from Waikiki’s high-rises and busy boulevards, a group of local entrepreneurs are building a craft-cocktail kingdom.

Downtown Honolulu is only a 20-minute drive west of Waikiki Beach, but it’s a totally distinct side of the city. Here, centered mainly in the diverse, easily walkable Chinatown neighborhood, former sailors’ haunts and once-abandoned buildings now house a lively crop of restaurants, bars, art galleries, and boutiques that stand beside dim-sum counters, lei shops, and produce markets. “Ten years ago, people wouldn’t go to Chinatown at night, but that’s changed,” says Honolulu-based Virtuoso travel advisor Randy King. “The city has put an emphasis on cleaning up this neighborhood over the last few years, and now it’s a great place to go for a different kind of night out in Hawaii.”

There are still mai tais (this *is* Hawaii after all), but whiskey, sake, and even mezcal dominate menus here, shaken and stirred into inventive cocktails enjoyed in secret rooftop courtyards and at intimate six-seat bars. Leave the sunsets and palm trees behind for a bit and drink in the action down the street.

WINE IT UP

The Tchin Tchin! Bar

In the late 1930s, sailors stationed at Pearl Harbor ventured up the narrow staircase that leads to this bar for some “Western dancing,” but the vibe today is less party time, more sip and savor. “Tchin Tchin” comes from the Chinese expression *qīng-qīng*, a toast used to invite guests to drink, and there are plenty of reasons to raise a glass here. The refined wine bar – exposed brick walls, leather couches, chandeliers – serves an impressive variety of vintages, a simple snack menu, and a spirits list that features local favorite Ko Hana Agricole Rum, distilled about 20 miles west. The pièce de résistance, though, is the rooftop courtyard, with its romantic string lights, wall of succulents and orchids, and downtown Honolulu views. 39 N. Hotel Street; thetchintchinbar.com.



From left: Tchin Tchin! Bar refreshments and its leafy rooftop patio, Lucky Belly, and Justin Park with a Tavern Keep’s Treasure cocktail at Bar Leather Apron.

LATE-NIGHT LIBATIONS

Lucky Belly

While its bigger-than-your-face ramen bowls lure diners, the sake and whiskey behind Lucky Belly’s bar attract a crowd too. Proprietor Jesse Cruz – who also owns The Tchin Tchin! Bar and Livestock Tavern across the street – brought the Japanese *izakaya* concept to the neighborhood when Lucky Belly opened in 2012. The restaurant eschews traditional entrees in favor of more appetizers (oxtail dumplings, scallop sushi) and creative cocktails, such as the Beanto Box, made with Japanese whisky, vanilla bean simple syrup, and orange bitters. On weekends, Lucky Belly stays packed well after midnight, and Chinatown revelers line up at its late-night window for pork-belly *bao* and takeout containers of shrimp fried rice. 50 N. Hotel Street; luckybelly.com.



CHINATOWN BY DAY

One of the oldest established Chinatowns in the U.S. (circa 1840), this Honolulu neighborhood also became an unofficial red-light district during WWII. Sailors came to Chinatown for booze, women, and tattoos – body-ink legend Sailor Jerry opened his first studio here. Virtuoso travel advisors can work with Virtuoso’s on-site connection, **Luxe Travel Hawaii**, to arrange a privately guided walking tour of the area. The two-hour stroll showcases the bars, burlesque clubs, and “boogie houses” of the 1930s, along with other stories about the neighborhood’s colorful past.



COCKTAIL CLUB

Bar Leather Apron

It’s technically outside Chinatown, but this tiny space hidden inside a nondescript office building is well worth the three-block detour. Co-owner Justin Park – who spent years managing a cocktail program in Chinatown – captivates behind the bar, offering up a crash course in the history and flavor profiles of each spirit in his drinks, which feature Japanese-inspired ingredients. He crafts matcha old-fashioneds and yuzu sours like they’re pieces of fine art, but the most beautiful drink on the menu is the Tavern Keep’s Treasure, a bourbon, Cynar, and bitters concoction that’s covered with a bell jar and smoked with wood chips shaved from a bourbon barrel stave. Stylish, leather-apron-clad bartenders look after the patrons in the adjacent lounge, but for the best experience, make reservations for one of the six seats at the bar. 745 Fort Street, Suite #127A; barleatherapron.com.

