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## Bangkok's Creative Watering Holes

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By NEWLEY PURNELL



—Cedric Arnold for the Wall Street Journal Japanese band Degurutieni from Osaka perform at Opposite in Bangkok.

What looks like a saloon entrance leads to a low-lit cavern, and up the wrought-iron staircase, a sultry woman croons along with a jazz combo.

Downstairs, the well-heeled crowds sip elaborately crafted cocktails, seemingly unconcerned with the blacksmith tools scattered about.

This is a typical after-hours scene in Bangkok, or more specifically, Thong Lor, one of the City of Angels' most cosmopolitan neighborhoods. A world away from the backpacker dives of Khao San Road and the city's less salubrious red-light districts, the area—based around Sukhumvit Road's Soi 55—offers edgy watering holes, craft brews on tap and pop-up music nights that cater to locals and expats alike, proving that it's possible to have a night out in Bangkok without recreating "The Hangover Part II."

Start your evening at **Soul Food Mahanakorn**, a two-story shophouse turned bar-restaurant run by former Atlantic food writer Jarrett Wrisley. The 32-year-old Allentown, Pa., native serves Thai comfort food, and in case the reggae playing in the background isn't relaxing enough, order the Jai Yen Yen ("Cool Heart" in Thai), which combines gin with ginger ale, passion fruit, pineapple, lime and cucumber.

### About Scene Asia

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"People want casual drinking and dining spaces that are quality-driven and creative," Mr. Wrisley says of Bangkok. "It's a refreshing trend."

If beer is your thing, head down the road to the cluster of establishments called Seenspace 13, home to **BREW Beers & Ciders**. Take a seat inside an industrial space designed to look like a brewery, complete with exposed pipes, or, if the weather's fine, on the cozy outdoor terrace (not an option during rainy season). Wherever you perch, choose from the 10 brews on draft and more than 100 labels, including Westmalle Trappist beer from Belgium and Bavarian beer Weltenburger Kloster Anno 1050.

Ready for an intimate cocktail? **The Iron Fairies** (the place with live jazz) will provide. The bar's Australian owner, Ashley Sutton, has written a series of children's books about iron fairies, whose figures he crafts by day in a space that doubles as a metal workshop. The figures gaze at patrons ordering drinks made with Ketel One vodka and mysterious ingredients like "dragonfly wings."



—Cedric Arnold for The Wall Street Journal

Next, make your way to **WTF Café & Gallery**, tucked away in a small side alley off bustling Sukhumvit Road. Since opening in 2010, the former shophouse has become a hub for the city's creative types. Not only is it known for its music, welcoming staff and unconventional drinks—take the Orchard, a mix of gin, lime, lemongrass syrup and lychee—but it also hosts poetry readings and exhibitions in the upstairs art gallery. After dinner, try the dark chocolate with extra-virgin olive oil (trust us, it works).

"We had always moaned about why there isn't a nice neighborhood bar with good music and drinks," says Christopher Wise, a Vermont transplant who co-founded the bar with his wife Somrak Sila. Previously a graphic designer, Mr. Wise says he wanted WTF to be "like the

kinds of places I used to visit in New York, Berlin and Barcelona."

Last year, the couple launched **Opposite**, a creative space that plays host to all manner of buzzworthy happenings, including pop-up restaurants serving up Roman, Isan (northeastern Thailand) and New Orleans-style feasts, as well as music events (keep an eye on its website for what's next). One DJ and live music show last year focused on mid-20th-century West African pop, while another evening saw a free gig by Brooklyn garage-punk band Vivian Girls that went late into the night.

As the evening progresses, consider a nightcap or two in the hard-to-find **Shades of Retro**. Hidden down an unmarked alley directly across from Thong Lor Soi 21, the bar embodies the city's love of all things vintage, with midcentury furniture (all for sale) sharing space with a distinctively attired clientele—don't be surprised if you spot Teddy Boy haircuts and wingtip shoes. Drinks are served with free popcorn and, if you're lucky, you might catch one of their open-deck vinyl sessions, featuring sets from unknown DJs. Love the wax? Ask to take a spin yourself.

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