

This page: The iconic Golden Gate Bridge. Facing page: Dragonwell Green Tea from Red Blossom Tea Company in Chinatown



THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO EXPLORE SAN FRANCISCO. WE OBEYED OUR THIRST — AND SUMMED UP THE CITY IN SEVEN DRINKS. OUR METHOD WAS ADMITTEDLY INCOMPLETE, BUT AS A GUIDE TO DISCOVERING THE CITY BY THE BAY, IT WAS THE PERFECT WAY TO GET OUR FEET WET.

# IN THE DRINK

BY JOHN ROSENTHAL

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RACHEL WEILL

For a city with such an outsized reputation, San Francisco is surprisingly small. Just 744,000 lucky souls live within the City by the Bay, which sits on a compact peninsula alongside the Pacific. But urban living has been elevated to an art form here. A true Pacific Rim capital with a strong Asian influence, the city also nurtures deep Italian, Latino, and Irish roots. This is evident in its diverse cuisine — and San Francisco is a foodie's paradise, indeed — as well as its menu of drinks, from sublime tea in Chinatown to sweet *horchata* at an all-night taqueria. Also significant to the city is the number seven — it covers approximately seven square miles (hence the name of a local lifestyle and arts magazine, *7x7*). With all this in mind, we raise a glass to San Francisco, exploring the city with seven stops for seven classic drinks.



This page, clockwise from left: Wading in the water on Baker Beach in the Presidio area; a cappuccino; Café Trieste in North Beach; facing page: bustling, busy Chinatown

### Bloody Marys in the Marina

The Marina district, near the Golden Gate Bridge, a bit off the tourist circuit, is a residential area of colorful, well-kept townhouses. Built on landfill, it was one of the neighborhoods hit hardest by the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. But young professionals started wheeling strollers back into the Marina almost as soon as the aftershocks ended, drawn by the beautiful setting and the collection of quirky shops and family-friendly cafés. This is the city's prime brunch destination on sunny weekend mornings.

Well-scrubbed twenty- and thirtysomethings stroll up and down Chestnut Street, the main drag, which is lined with casual bistros, gussied-up diners, and Cal-Mex burrito joints. Most of these places serve beer and wine only, so if brunch isn't complete for you without a Bloody Mary, walk two blocks inland to the Balboa Café. A neighborhood institution since 1913, the Balboa features a full bar and makes a mean Mary — heavy on the horseradish, light on the Worcestershire sauce, with just the right amount of Tabasco.

The Balboa's clubby interior is inviting, but on a sunny day, there's no beating the charming outdoor tables overlooking Greenwich Street. They're a prime perch for noshing on

specialties such as *huevos rancheros* or buttermilk pancakes with huckleberries.

Another reason to love the Marina is its proximity to the Presidio, San Francisco's most spectacular outdoor playground. This former army base has been transformed into an urban national park, with 12 miles of hiking trails, five miles of bike paths, tennis courts, and even a golf course. Crissy Field, the park at the Presidio's northern edge, features an often-sun-soaked beach that attracts pets and their owners from miles around. Boxers, terriers, and other landlubbing canines stick to the sands while Labs and golden retrievers plunge into the chilly waves. The breakers here aren't big enough for traditional surfing, but when the wind starts streaming through the Golden Gate, the dogs are joined by world-class windsurfers and kiteboarders. When the breeze is right, dozens of these daredevils fly across the water in tight formation, making for one of the best shows in town.

### Coffee in North Beach

The twin steeples of Saints Peter and Paul Church signal that you've arrived in North Beach, San Francisco's Italian enclave, where the narrow sidewalks bustle at all hours of the day and

night. Customers who prefer their espresso or gelato alfresco shimmy up to tiny tables perfectly angled for optimal people-watching.

Beatnik writers like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg made North Beach their stomping grounds, and a newer generation of aspiring artists and poets soaks in that tradition at bars like Vesuvio, coffeehouses like Mario's Bohemian Cigar Store, and landmarks like City Lights Bookstore, founded by beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti in 1953.

Caffe Trieste is another North Beach institution, owned by the Giotta family for more than 50 years. It still feels like a local hangout, with baristas in perpetual motion whipping up espressos and lattes, and the kind of patina Starbucks can only dream of achieving. On this day, young architects shuffle flash cards in preparation for their upcoming licensing exam, downing endless cups of coffee to fuel their cram session. Ali Mongo, a local artist, meticulously cuts construction paper frames for his watercolors and pen-and-ink drawings. A woman sits at a table alone, nursing a latte as she practices the old-fashioned art of handwriting a personal letter. Two kids on scooters roll up to the front door while their folks wait inside for a cappuccino.

If you drop in on the right Saturday afternoon, you're in for a Trieste treat: about 18 weekends a year, groups of musicians perform live opera, jazz, or American and Italian pop standards. The ever-evolving lineup usually includes a guitar and piano, plus anything from a flugelhorn to a conga drum to three accordions. These informal gigs have become a true North Beach tradition.

