

good WHISKY blues

HE'S JUST SITTING HERE AND (THERE) DRINKING.
VIKRAM ACHANTA SAMPLES THE WARES AT
SOME OF AMERICA'S BEST BOOZY BARS





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NEW YORK CITY

I didn't have happy memories from the last time I was in NYC's Little Korea in 2013. I was younger then, but not so young that I deserved to be carded. My driving licence, ancient as it was, was illegible, and my voter ID did not have my year of birth. So, in spite of my advancing years, I was turfed out. Well, three years on, I was back in K-Town and, to make doubly sure that no one dared ask me for ID, I'd even become bald.

We were at **New Wonjo** (newwonjo.com), apparently the only restaurant in K-Town which had managed to persuade the powers that be that they could operate a charcoal-fired grill at each table (other restaurants had to make do with gas-fired grills), on which a range of meats were barbecued. To wash down the BBQ, we had a large bowl of Makgeolli, a milky, sparkling rice wine. Literally meaning "roughly strained", it's an unfiltered rice wine. A working-class favourite till it went out of fashion, it's come roaring back. The fair amount of lactic acid and fibre it contains make it popular with the elderly as well.

A bottle of soju is also de rigueur. Here's a piece of soju etiquette: soju should always be served and accepted with both hands. I suspect it's not so much a cultural thing as a need to make sure you don't drop it, which can come from underestimating the potency of soju. Distilled from rice liquor, it's incredibly popular in Korea, which has

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Bottles of Makgeolli (above); and New Wonjo

ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE



The Dead Rabbit Grocery and Grog is now dead-famous

ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE

The singularly named Dead Rabbit Grocery and Grog was created by the incomparable duo of Sean Muldoon and Jack McGarry

made Jinro soju one of the world's top-selling liquor brands.

Next up, **Pocha 32** (pocha32.com), a very popular pub known for its range of flavoured soju. It takes its name from the Korean term for makeshift taverns in South Korea, which were known as *pojangmacha*, then shortened to *pocha*. We opt for the signature drink here, their watermelon soju, which was served chilled in half a scooped-out watermelon, and was delicious.

The next night, there are two young Danish women at the bar next to me, and we strike up a conversation. They frequently consult a book, which had helped guide them to the bar we're at, the singularly named **Dead Rabbit**

Grocery and Grog (deadrabbitnyc.com), created by the incomparable duo of Sean Muldoon and Jack McGarry, fully as Irish as their names suggest.

I'd been guided here, not by a book, but by the urge to see if the Dead Rabbit lived up to the hype of the last few years, during which it has received awards from both *World's 50 Best Bars* and *Tales of the Cocktail*. This is also the bar where Ben Reed, a friend and cocktail wizard, once spent a well-soaked evening with his girlfriend, in which he conspired with the bar owners to serve a cocktail to her with an unusual garnish—an engagement ring. (No, she didn't consume the ring, and, yes, she is now his wife.)

The ground level of the bar is called

the Taproom. I peruse the menu, consult with Melissa the bartender and order a Slim Shady ("Powers Irish whiskey mixed with Suze, Lillet Blanc, Lemon, Peach, Basil and Green Peppercorn, and served in a champagne coupé glass"). There's also punch on offer and, as I wait for my drink, I decide to check with the bartender if she knows the etymology of the word punch, that it derives from the Hindi word, *paanch* (she didn't). I had along with me a copy of *The Tulleeho! Book of Cocktails*, which I wanted to present to Sean and Jack. Sean's wife Ann was behind the bar, and she graciously accepted the book on their behalf. I then found out that upstairs was the Parlor, an exclusive part of the bar,



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Facing, clockwise from top left: makgeolli; a coffee daiquiri; cocktails at Bear's Tooth, Juneau; beer from the Skagway Brewing Company; a cocktail at Dead Rabbit, NYC; watermelon soju; and a glass of De Brau

picked up a copy of *Dead Rabbit—Resurrection*, a drinks menu designed as an adult graphic novel. Did Dead Rabbit live up to the hype? In spades.



WASHINGTON D.C.

