

No Depression at the 1920's club

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As one friend explained to me, the 1920's Club on Congress Avenue is Austin's classy gay bar. Plus, it's known for fun martinis.

The 1920's Club is a hang-out, rather than pick-up, gay bar. It's small and cozy and twenties-y. Large paintings by Douglas Withfield, depicting halcyon figures such as Fatty Arbuckle and John Barrymore, cover the walls. Part of a vintage '20s Chevy truck protrudes from the south wall, like hip bas-relief. The light fixtures, made of wrought iron and opaque plastic, are fabulous to look at. And each time I've gone in, people have been chatty yet nonintrusive.

Being a whiskey kind of girl, I don't drink flavored martinis very often. But the bartender and two guys sitting at the bar strongly encouraged me to try the Scarface, a chocolate martini. Yum. Double yum even. Stoli vanilla, creme de cacao, a cherry, a cacao dusting on the rim of the glass. Very classy. Very tasty.

Another friend of mine who frequents the bar quite often notes that it's a good place for a date or for groups to get together. It's never packed the way Oilcan Harry's -- or any Fourth Street bar -- might be. Some times and nights are busier than others, of course. Margaret Wright, who plays the piano and sings on Thursday nights, always draws a crowd, and people often gather before or after a show at the State or Paramount theaters, just across the street.

That the 1920's Club never gets too crowded is good, because it's not that big. The upstairs, with comfy seating for a dozen or so people and standing room for a maybe a half-dozen more, is tiny. The main area downstairs is long and lean; I've never seen more than 25 or so people downstairs, and that's about perfect for the space. (Of course, I also haven't shown up for Margaret Wright night, when the place gets hopping.) The bar used to be a restaurant, and it's still got a bistro feel, small and personal.

On a recent visit, a friend enlightened me about the seating patterns. Pretty boys, he says, hang out by the big windows up front and there's always one sketchy guy at the bar, with eyes as opaque as martinis. (NB: The last time I went in, the two guys at the bar were pleasant, and had eyes as clear as Scotch and soda, minus the Scotch.) One of the great things about the 1920's Club is that it has a nice mix of boys and girls. Sure, it's mostly boys, but girls turn up too, usually with gay men, but not always. I've shown up once or twice with a straight guy in tow; everyone gave me a little more breathing room than usual (they were being respectful of "date" mode, I think).

In the words of the bartender, the Club is a starting-off place -- it closes at midnight Sunday-Wednesday. It's not a venue for late-night dancing or 2 a.m. drunken madness. There's a nice happy hour and drink specials all night Monday through Wednesday.

Admittedly, the bar itself doesn't seem all that '20s to me; it's too friendly and un-back-roomish to feel like a speakeasy. But the conceit is fun -- and champagne martinis go for three bucks on Tuesdays.

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The 1920's Club: 918 Congress Ave., 479-7979; Hours: 5 p.m.-midnight Monday-Wednesday; 5 p.m.-1 a.m. Thursday; 5 p.m.-2 a.m. Friday; 6 p.m.-2 a.m. Saturday; 6 p.m.-midnight Sunday.