### All the Tea in Chinatown

"More kinds of tea are imported to the U.S. than are available in China," says Alice Luong, owner of Red Blossom Tea Company, a Chinatown storefront lined with row upon row of gleaming silver canisters brimming with myriad varieties of white, black, and green teas. "In fact, a lot of our customers who do business in Shanghai buy their tea here and bring it to China with them."

A former investment banker in Hong Kong, Luong, 38, returned home to San Francisco in 1997 to help run the business her parents started 25 years ago. She's made free tea tastings a prominent feature of the store, providing a soothing respite from the rush of humanity on the sidewalks.

Luong switches easily from English to Cantonese to Mandarin, catering to longtime customers and first-time visitors alike. They sit at a delicately appointed Chinese tea table while Luong ritualistically brews a tiny pot of tea and pours it into even tinier cups. You could easily spend the afternoon here sipping new varieties and talking about the nuances of tea.

Tourists love Chinatown for its ceremonial gateway arch at the foot of Grant Avenue, as well as the knickknack shops, Asian-style temples, and jade jewelry stores. But Luong insists that the neighborhood is no mere façade; it remains an authentic, vibrant part of the Chinese community. Even second-generation Chinese who've moved out to suburbs like Millbrae come back to Chinatown to shop for herbs and vegetables they can't find anywhere else.

"It's still old-school," Luong says. "There are places like R&G Lounge or Great Eastern where you can still get traditional *lor mai gai*, crispy chicken stuffed with sticky rice." This dish is so labor intensive that diners have to order it 24 hours in advance, which is why so few places serve it. But Luong says her father loves it because it brings back memories of his younger days in Guangzhou.

### Syrax in SoMa

The former warehouse district known as SoMa — South of Market Street — first became a true



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neighborhood during the early 1990s, when artists, entrepreneurs, and alternative clubs moved into its forlorn buildings, attracted by its oversized spaces and cheap rents. They were followed by institutions like the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, which gave the neighborhood some serious cultural bona fides.

Gentrification gradually wore away much of SoMa's edge, weighing it down with chains like California Pizza Kitchen and Office Depot. And the dot-com bust sent many of the startups and performance artists packing. But SoMa never lost its cool quotient, and today there's a new wave of development and a growing sense of maturity. The neighborhood varies dramatically from block to block, with luxury lofts and swanky

restaurants clinging to the area around Yerba Buena. Farther south and west, it's hard to find a building with street numbers (that's actually a plus for the hipster clubs that are discovering SoMa all over again).

Bacar, a cavernous industrial-chic brasserie that opened in 2001, is hidden behind a rather anonymous façade on an otherwise barren stretch of Brannan Street. But it's worth seeking out, for wine is practically built into Bacar's DNA. A three-story wall of glass blocks encases a treasure trove of more than 1,000 bottles, and dozens of these selections can be ordered in varietal flights, making it a fun proposition to taste exactly how California vintages compare with their European, Australian, and South American counterparts.

Bacar is renowned for its deft wine and food pairings. The adventurous wine list is 42 pages long — requiring a full-fledged table of contents — but the friendly staff is eager to talk about the selections, engaging novices and experts alike without a hint of pretense or pressure. On my last visit, I sat down to a plate of earthy, rustic sardines and a dazzling lamb



This page, clockwise from left: The Ferry Building Marketplace; Bacar Restaurant in the SoMa area; Taquerias LaCumbre in the Mission District; facing page: AT&T Park, home of the San Francisco Giants



entrée that allowed the chef to show off his skills with four different cuts. Just as my server promised, those hearty flavors came alive with a glass of 2005 Clos Mimi Petit Rousse Syrah, an aromatic and spicy vintage from Paso Robles, just down the coast. She could have chosen something more obvious from Napa or Sonoma, but the Syrah was big, bold, and slightly eclectic, just like the neighborhood itself.

### Beer at the Ballpark

Up until 2000, the San Francisco Giants played their home games in perhaps the dreariest stadium in the major leagues. Candlestick Park was subject to howling winds, blinding sun, and bone-chilling fog. Just getting to the game was an exercise in frustration, a traffic-choked ordeal with few public transportation alternatives.

But today the Giants play in a veritable baseball cathedral in the China Basin, at the outer edge of SoMa. The team may be sputtering in the standings in the post-Barry Bonds era, but there's no denying that its new home, AT&T Park, is a fine place to take in a ballgame. The enchantment begins the moment you hop off the streetcar that stops outside the gates, when the heavenly scent of Gilroy Garlic Fries beckons. Inside, all is old and new at the same time, as if this intimate park had been built in 1908 and impeccably maintained for 100 years.

Seats on the field level are astonishingly close to the action. Just 48 feet separates the closest front-row seats from home

### San Francisco Treats

Don't let anyone tell you that San Francisco's signature attractions are too touristy. Even seasoned travelers are wowed by these quintessential experiences. Best of all, you can put them all together in a single afternoon.

