

# Twenty Bars in Two Days

A TCU chemistry professor with a passion for whiskey journals his experience as he visits San Francisco's most notable purveyors.

BY ERIC SIMANEK



**T**he goal was simple: Identify San Francisco's best whiskey bars and a strategy to enjoy them. I polled bartenders at 20 bars, and 11 establishments emerged as the city's finest for whiskey.

**Day 1** Any whiskey adventure to San Francisco should start with an Irish coffee at The Buena Vista, a venerable cafe at the end of the Powell-Hyde cable car line at Fisherman's Wharf. First,

hot water emptied from the clear glass. Then, two lumps of sugar. Black coffee and the Irish whiskey of the day (today, Tullamore DEW) follow. Finally, thick cream spooned on top.

**Hard Water**, on Pier 3 near the Ferry Building Marketplace, opens at 11 a.m. The clean, sleek space sports a wall of whiskey, and each of the six shelves holds multiple bottles of well over 100 different offerings. I meet bar director Erik Adkins, who shares his enthusiasm for bourbon and the process that yields it.

From Hard Water, a several-block walk

to the Financial District will land you at **Rickhouse**. Some of the best cocktails are not on the menu. I had heard rumors of one called Penicillin, a perfect concoction of Scotch blended whiskey, an Islay malt (ideally Laphroaig 10 year), citrus, ginger and honey. It is relatively laborious to prepare, so do not ask for one if the bar is hopping.

After a short hotel stop, it's time to head south to the lively and emerging Mission District and several bars on our tour. First stop is the **Nihon Whiskey Lounge** (NWL), which lives in an

unassuming, gray building on the corner of Folsom and 14th streets.

NWL offers what is commonly described as the most complete collection of single malts in the city. As I sit at the bar and consider a malt list that readily numbers in the hundreds, my eyes dance between a host of 3/4-ounce tastes. While many start at \$7, others reach a few hundred dollars.

From NWL, the Mission also is home to **Trick Dog**, which tends to attract a younger crowd. The menu, a photobook of recipes, is itself a work of art. Proceeds from its sale support the local art community through ongoing efforts. Currently, Trick Dog is sponsoring 14 local artists to paint murals around the city, including the collaboration that appears on the outside face of the bar. The murals inspire cocktails of similar names.

Grab a ride and head over to the Mission's **ABV** and **Elixir**, separated by 243 feet and one busy street. ABV leverages its role as a gathering place to advance worthy causes. On the immediate horizon is a family spaghetti dinner with negroni cocktails to benefit a local cancer support group. While ABV does not take reservations, a bar upstairs, aptly named Over Proof, does.

Elixir is a classic corner bar run by "H." Joseph Ehrmann, a pioneer of the San Francisco scene. While his interests are not monogamously focused on the brown spirit whiskey, his knowledge of scotch, bourbon and blends is exhaustive. On this day, Teelings Whiskey is pouring. Hang out and one might meet Camper English, a famed blogger and experimentalist currently consumed with ice.

**Day 2** Perched in North Beach on Pacific Avenue at Columbus, **Comstock Saloon** anchors what was once the Barbary Coast. Comstock Saloon has been lovingly restored by hand by co-owner Jonny Raglin to reflect a history tracing back to before the San Francisco fire of 1906. We visited over a shot of Four Roses



Comstock Saloon serves shots in boot-shaped glasses.



Yellow Label (the only liquid authorized to be served in the glass cowboy boot shooter) and a steam beer chaser.

I head next to **Alembic**, which resides in the storied Haight-Ashbury, where the vibe still lives. The Mount Aso captures my attention — Iwai whiskey, mirin (a type of rice wine), kabocha spice, lemon, and smoked carrot dashi. The hint of carrot is a surprisingly delicious contributor to taste. Music from the '60s offers a backdrop for a crowd engaged in intimate banter around the bar.

A drive back downtown to Union Square puts me at **Tradition**, which is large in comparison to other spots. Behind the bar, I find another wonder (and perhaps traitor, by some standards): Kelly, a self-proclaimed gin-oisseur. She offers this label as justification for her personal collection of 400 bottles, which exceeds that of Whitechapel, the gin house she selects for. I guess somebody has to do it. Kelly walks me through the menu leading me to the signature drink, aptly named the

## The List

### Hard Water

Pier 3,  
Embarcadero  
[hardwater-bar.com](http://hardwater-bar.com)

### Rickhouse

246 Kearny St.  
[rickhousesf.com](http://rickhousesf.com)

### Bourbon & Branch

501 Jones St.  
[bourbonand-branch.com](http://bourbonand-branch.com)

### Nihon Whiskey Lounge

1779 Folsom St.  
[dajanigroup.net](http://dajanigroup.net)

### Comstock Saloon

155 Columbus

Ave.  
[comstock-saloon.com](http://comstock-saloon.com)

### Trick Dog

3010 20th St.  
[trickdogbar.com](http://trickdogbar.com)

### Elixir

3200 16th St.  
[elixirsf.com](http://elixirsf.com)

### ABV

3174 16th St.  
[abvsf.com](http://abvsf.com)

### Alembic

1725 Haight St.  
[alembicsf.com](http://alembicsf.com)

### Tradition

441 Jones St.  
[tradbar.com](http://tradbar.com)

### Rye

688 Geary St.  
[ryesf.com](http://ryesf.com)



Inside  
Comstock  
Saloon

### Tradition. Delicious.

The next stop on the whiskey tour is **Bourbon & Branch**, just across the street. Make a reservation. Get the password. Look for the sign for the Anti-Saloon League (a group that advocated prohibition during the late 1800s). Under the sign, one is likely to find a well-dressed gentleman who neither threatens, nor seems readily willing to offer a hug. There is no conversation until I deliver the password to this speakeasy. Then, after a delay where the hostess appears at a knock, confirms my name, and all too abruptly shuts the door in my face, I am ushered into what is a very dark barroom. The bar is divided into four rooms — three rooms take reservations, the dark bar and two better-lit rooms. Each reservation provides a monitored window of time. When time expires, patrons are ushered to the last room, the library, where libations can be finished.

To end the adventure, head around the block to **Rye**, but keep your eyes open. Rye is almost as well hidden as Bourbon & Branch, although a sign marks it. Of the choices, start with a Pimm's Cup. Atop this frothy glass of rye and house-created

Pimm's No. 5 is a cucumber slice and mint sprig. Lemon, ginger and seltzer complete the mix. The approach — that is, the smell of vapor before the sip, when the nose and lips move in toward the glass — is a critical part of the experience.

Research complete, it is overtime to grab a lift to the airport. **FWInc**



*Eric Simanek is Robert A. Welch Professor of Chemistry at TCU and department chair, organic and biological chemistry, materials chemistry*

*and drug delivery. His lab pioneered a new class of tree-shaped molecules that showed promise as vehicles for fighting prostate cancer and building blocks for new materials. He founded the TCU IdeaFactory to engage students in entrepreneurship. Simanek teaches a class on whiskey and enjoys writing about, and sampling, it.*

DESIGN. BUILD.  
GENERAL CONTRACTOR.

## STABILITY THAT DRIVES BUSINESS

*A foundation  
to get success rolling*

*The next, state-of-the-art,  
60,000-square-foot*

**ROGER WILLIAMS AUTO  
DEALERSHIP**

*in Weatherford, Texas*



- Builders & architects under one roof
- Customers involved start to finish
- Projects delivered 20% faster
- Budgets executed within 5% of target
- Superior, sustainable construction

*Speed*  
**Fab-Crete**

*Let us show you some more  
impressive numbers*

817.478.1137 | speedfabcrete.com