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Rooftop bar Charmaine's unleashes killer views with just a hair of Trick Dog tricks

By Esther Mobley | December 5, 2017 | Updated: December 6, 2017 10:16am

The cocktail names are mostly midcentury musical references, nodding to songs by the Hollies, Ike and Tina Turner, Laura Nyro, Nat King Cole and others. Some of the best drinks at Charmaine's are the ones that enact the comfort and simplicity of those bygone musical genres. Fifi the Flea presents as a saltier, spicier paloma, with Tequila, two chile liqueurs and grapefruit, mellowed with honey and vanilla, then boosted with smoked salt. It stands tall, jammed with crushed ice, and goes down quick.

The I Choose Love is something like a manhattan, juicy with housemade orange cordial, plus rye, amaro and cherry bitters. And the Proper Cup reads as a jacked-up Pimm's Cup No. 1, with Hendrick's gin echoing the cucumber garnish and the bite of black pepper.

In fact, in a far cry from Trick Dog, whose menu items seem at times in a perpetual battle of one-upmanship, a few of the drinks at Charmaine's even verge on monotony: It was hard to parse the complex flavor of apple mole in the Christmas & the Beads of Sweat, or the amontillado Sherry in the Songs From the Brill Building. From the menu's Spiritous & Stirred section, both taste darkly boozy and bitterly sweet, and that's about it.

At $15, these are expensive cocktails, even for San Francisco, and even for the Trick Dog guys. Of course, you're paying extra for being on a Wearstler-designed rooftop. The bar was supposedly modeled in the style of the Vienna Secession, but individual pieces (plaid chairs; lip-shaped love seats) look like they might have belonged in a Los Angeles living room circa 1972. Floor-to-ceiling windows lead from the bar's indoor area to a spacious outdoor patio dotted with fire pits — a necessary precaution in chilly downtown S.F. — and the view at night is great, positioned toward our twinkling skyline, with the beacon of Salesforce Tower at center.

San Francisco's dearth of rooftop bars seems to be a plain, immutable fact of the city's identity, like cable cars or sourdough. It makes sense, but then again it doesn't make sense. Sure, our city is rarely warm enough at night to sit outdoors, and too often the afternoon view is blighted by fog. Still, though, rooftop bar demand clearly outruns supply: Even on a chilly evening, witness the hordes lining up along Valencia Street patiently waiting their turn to ascend to El Techo de Lolinda.

The few rooftop bars we do have are mostly in hotels: Dirty Habit at Hotel Zelos, Bar Via at Hotel Via, the Top of the Mark at the InterContinental Mark Hopkins, the View at the Marriott Marquis (OK, the latter two aren't quite on roofs, but they're very high up). And so it is with the latest addition to this struggling San Francisco genre, Charmaine's, the rooftop bar at Mid-Market's new Proper Hotel.

Charmaine's has a high profile not only because the Proper Hotel — with its interiors designed by Kelly Wearstler and its kitchen run by chef Jason Franey — has a high profile, but also because Chronicle Bar Stars Josh Harris and Morgan Schick have created the bar's drinks. With Scott Baird (another Bar Star), Harris and Schick are partners in the Bon Vivants, the zeitgeist cocktail consultancy behind Trick Dog. This time, Schick and Harris struck out on their own, sans Baird, to consult for Charmaine's, launching a new consulting firm called BV Hospitality. (In addition to Charmaine's, BV Hospitality has created a 49-cocktail tome for the Proper Hotel's downstairs restaurant Villon.)

The first question we all had: Would Charmaine's be like Trick Dog?

It's only like Trick Dog insofar as it's kind of hard to find — where Trick Dog's facade is unmarked, the Charmaine's entrance is on the back side of the Proper Hotel, and then up an elevator.

Drink-wise, Charmaine's is not like Trick Dog, at least not exactly. Here, Harris and Schick have offered up highly domesticated versions of the wild beasts that made Trick Dog famous. (All cocktails are $15.) No everything-bagel-flavored cocktails; no honey mustard or seaweed or yams. Instead, at Charmaine's, what counts as "weird" are ingredients like Szechuan peppercorn and pickles.

One cocktail description, the Cuddly Toy, lists "banana bread." If this were Trick Dog, you'd probably assume that meant your drink would come garnished with a real-life slice of banana bread. They've been known to tack a PB&J sandwich onto a toothpick. (And elsewhere on this menu, there is a cookie-topped drink.) Here, though, it just means a syrup composed of banana bread elements (banana, nuts, baking spice), and it's added judiciously, gracing a concoction of Tequila and maraschino liqueur with a warming aromatic touch.

By design, the atmosphere at Charmaine's is more subdued, more buttoned-up — in other words, more hotel bar — than a place like Trick Dog. It's well-lit, and table service prevents a standing mob from forming around the bar. In fact, as soon as we exited the elevator into the bar, a greeter rattled off a lengthy set of instructions (if you order at the bar but then take a table, pay your bar tab first; etc.). While you might expect Charmaine's to be the sort of spot that requires reservations, or at least makes you wait interminably for your table to be prepared — as so many table gatekeepers insist upon these days — seating is simply first-come, first-served. Including at the fire pits. And in my experience, there are usually tables available. I like that.

Does this tell us something about what we can expect from BV Hospitality, as opposed to the Bon Vivants? Until we see what other projects Harris and Shick's new consultancy signs on for, it's too soon to tell. One thing's clear: That same cleverness and sense of humor — the sense that your cocktails are one part history lesson, one part inside joke — endures. That's one of Trick Dog's most endearing qualities, to my mind, and it abides at Charmaine's, too.

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To order: Fifi the Flea; I Choose Love; Nature Boy (all $15)

Where: Charmaine's, San Francisco Proper Hotel, 1100 Market St., S.F. (628) 895-2055 or www.properhotel.com

When: 5 p.m. to 2 a.m. daily