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Photo courtesy of The Riff Raff Club. Must be 21 years of age or older to consume alcoholic beverages. Please drink responsibly.

Dish By Dish New York

Classic Cocktails With Many, Many Twists at the New Riff Raff Club

By Kara Newman September 18, 2024

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Chances are that when you arrive on the 39th floor of the **Virgin Hotel** in NoMad and step inside the new **Riff Raff Club**, you'll immediately think of the raucous watering holes of New York City's past — or at least, a version involving a library of vintage spirits and fancy caviar service.

It's decidedly by design, and given who's behind The Riff Raff Club, it makes a lot to sense. That would be bar partner Charles Joly, the Chicago-based mixologist best-known for Windy City establishments the **Drawing Room** (located in the Chicago Athletic Association Hotel) and **The Aviary**. Suffice to say, Joly knows how to create a swanky bar scene.

Joining him is Drawing Room alum **Mea Leech**, who oversees day-to-day operations as beverage director.

The Riff Raff Club has 360-degree views, including the Empire State Building and Times Square, and the centerpiece of the space, designed in partnership with Benjamin Kay of **Adorn Designs** (whose credits also include Marcus Samuelsson's Red Rooster Harlem and the now-closed Redbury hotel, formerly home to Danny Meyer's Marta), is a free-standing island bar, accommodating thirsty guests on all sides. Custom wallpaper incorporates whimsical images modeled after staffers' pets, including Joly's cosseted pit bull Jackson. "They become part of the riff raff," Joly says, "you'll see them around the bar, smoking cigars, and sipping cocktails."

That don't-take-it-so-seriously vibe extends to the drinks, many of which include smoke, pyrotechnics, intricately etched ice cubes, and "questionable garnishes" as Joly describes them. The latter adorns a Wisconsin Old Fashioned, a nod to Joly's Midwestern roots.

Charles Joly. Photo courtesy of The Riff Raff Club

While potables will be the main draw, don't overlook "cocktail-inspired" dishes from executive chef Freddy Vargas, like a hamachi "sidecar tartare," made with a citrus and Champagne vinegar marinade that nods to a citrusy brandy-based sidecar.

When planning the food, Joly recalls, "I said, 'Guys, no Marcona almonds and no little bowls of olives please.' I wanted to try some different things."

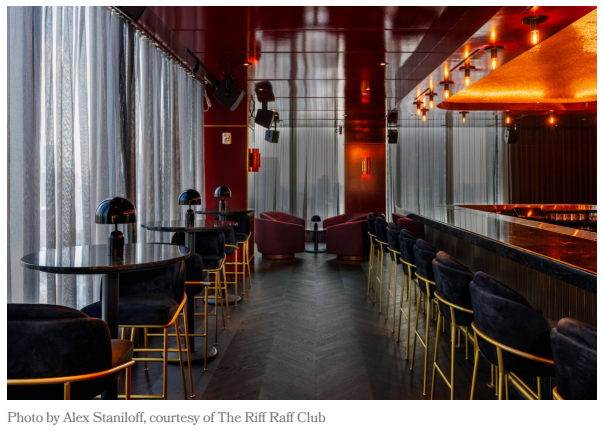

Photo by Alex Staniloff, courtesy of The Riff Raff Club

Photo courtesy of The Riff Raff Club

And of course, no upscale cocktail bar these days is complete without caviar. Joly, who sells vintage barware and other goods on **Instagram**, sourced antique caviar serving sets to showcase the covetable roe. Some of the glassware used to serve drinks will also be vintage pieces.

The goal is to take the cocktails and hospitality seriously, but still set the stage — tippling animal caricatures, black leather apron-clad bartenders, smoldering Negronis, and all — to have fun. "We're a bar," Joly concludes. "Let's have a good time."

Here are five drinks not to miss when you pay a visit.

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The Riff Raff Club

Why We Like It
It's not your average hotel rooftop bar. It's a rare New York offering from a well-known Chicago bar pro, and that means elevated riffs on classic cocktails plus a deep well of vintage spirits in a playful, welcoming space.

Essential Drinks
Expedition Punch; 1980's Vintage Beefeater Martini Service; Prescription Julep #3; Negroni Affumicato; The Moonlighter Cocktail; Riff Raff Old Fashioned.

Must-Order Dishes
Hamachi "sidecar tartare"; caviar service; dressed tinned fish conservas and mushroom (vegan) conservas; chocolate crunch peanut butter bar.

Who and What It's For
Think date nights and late nights. Tourists, yes, but also larger groups. Ample bar seats will attract cocktail enthusiasts and hospitality pros after hours.

How to Get In
Reservations drop 14 days in advance at noon, including bar seats. Some seats are held for walk-ins daily.

Fun Fact
Do pay close attention to what's on your table or at the bar. Bar partner Charles Joly collects and sells vintage glassware and tableware, and he hand-selected many of the vintage items seen throughout the bar, including antique glassware, cocktail shakers, and silver caviar serving pieces.

