

# it's Tiki Time

*Rum-based tiki drinks are making big waves again*

by Camper English / photos by Matt Powers

Limited-edition tiki mugs being signed by the artist known as Notch outside Forbidden Island in Alameda, one of the stops on the Eighth Annual Bay Area Tiki Crawl.

Once relegated to ironic kitsch status, tiki bars and drinks are coming back in a big way. Tiki drinks—considered the last major cocktail category created between Prohibition and today—were born thanks to Donn “Don the Beachcomber” Beach and Victor “Trader Vic” Bergeron (inventor of the Mai Tai), both of whom opened a series of restaurants with exotic Polynesian themes that became extremely popular after World War II.

A few early tiki establishments—the classic Tonga Room in San Francisco, the diminutive Tiki Ti in Los Angeles and the over-the-top Mai Kai in Fort Lauderdale, for example—remain. But now bartenders across the country are rediscovering that, despite their kitsch reputation, original tiki cocktails show quality and complexity on a par with the classic pre-Prohibition cocktails so popular today.



A classic Mai Tai served at Trader Vic's in Emeryville during the eighth annual Bay Area Tiki Crawl.



**Tiki fans enjoy the outfits as much as the drinks at the Forbidden Island bar in Alameda, one of the stops on the Eighth Annual Bay Area Tiki Crawl.**

The number of new tiki bars and tiki theme nights is staggering, especially on the West Coast. Tommy O's in Camas, Washington, has dedicated about half of the cocktail menu to tiki drinks. The much-respected Tear-drop Lounge in Portland, Oregon, hosted a monthly tiki theme night last summer and plans to do so again this year. At the 2008 Tales of the Cocktail conference in New Orleans, there was a Tiki Block Party. Just this winter, Frankie's Tiki Room opened in Las Vegas, Luau debuted in Los Angeles and Tiki Tom's cropped up in Oakland.

The East Coast has been slower to pick up on the trend, but there have been a few one-off events. The normally staid Distilled Spirits Council of the U.S. (DISCUS) threw a much-blogged-about tiki party last spring at a surf-and-bikini shop in Tribeca. Apothecary Bar and Lounge in Philadelphia hosted "Apotiki" last fall. At the bar PDT in New York, Jeff "Beachbum" Berry, author of four books on tiki drinks, was hired to give a talk for the city's top bartenders, who may have the Negroni down pat but who might need help mastering the complexities of tiki-ology.

Berry sums up the new popularity of the movement: "After years in the ironic hipster subculture ghetto, tiki has gone mainstream in a big way. Maybe because Madonna and Paris Hilton are frequenting the Mahiki in London, or Elton John and Jennifer Lopez have been photographed at the Luau in Beverly Hills, all of a sudden my books are all sold out on Amazon.com, and the

phone's ringing off the hook for magazine interviews and appearance requests." Business is booming for this tiki-meister. "In 2008 I gave drink demonstrations in New York, New Orleans, all over Florida and even Bratislava; after years of dismissing them, bar owners and tenders now all want to know how to make these drinks."

Another unique factor of the tiki revival is the extremely dedicated fan base of enthusiasts, who socialize at sites like Critiki.com and TikiRoom.com, as well as at gatherings like San Diego's Tiki Oasis. They organize outings like the eighth annual Tiki Crawl in the San Francisco Bay Area, which started as a one-night event but has since expanded to visit ten bars over the course of four days.

At Forbidden Island in Alameda, CA, one of the stops on the Tiki Crawl, co-owner Martin Cate acknowledged the recent upsurge of interest in rum—a predictable side effect of tiki fever. "We have definitely noticed an increase in rum's popularity as people have noticed its sippability," Cate notes. "Rum has a long way to go to reach the heights that tequila has reached. About once a month I still get the question, 'You can sip rum?'" When that question goes away, I'll know we've made it."

Equipping a tiki-ready bar means stocking a lot of different rums as a starting point. Cate currently carries 107 of them at Forbidden Island. "Tiki drinks often blend rums of different origins and styles to create new flavor profiles," he says. "The Zombie blends a rich and pungent 151 Demerara rum and expands it with a light, dry unaged Puerto Rican or U.S. Virgin Island rum, and sometimes also the molasses richness of a black rum."

Several species of rum inhabit the drink well at



**At the Kona Club in Oakland, a former sports bar converted into a tiki palace, the statue's hips slowly sway to the music**

Forbidden Island, including a Jamaican version, two Demerara rums from Guyana, a pot still rum and two rums from St. Croix-based Cruzan. "I put the Cruzan aged in the Nui Nui, a Don the Beachcomber drink," Cate says.

"At the end of the day people are discovering that a drink with an umbrella in it doesn't have to mean a syrupy blue nightmare," Cate declares. "It can be a great, well-crafted drink with an exciting rum." ■■