

# The Surprise of San Antonio

At night this Texas city **comes to life**

story and photos by Anthony Head

Not so long ago, a visit to the Alamo was one of the few highlights that came with a trip to San Antonio. While that landmark still draws tourists by the millions, the rest of this city has spent the last few years blossoming like the yellow rose of Texas.

The revitalization of downtown has been assisted in equal parts by the success of the four-time NBA World Champion San Antonio Spurs, thriving convention facilities and numerous special events, such as the upcoming NCAA basketball championship in March. Most notably, though, the city has refurbished the River Walk, bringing new energy to the banks of the San Antonio River. Today, downtown San Antonio is a true world-class destination, and the bar scene is so exciting that some visitors just might—dare I say it?—forget the Alamo.

## VBar

The über-cool Hotel Valencia Riverwalk may at first seem out of place in Central Texas, but it actually fits right in with the new hip hotels sprouting up around town. Inside, Vbar features a sleek but warm interior and hosts all sorts of events that attract locals and tourists alike. Fashiontini Thursdays feature red-carpet runway fashion shows, and on



San Antonio's River Walk glows at night.

PHOTO: SACHAL RENDON



Richard Ramos says vodka rules at VBar.

Stiletto Fridays there's a discount (\$1 per inch of heel) for the first drink.

Bar Supervisor Richard Ramos, a San Antonio native, says that bringing back the locals, especially the younger crowds, has been key to the bar's success. "Downtown is really a hot tourist spot now," he says. "Four years ago, there were only a couple destination bars around here. Now you see lines out the doors on weekend nights all over the place."

At Vbar, hotel guests dominate the lounge during the week, but on the weekends 95 percent of the crowd is local. "Liquor sales seem to be bigger then," says Ramos as he mixes a signature Valencia Dementia. "Vodka is really popular and Grey Goose is the call of choice."

150 East Houston St., 210-230-8410  
www.hotelvalencia.com

## SoHo Wine & Martini Bar

Open for less than a year, SoHo Wine & Martini Bar has already been discovered by



**Theresa Goldbach with local Drippings Springs vodka.**

downtown's working professionals. Although this former San Antonio Loan & Trust Co. building is on the National Register of Historic Places, the vibe inside the long, slender lounge skews younger, especially as the night gets older.

The smell of fine cigar smoke gently permeates the three individual rooms, dominated by a central bar, sleek furniture and polished hardwood floors. The old bank vault, dating to 1901, has been converted into a wine vault, housing dozens of selections. Return visitors usually spot something different on the wine list, too. "We're still pretty new, so we're seeing what works and what to drop," says Managing Bartender Theresa Goldbach. "Right now we're fine-tuning the reds."

Depending on the crowd, liquor and beer sales can outpace wines here. SoHo's extensive drink menu features several specialty Martinis made with ingredients as diverse as ginger, espresso and caramel apple. A current favorite is the CucumberTini, mixed with Drippings Springs vodka, a popular local spirit produced in the Texas Hill Country.

214 W Crockett St., 210-444-1000  
www.sohomartinibar.com

## Acenar

With more theaters opening throughout San Antonio, an energetic nightlife culture has been the driving force behind success of restaurants like Houston Street's Acenar. Inside this modern Tex-Mex establishment the dedicated bar space—called Atomar—attracts its own following.

Head bartender Albert Cancino whips up a signature Mojito made with 10 Cane rum and blood orange purée. He says that when special events are happening (which is all the time), Atomar's location puts it right in the

heart of the action. "When the city hosted the Big 12 college football championship game, we had a weekend filled with Oklahoma and Missouri fans. We doubled the take."

General Manager Dave Davis says the restaurant and bar opened about three years ago as part of a wave of similar properties that really raised the area's profile. "This whole street has been revitalized with new businesses, residential properties and theaters," he says. "Both locals and out-of-towners are down here every single night."

146 East Houston Street, 210-222-1512  
www.acenar.com

## Zinc Champagne & Wine Bar

"We move a lot of champagne; it's my favorite thing to sell," says Jackie Davis, Cocktail Manager at Zinc. That makes sense, too, because this chic destination bar has eight champagnes and sparklers available by the glass and more than 50 by the bottle, including Roederer Cristal, Krug Grande Cuvée and Dom Pérignon Brut.

With champagne's soaring popularity, it's no wonder Zinc has the energy and buzz of a new place. But it's actually been around for eight years and has developed a very loyal following, not only from a regular crowd of city officials and law office workers, but also from others in the hospitality industry.

The emphasis may be on the bubbly, but Zinc also boasts one of the top wine lists in town, with bottles from as close as Fredericksburg, Texas, to as far away as Marlborough, New Zealand. ■■

207 N Presa, 210-224-2900  
www.zincwine.com



**Head bartender Alberto Cancino at Acenar.**



**Champagne is a favorite at Zinc, says Jackie Davis.**