

The Bay Area Reporter's

BAR TAB

Nightlife Guide

On the Tab 
a Bouquet of April Events

Out in Style

Chic Spots  Romantic Designs  Bar Reboot



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On the Cover: Antoine Delattre, Katya Smirnov-Skyy, Elliot Tomaeno and Nikki Wooldridge share drinks at Harry Denton's Starlight Room. • Photo: Georg Lester. See page 4.



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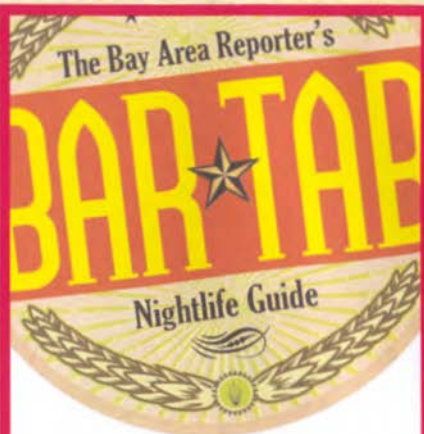
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GAY BY DESIGN

• by Dr. Jack Fritscher

Gay bars are like Mickey and Judy (and Liza) putting on a show in a barn that turns into the Kit Kat Klub. "Outside it is winter, but in here it's so hot!" In the way the world did not begin the day we first noticed it, gay bars did not begin the night we came out and chose the venue whose form fitted our "funktion" best. Even as rough bars existed under 1930s radar, piss-elegant bars were de rigueur back in the art deco of pre-disco San Francisco, and the pissier, the gayer. When straight hotels chased gay wallets, the very apartheid design of the bar signaled straight or gay.

In the 1930s Depression, the St. Francis Hotel on Powell Street, trumping its dark-wood "Victorian gentlemen's club," fetched after gay cash with its Orchid Room swank, with a narcissistic interior marketed smartly as:

"Lavender glass and black kid leather. When Noel Coward writes another play, or smiths another tune like 'Mad Dogs and Englishmen,' go here to talk about it...It's a hundred thousand bucks worth of glitter. The walls are black kid, the ceiling is DuPont's new translucent Lucite...Ceiling-to-floor mirrors are spotted around where you can sneak a look at yourself when you're feeling your cleverest. The floor is turquoise-rugged. The whole joint changes color according to whim."

Lavender? Kid leather? Lucite? Mirrors? Turquoise carpet? A light mixer? You're not in Kansas, sailor! You're in a gay bar. And it's a binary opposite to the "seafood carry-out" interior (1938) of the Sailor Boy Tavern near the Embarcadero YMCA. Welcome to World War II!

In the run-up to the great sex adventure of WWII, designers of the 1939 San Francisco World's Fair on Treasure Island built a temporary tavern coyly coded as the "Gayway." Its fatuous name, spinning the fair's midway lights, delivered a voyeur's dream-interior spotlighting "live nude cabaret." It was vaudeville, hotter than the cool imperial drag at both upper-crust Finocchio's (1936-1999) and the crusty Beige Room (1940s-1950s), where the stage runway itself

The BEIGE ROOM 831 BROADWAY, at Powell
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA



Featuring America's Most Beautiful and Talented Female Impersonators

— A program from The Beige Room. —

was the heart of exhibitionist design needed for drag, presaging the catwalk shows of Fashion Week.

Recently, archivist Marjorie Bryer searching boxes donated in 1999 to the GLBT Historical Society found "lost" photographs of drag artists posing in the picture-frame surround of design that defined the Beige Room. Geographically, the Orchid Room, and pantomime bars starring "Victor lip-synching Victoria" to a dapper audience, ruled pop culture north of Market Street. In the Tenderloin and SoMa, the War liberated servicemen to find their own speaking voices celebrating masculine fraternity in bars needing no proscenium stage for mime. The patrons on the floor became willing performance artists in the bars where "flash-mob" mixer-interiors made the space participatory theater in the round.

In our counterintuitive gay consciousness, bar design functions as stage magic until "last-call" halogen spots light up like a cop raid revealing the minimalist Ick of the boozy, boxy, existentialist space.

Even so, bar interiors reinforce diverse sexual identities by being transformative "environmental pornography" enabling us to believe that we are all that we want to seem. ★

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