



Clandestine Cocktails

The Arizona Biltmore's Mystery Room recreates the Prohibition-era speakeasy where Jazz Age resort guests once secretly raised their glasses.

ON THE HEELS OF THE GATSBY CRAZE, THE glamour and booze-fueled exuberance of the Roaring '20s are back in full swing at the Arizona Biltmore, where the resort's long-derelict speakeasy reopened this past summer after an 80-year hiatus. Whispering the secret phrase opens the door to a hidden space located in the resort's main building, where Prohibition-era guests surreptitiously swilled liquor from a bar masquerading as a bookcase.

Although the bookcase ruse is history, little else has changed in what was officially known as the men's smoking room – but familiar to illegal imbibers during the state's dry times as the "Mystery Room." "The allure of socializing in a place you can't normally get into [is] huge," says Sarah Moran, Public Relations and Marketing Manager for the Arizona Biltmore.

Arizona was a very different place when the Arizona Biltmore opened on Feb. 23, 1929, just before the Great Depression. The state had been dry since 1915, when Arizona voted to make the sale or production of alcoholic beverages illegal. By 1920, the 18th Amendment banned booze throughout the U.S. But in Phoenix, as in most of the nation, enforcement of the law was lax and booze was widely available. "Every self-respecting gentleman must have an intimate understanding of at least three kinds of cocktails, and access to the makings of a decent high-ball," commented a socialite on the prevalence of liquor in Phoenix during Prohibition in Bradford Luckingham's book, *Phoenix: The History of a Southwestern Metropolis*.

Phoenix businessmen and brothers, Warren McArthur Jr. and Charles McArthur, spared no expense in creating the Arizona Biltmore, which they dubbed "The Jewel of the Desert." The resort's three-day grand opening was considered the Valley's party of the decade and was attended by more than 2,000 guests.

The celebration began with a circling airplane dropping a bouquet of roses and ceremonial key to resort manager Charles Hervey.

Given the elaborate planning that went into every detail of the Arizona Biltmore, it's likely the third brother who designed the resort, architect Albert Chase McArthur, created the men's smoking room with a speakeasy in mind. "The Biltmore was built during Prohibition, so there's a good chance that the room with its hidden doors was designed as a place to enjoy a cocktail," Moran says. Famed Los Angeles interior decorator Kem Weber furnished the exclusive room, which could be accessed by a secret staircase.

The Mystery Room came to life after the official entrances to the men's smoking room were locked for the night. Guests in search of adult beverages discreetly wandered into the hotel kitchen and up a staircase that led to a hidden door into what may have been the ultimate man cave. Though Prohibition speakeasies were among the first American venues that allowed respectable men and women to drink with one another socially outside the home, "It's a wild card whether or not women were allowed to journey up into the Mystery Room to drink," says former Biltmore Resort Historian Becky Blaine.

Imbibers ordered a "set-up" of glasses, ice and mixers, to which bootleg spirits were added from bottles concealed in a double-sided bookcase that swiveled to reveal a liquor cabinet. Guests could relax with their libations, knowing the resort kept vigilant watch for Prohibition raids. Ostensibly to attract visitors to the resort, then several miles outside city limits, the Arizona Biltmore mounted a high-powered searchlight on its roof. The beam was also used to spot approaching police cars. When the spotlight shined into the windows of the Mystery Room, it was a signal to alert guests to approaching law enforcement. The booze evaporated as the ephemeral gin joint was quickly converted back into its staid alter ego, the men's smoking room. "The resort's original general manager [Harry



Boyle] had his apartment next to the Mystery Room, probably to keep an eye on things," Moran says.

Such subterfuge became obsolete when Prohibition was repealed in 1933 and the Biltmore's official cocktail bar opened downstairs. The Mystery Room was subsequently used as an event space, but was deemed an underutilized asset on the eve of the resort's 85th anniversary. "We wanted to make the room relevant but use its history for those who want to experience the Gatsby era as popularized in Leonardo DiCaprio's movie," Moran says. "The room is kept true to its original social function, which allows guests to take an entertaining trip back in time."

Since reopening, the Mystery Room has retained an aura of exclusivity. The hours are limited to Sunday nights from 8-11 p.m., and guests must crack a code to obtain the week's password – a playful homage to speakeasy-style security measures. "Twitter is the current word of mouth, so we use it to send password clues weekly from the resort's page [@ArizonaBiltmore]," Moran says. "The word spreads organically and there's a mystique to

it, with only 30 people allowed in the room. It's an intimate experience to share with friends and there's usually an interesting mix of hotel guests and locals."

The clever few who are ushered into the Mystery Room are rewarded with a soaring space that oozes elegance, with an elaborate fireplace as its focal point. Biltmore blocks inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright rise to cantilevered windows and a gold-leaf ceiling with inlaid glass. Photos of celebrities from the resort's early days, such as Marilyn Monroe and Martha Raye, decorate the walls. A bartender in period attire serves Prohibition-era cocktails as jazz tunes play in the background.

"The Biltmore is a time capsule and we've come full circle with once again serving cocktails in the Mystery Room," David Kirken, Biltmore General Manager, says. "It's a great place to socialize, with its unique lighting and ambiance. As the sun sets on the gold-leaf ceiling, the colors change in the room. It's truly a magical place. We value the Biltmore's unique history and I don't want to change things in the Mystery Room because it's too perfect."

Goldwater's Firewater

PROHIBITION CREATED CLASSY PHOENIX SPEAKEASIES LIKE THE ARIZONA BILTMORE'S MYSTERY ROOM – and also rough and tumble gin joints like the Joyland and Palms dance halls near 35th and Van Buren streets, then outside city limits. These notorious "pleasure resorts" were raided by undercover federal agents for "dispensing liquor to young women and getting them debauched," according to a 1927 *Arizona Republican* article. Despite such raids, speakeasies continued to proliferate. Phoenix high society, however, often imbibed in the comfort of their homes, enjoying stockpiled supplies or booze smuggled from Mexico. "When Prohibition became the law of the land, my father bought the bar, the back bar, and the brass foot rail of his favorite saloon and had them installed in the basement of our house," Barry Goldwater wrote in his 1979 memoir, *With No Apologies*. "The country went dry, but that bar was always wet."

— Douglas Towne