The doorman at the Loews Madison Hotel in D.C., where we're staying, is from Cameroon. I reminisce with him about Roger Milla, the Cameroonian striker from the 1990 World Cup, who scored four goals and, at the age of 38, took Cameroon to the quarters. The doorman shakes his head, and bemoans the fact that players nowadays don't have a feeling of national pride; it's now all about the rich clubs of Europe, which have seduced the best African talent.

With soccer on our mind, it's just as well that Euro 2016 and the Copa America are both on, full tilt. After a long, hot

day on the National Mall, a cold glass of beer was welcome at the bar at **Rural Society** (dc.ruralsocietyrestaurant.com), the well-thought-of Argentinean restaurant at our hotel. The DC Brau Public Pale Ale was the only local beer available on tap, and I decided to start with it. Brewed in the classic American pale ale style, it seemed a far more civilised way

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The famous daiquiri was born in Cuba and came to the US via the historic Army and Navy Club in D.C.

Beer on tap in Washington D.C.; and a daiquiri keeps company with a sister cocktail

to spend the evening compared to the fans amusing themselves at the England-Russia game in Marseille. I follow up my DC Brau with a pint of Loose Cannon IPA, a flagship beer from the Heavy Seas Brewery in Baltimore, figuring that Baltimore was close enough to DC to count as local. The match ends 1-1 and we leave before violence breaks out on screen.

Detente is in the air. Obama has visited Cuba, diplomatic relations between the US and Cuba have resumed and civilian flights from the US to Cuba are set to take off soon. What better time to revisit the daiquiri, a cocktail born in Cuba and which came to the USA via a historic club in DC, the **Army and Navy Club** (armynavyclub.org). A private function is winding up in the Daiquiri Lounge, so we were ushered first to the Eagle Grill. My wife and I have a daiquiri each, served in a signature jam jar with a handle, and excellent they were.

The private function over, we make our way up to the Lounge, where we coax another daiquiri from the bartender, and read the legend on the wall. Back in 1898, Jennings Cox, an American mining engineer in Cuba invented the daiquiri, which he named after the town

of Daiquiri where he was then working. In 1909, a junior medical officer named Lucius W. Johnson visited Daiquiri, where Cox introduced him to the drink. On Lucius's return to DC, he introduced it at his club, the Army and Navy, making it the first place in the USA where the daiquiri was made and served. The rest, as they say, is history.

ALASKA

Alaska's largest city, Juneau, is blessed with some of the best beer I've tasted at the sister outlets of Bear's Tooth and Moose's Tooth, along with some amazing food. Rod Hancock and Matt Jones, united by their love for beer, pizza and rock climbing set up their first outlet, **Moose's Tooth** (moosestooth.net), naming it after a peak in the Alaska Range. After an exhilarating but exhausting day spent hiking in the Chugach Stage Park and cycling on the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail, I walk over to Moose's Tooth and settle in at the bar counter. I find myself next to Joe, who's on a break from DC and is off the next day to a friend's fishing camp in Kodiak, where he hopes to learn the trade, and perhaps orchestrate a

career shift.

"Handcrafted ales of the last frontier" is their tag line, and I start with a sampling paddle, with the choice of four beers from their large menu left to you. I chose the Prince William Porter, which is an American Brown Porter, the Northern Lights Amber Ale, a copper-coloured ale, the Moose's Tooth Hefeweizen, an American-style Hefeweizen and the Pipeline Stout, a full-bodied stout beer. Moose's Tooth and, as I was to discover, other brew pubs I visited in Alaska, also made available a selection of beers from other brewers, one of which I choose. The crowds keep thronging in and I'm gratified that, settled at the bar with my paddle and pint in front of me, I look like a veteran, and a few people ask my advice on what they should order!

Outside it was touching midnight, but it seemed like it was barely past midday. I began to empathise with Al Pacino's character in Christopher Nolan's *Insomnia*. After a couple more beers, I head home, as the next morning we have an early start to the town of Talkeetna, from where we're taking a light plane through the Alaska Range, and where we are to land on the south-east fork of the

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A glass of brown porter goes very, very well with spare ribs

ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE

Outside it was touching midnight, inside it felt like midday. I began to empathise with Al Pacino's character in *Insomnia*

Kahiltna Glacier. This is also where the Denali base camp is situated, from where climbers head off to the tallest mountain in North America.

