

Interiors

I'll have my home bar shaken, not stirred

A long way from postwar martinis or kitschy key-party vibes, today's mixology is maxing out



A home bar circa 1968 © ullstein bild/Getty Images

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It was fond memories of her late aunt's California home that inspired Samantha Steele's Palm Springs renovation. The recently retired school superintendent recalls "a kidney-shaped pool with a pool house *casita*, and cigarettes and beautiful vessels on every coffee table. To me, it seemed like being the ultimate hostess to provide something naughty like that." And life revolved around one other essential feature: her wet bar.

Home bars, once a staple of the martini-shaking postwar period, then synonymous with a kitschy, key-party vibe, and later abandoned in the wake of the cocktail bar revival of the 1990s, began making a comeback a few years ago. New York-based architect Bill Georgis, a partner at Georgis & Mirgorodsky, reports a 25 per cent increase in requests to include them in projects today versus a decade ago. But the vibe now? Extra.





A 5ft-wide nook in a Tribeca apartment serves as both bar and DJ booth, designed by Amuneal Manufacturing

Steele put in not one but three bars in tribute to her aunt: alongside the alfresco spot by the pool, there's an indoor one for aperitifs — plus a drinks nook upstairs connected to the main bedroom and gym. The latter begins as “a private place to have coffee in the morning when we're hosting guests”, but pivots from barista to bar using custom sliding screens by Modern Metal. The fridge isn't stocked entirely with booze or mixers. “It's 50 per cent filled with protein drinks,” Steele laughs. “We are drinking alcohol less and less but it hasn't changed how much we're using these bars.”

It might seem counterintuitive to see a bar resurgence in times of plummeting alcohol consumption. That misses the point, says Brian Smith, design director at New York-based Avroko, which specialises in hospitality interiors. “They're not just bars, they're pleasure, programmed for us,” he notes, without a hint of irony.

Smith points to the heyday of entertaining at home, in the late 1960s and 1970s, when designers such as Milo Baughman used furniture to disrupt the staid social set-up of the home; the half-moon circular sofa prompting conversation rather than leaving a family fixated on the TV. Today's bars aren't tearing us away from a shared screen, Smith suggests, but rather the screen fixed in the palm of every hand.



Samantha Steele's Palm Springs renovation includes this neat nook that pivots from barista to bar using custom sliding screens by Modern Metal © David A Lee



A bar-guest-bedroom-home-office by Amuneal © Joshua McHugh

Adam Kamens, chief executive of Philadelphia-based Amuneal Manufacturing — which makes bespoke bars in wood and metal — says the company now receives a dozen requests per month, the same number as in an entire calendar year pre-pandemic. Recent clients include a New York couple who asked for a double-duty bar: could a 5ft-wide nook in their Tribeca apartment serve as both wet bar and DJ booth? “We were nervous about the long-term functionality,” Kamens admits, of mixing liquid and electricity. But their attitude was, “If things get spilled, we’ll replace them.” The result was a marble, bronze and ebonised walnut creation, including a removable glass shroud. It cost more than \$65,000. “It sets the mood, for sure,” he says.

Another Tribeca family, being part British, had regular visitors from the UK and often entertained at home. Their bar was earmarked for a spare room which would be part guest bedroom, part home office. “It needed to be sort of evident, but not,” Kamens says of the brief, which set aside \$90,000 for the installation. The result was a long, curved, bronze bar with shelving and a tower that opened to reveal the mixology-mad owner’s collection of bitters.



A bar hidden in a trunk by Jaipur-based Trunks Company

Paritosh Mehta, co-founder of Jaipur-based Trunks Company, specialises in hidden bars; around a third of the 100 or so upholstered trunks he'll make this year open to reveal a drinks-making station. They cost an average of \$70,000, though materials and detailing can double that. The most popular model is a 6ft x 3ft trunk that opens up to be 6ft square and features crystal glassware, a decanter, ice bucket, a refrigerator and tools. “Every trunk comes with an option of wheels if you want to move it around,” he explains, “One client likes to take theirs into the garden.”

Steele's upstairs bar isn't just for drinks — it conceals a second purpose as a home for her two small dogs, Starsky and Taco. The corner cabinet is split in half horizontally: the top shelf holds the liquor and below are the dogs' beds, from which they can peer out from behind another custom metal screen.

"We never wanted a bar where you're going in and dusting all the glassware, that never gets used," she says. With the dogs in on the act, that's not likely to be the case — even if she's not as hostess-ready as her aunt.

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