Start by boarding a cruise to **Alcatraz**, the forbidding island prison where Al Capone and Machine Gun Kelly did time. The boat ride across the bay is worth the trip itself for the unparalleled views of the Golden Gate Bridge soaring high above a soft blanket of fog.

**Pier 39**, where you'll disembark when you return to the mainland, is a corral of overpriced souvenir stores. But you will see one group of locals here: hundreds of portly California sea lions

who sunbathe on the floating docks. You'll probably hear them before you see them — more than 500 on a good day — barking and jockeying for prime positions.

At nearby **Ghirardelli Square**, catch the Powell-Hyde cable car line and hang on tight as it careers between the peaks of Russian Hill and Nob Hill. Hop off at the Sir Francis Drake Hotel, in the heart of Union Square, and let the elevator whisk you up to Harry Denton's Starlight Room, a swell-egant bar with 360-degree views of the city. A cable car of a different sort was invented here — this one a San Francisco version of the sidecar, using Captain Morgan's rum instead of brandy. It's the perfect nightcap to a day of San Francisco classics. — J.R.

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plate, placing those lucky fans even closer to the batter than the pitcher he's facing. But what makes AT&T so memorable is the view from the upper decks. Beyond the brilliant Kentucky bluegrass outfield stretches the expanse of San Francisco Bay, glittering under bright cobalt skies. Kayakers often pull up beyond the outfield wall, poised to fish out any home runs that might plop into the water.

Peanuts and Cracker Jack may suffice at other parks, but AT&T Park does San Francisco proud with perhaps the best food concessions in the bigs. Fans can nosh on Dungeness crab sandwiches, Niman Ranch burgers, chili-marinated Caribbean barbecue, and Ghirardelli chocolate sundaes. Sip a latte if it's chilly, or head to the Acme Chophouse and splurge on, say, a Sinskey Carneros pinot noir. For me, though, nothing tops a cold beer at the ballpark. That first sip of a Gordon Biersch microbrew and the words "play ball" are like heaven.

### **Fusion at the Ferry Building**

Located along the Embarcadero, on the waterfront, the Ferry Building isn't so much a neighborhood as a gateway. Approximately 11,000 bankers, stockbrokers, and other commuters pass through here every day, supporting an amazing array of gourmet food merchants and restaurants. Cowgirl Creamery Artisan Cheese, Scharffen Berger Chocolate Maker, and Tsar Nicoulai Caviar are among the 42 shops here.

The best time to visit the Ferry Building Marketplace is on Tuesday or Saturday morning, when farmers from all over Northern California set up outdoor stands on the waterfront, bearing heaping mounds of monstrous artichokes, crimson strawberries, and heirloom tomatoes so enticing you'll want to eat them like apples. The market draws not only local families and serious foodies, but some of San

Francisco's top chefs as well. A stroll through the jam-packed aisles reveals new treasures at every turn, from fragrant sprigs of lavender to a wondrous array of organic mushrooms to jars of sweet golden honey.

It's tempting to wander from stall to stall and assemble an impromptu picnic, but on this visit, I head instead to the Slanted Door. Located at the Ferry Building's northeast corner, this acclaimed Vietnamese fusion restaurant is a destination all its own. Its floor-to-ceiling windows deliver knockout views of the bay, while the cuisine gives the starring role to the organic farm-fresh produce sold just outside the doors.

That masterful blend of international influences even extends to the cocktail menu. One memorable choice is the Phantasm, a concoction of lemon-grass vodka, lime juice, and falernum (a liqueur with hints of almond and cloves). Just like the city itself, it's a heady mix of flavors from Europe, Asia, and the Caribbean stirred into something exotic and entirely new.


### **Horchata in the Mission**

San Francisco's most dynamic neighborhood, the Mission, takes its name from the city's oldest building, Mission Dolores. The edifice has survived two major earthquakes, and over the years has seen the surrounding population change from almost entirely Irish to predominantly Latino.

Today, the Mission is reinventing itself yet again, as sleek condos sprout up among the modest row houses. The influx of pricy properties is starting to drive out not only Latinos, but also the bohemians who flocked here for low rents, cheap eats, and dive bars.

All of the Mission's various constituencies find common ground at Taqueria LaCumbre. It's open until 3 a.m., long after the Belgian frites joint, the Spanish tapas bar, the Indian ice cream parlor, and the two other

taquerias on this block close. White or brown, rich or poor, vegetarian or carnivore, if you're hungry after midnight in the Mission, you're at LaCumbre. After hours of prowling the Mission's nightspots, it's a reliable stop for fresh-grilled *carne asada* tacos and a comforting glass of *horchata*, a Mexican drink made from rice milk, almonds, cinnamon, and sugar. It

soothes your stomach and is said to prevent hangovers. Even if it doesn't, it's a sweet way to end the evening. 

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