On our return from our 'flightseeing' trip, we head to **Bear's Tooth** (beartoothgrill.net), which serves outstanding Tex-Mex food and beer. I start with the Wild Country raspberry wheat beer, flavoured with Oregon raspberries, and then tempted by a weeklong celebration of the Negroni cocktail, opt for one, made with 50 Fathoms gin from a local distillery, Port Chilkoot Distillery.

A scenic bus ride down the Seward highway gets us to Seward, from where we board our floating home for the next week, the *Celebrity Millennium*. And, apart from the scenic wonders of Alaska, I'm looking forward to the brews and bars along our voyage. We're scheduled for four days of back-to-back stops following our first day of looking the Hubbard Glacier in the eye.

Juneau, Alaska's capital, beckons and I was looking forward to a brewery visit at the famed Alaskan Brewing Company, but it was closed, it being a Sunday. So I

settled for the next best thing, the **Red Dog Saloon** (reddogsaloon.com), which was set up in 1887 to cater to gold miners. The batwing doors of the Red Dog Saloon open to give us a view of what the 19th century might look like, with possibly the only thing changing being the 70-year-old stand-up comic with his electric guitar, and a tip box labelled 'Old Farts Fund' in front of him.

I start with a laden glass of the Alaskan Amber ale, served on tap, and raise a toast to Marcy and Geoff, the co-founders of Alaska Brewing, and my wife has



At the Red Dog, the floor is strewn with sawdust. The only things missing are a card sharp and a shootout

Clockwise from left: The Red Dog Saloon; on the Yukon Railroad; and a glass from Icy Strait Brewing

a Glacier Margarita. Stand-up fades into country music taking us back to Johnny Horton's country music standard 'When It's Springtime in Alaska (It's 40 Below)'. The floor is strewn with sawdust and the waitresses are dressed in period clothes. The only things missing are a card sharp and a shootout. But this is America, anything can happen, I figure, and decide to order the Alaskan Summer Ale, a crisp and light Kolsch-style ale. We reluctantly bid adieu to Red Dog as I also want to visit the famed **Tracy's King Crab Shack** (kingcrabshack.com), right on the shore where we have some absolutely brilliant beer-battered shrimps, crab legs and another glass of beer from the Alaskan brewing company.

The next day we're in Skagway, home of gangster Soapy Smith, whose shootout with Frank Reid appears to have

been the high point of Skagway's existence. Off the ship, we take the White Pass and Yukon Railroad, an amazing feat of civil engineering, completed in 1900 and built to provide a way to the Klondike Gold Rush. We pass a stunning panorama of waterfalls, snow-capped peaks and glaciers as the train hugs sheer cliffs on its way to the White Pass.

Back in town, after succumbing to a bawdy depiction of Soapy Smith's life and death, we head for the **Skagway Brewing Company** (skagwaybrewing.com) to calm our nerves from the train ride and the subsequent 'on stage' shootout (which made up for striking out at the Red Dog Saloon). As we have the time, I follow this up with another beer, the Spruce Tip blonde, which incorporates hand-picked Sitka spruce tips.

From Skagway we head to Icy Straits,

where the pleasures of a Bloody Mary packed with crab meat, and garnished with a crab leg, seem a drink too far for me. Instead, I have a brew—from, you guessed it, **Icy Strait Brewing** (icystraitbrewing.com).

From Icy Straits, we head to our last halt, Ketchikan. Eschewing the charms of an 'authentic' totem village, we instead go for a hike on the Rainbird Trail, getting to which itself is quite a hike! Back to the pier we head back to the **Alaska Fish House** (alaskafishhouse.com), where a plate of halibut and chips had impressed us earlier. The sun is glorious and welcome, as we dry out from our hike, and our table has a great view of our cruise ship on one side and kayakers on the other. One beer soon stretches into three. No, Muddy, whiskey (and beer), *you bin very, very good...*