



WAITER

PANCH...

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GABRIEL
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DIEGO RIVERA

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GREAT BARS OF THE WORLD

The Bar La Opera, Mexico City's grandest drinking establishment, supposedly got its name from its location: near the flamboyant, Art Nouveau Palacio de Bellas Artes, which houses the Folkloric Ballet of Mexico and the Mexican Symphony Orchestra. Actually, the bar itself might pass for a tiny opera house, what with its high gilded ceilings, baroque lanterns, velvet booths decorated with darling scenes of the Mexican countryside, luxurious wallpaper and handsome carved-wood paneling.

If it isn't mistaken for the front room of a New Orleans bordello, that is. For the actual bar—the looming altarpiece of glittering liquor bottles and the counter that stands like a long pew before it—was imported by train from the Big Easy, although whether or not it came from a whorehouse the manager is too discreet to say.

One of the oldest bars in the city, the Opera has been slaking thirsts here at

the corner of Avenida 5 de Mayo and Mata, near festive Alameda Park, since about 1906. The room housed a café and a bakery before that, in the high-flown manner—I imagine—of the famous Caffè Greco near the Spanish Steps in Rome. It is a place of refinement, of sobriety.

The mustachioed dictator Porfirio Díaz came in every evening for his mug of beer until his forced departure for Paris a few steps ahead of the Mexican revolutionaries, in 1911. The bar achieved its greatest renown shortly afterward, when Pancho Villa, the fiery general of the revolutionary forces, discovered his followers inside, lolling over beer. Infuriated, he rode his horse in through some double doors in the back and fired his pistol over the heads of the drunken revelers to scare them out of their seats and back to the people's business.

Villa's bullet hole is still visible above the booths in the center of the bar. It appears as an ominous black hole, highlighted by a circle of dark paint, in the otherwise gold ceiling. Political excitement has died down since then, although the Mexican senators and ministers do routinely amble over to the bar from the nearby legislature to carry on their political disputes in a more congenial setting.

As befits an establishment named for one of the arts, the dignitaries drawn to the Bar La Opera since Pancho Villa's

time have more commonly been writers, painters and actors. Gabriel García Márquez is a frequent visitor, although he is said to come primarily for the food. (Like most Mexican bars, the Opera serves modest food in the tapas tradition.) He has, however, been known to quaff a tequila on occasion. Diego Rivera, the extraordinary muralist whose masterwork on the history of Mexico is painted on the nearby Ministry of Education building, visited in an earlier

Bar La Opera,

Mexico City

day—but too late to get an impression of Díaz and Villa, who figure so prominently in his historical work. More recently, Timothy Dalton popped in for a quick one during the filming of the latest James Bond flick, *Licence to Kill*. The waiters say he looked “very serious.” (Possibly he was wondering: Now, is it shaken, not stirred—or stirred, not shaken?)

A traditional bar, the Opera is not the place to order exotic drinks. Save your request for a Triple Malted Maltese Butterfly for the Stateside Holiday Inn. Instead, do what the locals do and go with the cheap, local fare: beer, most commonly; tequila; Don Pedro brandy; or Bacardi rum. According to one local story, the margarita was actually invented around the corner at the Ritz bar, when a tourist came in and asked for a tequila drink that didn't taste like tequila. The resulting concoction was so named because it was originally served with an olive, which together with the glass's fringe of salt made the whole array look like a margarita flower. The Opera's version—served, as is typical in Mexico, in a martini glass—is perfectly adequate for getting you where you're going. If you must get fancy, try the *conejo*, or rabbit, so called because after three of them you're likely to start hopping.

The bar is open from noon to midnight. Be warned that the service is a little slower than at other bars around the city, but then, after a little while, everything tends to slow down at the Opera. With any luck, you will too. ■

John Sedgwick, a regular contributor to GQ, wrote about secrets in the last issue. His most recent book was *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Year in the Life of America's Oldest Zoo*.

BY JOHN SEDGWICK