

Opening Soon: Sidecar Cocktail Lounge

A rum-forward cocktail bar is putting Midlothian on island time

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(From left) The owners of Sidecar Cocktail Lounge, Jessica and Josh Bufford, Greg Hill, and Chris Staples (Photo courtesy Sidecar Cocktail Lounge)



A husband-and-wife restaurateur duo, a dining industry veteran and a master rummelier walk into a bar ... [Sidecar Cocktail Lounge](#) at 3730 Winterfield Road, to be exact.

Jessica and Josh Bufford of Toast, former EAT Restaurant Partners director Chris Staples, and [Royal Rum Society](#) founder Greg Hill have joined forces to debut a rum-forward, 1950s Miami-inspired cocktail lounge in Midlothian on Tuesday, Feb. 7.

And if you've never heard of a "[rummelier](#)," you're not the only one. Hill came up with the concept following a basement bottle session with a group of fellow rum enthusiasts. Making notes and discussing the various flavor profiles, Hill made the joke that they were rummeliers, a play on the sommelier designation for wine professionals.

"I said, 'Let's Google that,' Hill recalls. "Nothing existed, so we trademarked the term." He went on to become the world's first master rummelier; there are only 10 master rummeliers and just over 100 total worldwide.

Over a dozen years later, Hill has created an entire coursework of programming for others seeking the certification and published a comic book of rum-centric stories. The Barbados government has even called on him to lead fun and approachable training seminars for its hospitality industry.

"We've got chapters in nine countries, and it all started a mile away from here in my basement," Hill says of the Royal Rum Society. "When [the Buffords and Staples] came to me with this [Sidecar] idea, I thought this was perfect."

Doubling as the global headquarters for the Royal Rum Society, Sidecar feels like a mini museum dedicated to the sugar-heavy spirit, with — bonus — lots of booze. The emerald-tinged, midcentury modern lounge, home to 100 different rums spanning the Caribbean and beyond, evokes flashbacks of Don Draper's island bar scenes in "Mad Men." Booths have themes, including an area dedicated to the legendary rum runner Gertrude "Cleo" Lythgoe, "The Queen of the Bahamas," and fellow anti-prohibition rebel The Real McCoy. One captures the essence of author Ernest Hemingway, who helped popularize the daiquiri, and another Donn Beach, who was dubbed the founding father of Tiki culture in the U.S.

"The spirit kind of framed out everything," says Staples, who has traveled to Barbados and Jamaica conducting R&D for the concept. "We're doing rum-heavy, and we knew we wanted to do education here, too. Whether or not they know it, when they come here, they're going to learn a lot about rum."

In the back of the space, a pictorial history of the island spirit begins in the 1600s and continues through today, expressed through dozens of framed prints from Hill's personal collection — vintage advertisements, photos from popular bars and newspaper clippings. QR codes throughout the space invite guests to head online for a more extensive look into the gallery of art, collectibles and rums.

"If you want to learn about it, cool, if you just want to drink your rum, that's cool, too," Hill says. "If you really want to go deep, then we'll take you there."

Flights of rum, served on former Delta Airlines food trays, are divided into categories: high-end offerings such as Mount Gay's 1703 Select, sweeter styles that are sugary and smooth, Virginia-made selections from distillers including Virago Spirits, and spirits hailing from Barbados, the birthplace of rum.

"In my opinion, it's the most diverse spirit out there because there's so many styles," Hill says. "Jamaica hogo is a very distinct flavor, and completely different than what you'll find just across the water in Barbados, which tends to be a little bolder. Go to the Dominican [Republic], Cuba, they tend to be a little lighter or sweeter. Here our goal is to simplify it."

Sidecar is adjacent to the Buffords' restaurant Toast, New American Gastropub, the positioning similar to a previous project. The couple formerly operated Mix, a onetime dry cleaning business converted into a cocktail bar that was next door to their now-shuttered restaurant, Hutch Bar & Eatery, in the Gayton Crossing Shopping Center in Hen. The proximity allowed them to use the kitchen for both ventures. (The Buffords opened the original location of Toast in Henrico's Village Shopping Center in 2012 and sold it in late 2022.)

Coincidentally, Toast's neighbor in Winterfield Place was also a dry cleaners, until February of last year.

"They moved out in February, and I couldn't walk through the building without anyone being like, 'Hey, hey, I know there's an empty dry cleaners next door, build a bar,'" Jessica says.

The food menu at Sidecar is composed of small plates from chicken satay and Bajan shrimp fritters to desserts such as plantains Foster and coconut cake. As for drinks, while rum may be the favored spirit for at least two of the four owners, Jessica promises it's not the only star.

"Although we are rum focused, it's about 50% of our spirits," she says, noting that they will also serve draft beer, wine and bubbles. "It's a huge selection, but we also have a huge selection of the other stuff ... and something for everyone."

Guests can expect to find cocktail classics including Negronis and Corpse Revivers, alongside sips that showcase rum such as a Sugarcane Sidecar that subs in Diplomatico for cognac. Other rum-centric concoctions include Painkillers with Pusser's, Beachcomber draft mai tais, Blue Hawaiians, the Barbados-favorite Swizzles and a fun flaming scorpion bowl. Corn 'n' Oil remedy bottles, a traditional Bajan cocktail made with rum, falernum and lime juice served chilled, are offered as a quick shooter. A section of the menu dubbed Island Time, All the Time lists a group of cocktails that channel happy hour prices all day — hello, \$7 daiquiri.

"I think one of the things we keep saying to regulars and staff is that rum is fun, and we want to take that fun feeling and mix it in with high-end, really knowledgeable cocktail creations," Jessica says. "I've been working in industry for 20 years, and I'm surprised at the stuff I'm enjoying and drinking and the way we're putting it together to be approachable, and it's not what I expected from it as a spirit."