Expedition Punch. Photo courtesy of The Riff Raff Club

1. Expedition Punch

Gin, grapefruit grove tea, citrus melange, spiced bitters, pomegranate and rose ice

"If I were to come in with a group of six people, this is a great way to start while you thumb over the menu and decide what you want to do," Joly says. The Expedition Punch is one of two large-format options filed under "Cocktails for a Crowd."

Grapefruit-infused black tea from Chicago's **Rare Tea Cellars** ("Tea has always been part of my style," Joly notes), gin, and a blend of spiced bitters are delivered in "a giant cocktail shaker," to portion out into three-ounce vintage Nick & Nora glasses. "It's a lovely, bright, refreshing punch that's served over rose and pomegranate ice," he explains. "You pour yourself a couple of ounces, the ice is melting and adding flavor to your drink, you top yourself up. You'll find it goes a long way."

Vintage Martini service. Photo courtesy of The Riff Raff Club

2. 1980's Vintage Beefeater Martini Service

"OG Beetlejuice Era" Beefeater gin, dry-ish vermouth, (2:1 gin:vermouth), bitters, accoutrements

Vintage spirits are a cornerstone of the drink menu, and that includes a lineup of "Drinkable History" cocktail featuring said spirits.

"You can get whatever you want made vintage, but we'll start by giving ideas," Joly says. This $60 martini begins with 1980's Beefeater and references the 1988 film "Beetlejuice" (perhaps you'll want to try this drink en route to a screening of the just-released 2024 sequel).

"The original movie came out in 1988, around when this gin was produced," Joly explains. "It's stirred down with the house 'dry-ish' vermouth blend and served in a gorgeous mid-century carafe with an olive and a twist." Of note, Beefeater has dropped the proof of its gin twice over the past couple of years (to 44% and now 40% alcohol by volume, aka abv); this gives an opportunity to try "a little nip of the current stuff on the side" alongside the higher-strength 47% abv original.

Prescription julep. Photo courtesy of The Riff Raff Club

3. Prescription Julep #3

Rye, Cognac, Jamaican rum, pineapple, copious herbs, "Chartreuse-fire"

"It's my favorite version of a julep," Joly says of this stiff riff on the classic prescription julep, which incorporates rye, Cognac, and rum — all overproof versions, too. "This definitely has some oomph to it," he adds. But each spirit serves a purpose, he assures: "Rye; that's fresh-charred American oak, so it's high proof, big tannins, that spice bite to it; Cognac brings in more fruit, so it's more rounded, and adds more depth that whiskey on its own doesn't have; and Jamaican rum to finish it off. It brings in a kiss of funk, that inherent overripe tropical note," plus grilled pineapple syrup for sweetness.

But this drink — which arrives with the julep strainer buried in the pebbled ice — also comes with a pyrotechnics show: a swatch of herbs are dipped in high-proof green Chartreuse, then ignited. "It's a nice show," Joly says. "It smells lovely and releases the oils from the herbs without burning them. It's like boozy potpourri, in a way."

Negroni affumicato. Photo courtesy of The Riff Raff Club

4. Negroni Affumicato

Barrel-aged gin, caffè amaro, Campari, chicory-applewood smoke

The "**Smoking Box**," which Joly created with tableware company Fortessa in 2016, has become one of his signatures, and here, it's used to smoke an otherwise classic Negroni, winterized with barrel-aged gin and coffee amaro from Kansas City's J. Rieger. "It feels like a cool weather Negroni to me," says, "with just a little more warmth and depth."

Because "bartenders can't leave well enough alone," he jokes, the drink is placed in the chrome-and-glass box filled with chicory-applewood smoke. "The whole box will be brought to your table or placed on the bar. It has two doors on it, one in front and one in back. So, I can pop the drink in the back, and the guest can reach in and grab their cocktail. It breaks the fourth wall, so the guest can interact. Usually, the guest doesn't touch the bar tools; interacting with the smoking box, you get to play bartender for a moment."

No doubt, this is also a drink that everyone will see — and immediately take note to order for the next round.

Moonlighter. Photo courtesy of The Riff Raff Club

5. The Moonlighter Cocktail

Vodka, Cocchi Americano, lavender, chamomile, fizz

"It's our utterly crushable, delightful, light sparkling cocktail," Joly explains. The Ketel One vodka-based drink will be citrusy, chilled, and carbonated, served in a highball glass with fresh lavender and mint and a tall ice cube. Although details about the ice are still evolving, "I'm 98% sure we'll have amazing etched cubes coming that will reflect the view out of the window in our cube," Joly says, an anticipated collaboration with **Abstract Ice**. "A tall cube with an etching of the Empire State Building will look amazing, that tower leaning in there."

The Riff Raff Club *is open Sunday to Wednesday from 5 p.m. to 1 a.m. and Thursday to Saturday from 5 p.m. to 2 a.m.*

Kara Newman *is a New York City-based writer, editor, and cocktail book author. Follow her on* ***X*** *and* ***Instagram****. Follow* ***Resy****, too.*

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