TIP

“Head to Chinatown early – around 5 PM – to enjoy a delicious happy hour cocktail and then try one of the neighborhood’s many great restaurants, such as The Pig and the Lady (83 N. King Street).”

– Randy King, Virtuoso travel advisor, Honolulu

GAME NIGHT

Royal Arcade Bar

After eight years of running Chinatown bar Manifest, owners Brandon and Nicole Reid opened a chilled-out sister hangout next door this year. While DJs entertain the crowd at Manifest, the soundtrack in this sparse, gallerylike space consists of pool balls clacking and *Street Fighter 2* battles going down on retro arcade machines. The varied drink menu, written on a chalkboard behind the bar, includes everything from Japanese whiskies and classic cocktails to Maui Brewing Company cans and PBR tallboys. 34 N. Hotel Street.

MARGARITAS, PLEASE Encore Saloon

Daniel Kaaialii, who grew up splitting his time between Oahu and Texas, launched Honolulu's popular, now-closed Cocina be-

fore opening this lively saloon in an 1886 building late last year. There's a simple (and tasty) taco and burrito menu, but the real focus here is tequila and mezcal. The Mexican spirits appear in a handful of margaritas and boozy slushies, and can take the place of other liquors to spice up traditional cocktails such as a Blood and Sand (substitute tequila for Scotch; add cherry liqueur, sweet vermouth, and lemon). Seating at the long, narrow bar is first-come, first-served, but there's usually plenty of room at the picnic tables out back. 10 N. Hotel Street; encoresaloon.com.



Clockwise from top: A prickly pear margarita and other mezcal and tequila drinks at Encore Saloon, House Without a Key's mai tai, and its enviable Waikiki Beach perch.

SUNNY STAYS

Where to unpack for ocean views and post up for sunsets.

A sleek aesthetic is the star at Honolulu's 353-room **Modern Honolulu**, from guest rooms' minimalist cream-and-neutral decor to the hip cocktail bar disguised as a library off the lobby. It's a five-minute walk to Waikiki Beach, but many guests prefer to hang out at one of the hotel's two pools. *Doubles from \$339, including an upgrade at time of booking (if available), breakfast daily, and a \$100 hotel credit.*

Halekulani provides a peaceful reprieve from Waikiki Beach's crowds, and many of the resort's 453 elegant guest rooms have soaking tubs and private balconies with Pacific Ocean and Diamond Head views. Every evening, the House

Without a Key bar fills with travelers who come for live music, traditional hula dancing, and front-row sunset seats. *Doubles from \$500, including breakfast daily and a \$100 resort credit.*

Waikiki's grande dame, **The Royal Hawaiian**, a Luxury Collection Resort, turns 90 this year. Toast the 528-room pink palace at its open-air Mai Tai Bar – with its signature umbrella drink, of course – or celebrate over a bountiful lobster dinner at Azure. *Doubles from \$385, including a welcome amenity, breakfast daily, and a \$100 resort credit.*

The 338-room **Kahala Hotel & Resort** stands on the east side of Honolulu's Diamond

Head, a ten-minute drive from Waikiki Beach. The hotel is fronted by a private lagoon with its own resident bottlenose dolphin population. *Doubles from \$425, including breakfast daily and a \$100 resort credit.*

Retreat to the island's quiet west coast at the 370-room **Four Seasons Resort Oahu at Ko Olina**, which opened last year. Spacious rooms with wood-paneled accent walls come with marble bathrooms, and almost all have private lanais. Guests stay busy on outrigger canoe excursions or during paddleboard lessons in the resort's lagoon. *Doubles from \$645, including breakfast daily and a \$100 spa credit.* VI