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WEEKEND Datebook

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Jen Fedrizzi / Special to The Chronicle

ESTHER MOBLEY *Drnk Up*

Good drinks, ruffled feathers

Wildhawk, the newest jewel in PlumpJack's ever-growing hospitality crown, is a very good bar that comes with a lot of baggage.

On the corner of Lexington and 19th streets, it's a beautiful space, eclectic and elegant. Designer Jay Jeffers, taking inspiration from the bar's namesake — the 19th century saloon dancer and courtly entertainer Lola Montez, said

Wildhawk's Breakfast Negroni (\$12, left) has gotten attention: It adds a taste of Cocoa Puffs to a Negroni and floats cutely orange peels on top.

to dance "like a wild hawk" — has created a bar that feels exotic and ornately Victorian, with patterned tin ceilings, elaborate wallpaper, funky patterned upholstery and antique tchotchke-filled curio cabinets.

That aesthetic has little in common with the bar that Wildhawk replaced, the Lexington Club. When the PlumpJack *Wildhawk continues on E12*

Ornate design, ambitious drinks

Wildhawk from page E1

Jack Group took over the space after the beloved lesbian bar — San Francisco's last — closed last spring, they began major structural renovations. It shows: The divey ambience of the Lex, whose walls were coated in graffiti and old concert posters, has yielded to Wildhawk's refined, hyper-stylized precision.

As the PlumpJack Group will do, Wildhawk has attracted an impressive roster of high-profile bar talent. It's led by Jacques Bezuidenhout and Ken Luciano, the men who, just a few months earlier, and just a mile away, brought you Forgerly; bartenders include Karri Cormican, formerly of Comstock Saloon, and Christina Cabrera, the consultant who launched Old Bus Tavern. (Despite some reports that Wildhawk has an "all-female team," as if in deference to the Lex, there are in fact dudes behind the bar.)

Their drinks match Jeffers' stylistic vision. Whereas Forgerly focuses on classic(ish) cocktails, at Wildhawk "once we started to see the direction of where the design was going, I wanted to dig a little deeper into the cocktails," Bezuidenhout says. "Push it a bit — be more intricate." He's taking more risks here. One drink has Cocoa Puffs.

The cocktails are ambitious — at times a bit eye-rollingly so. If you can get over the fact that there's an Anchor Steam hops tincture and that the martini costs \$25 (its price tag acknowledged by the menu: "You are essentially getting two ice-cold delicious martinis in one lovely serving," it says reassuringly), you will discover that overall these concoctions, though stunky, are nevertheless seamlessly balanced.

The Amor Bravio (\$13) combines Partida Blanco Tequila,

What to order: Breakfast Negroni (\$12), Hip Hops (\$8), Amor Bravio (\$13)

Where: Wildhawk, 3464 19th St., (at Lexington), S.F. (415) 829-7860. wildhawkssf.com

When: 5 p.m.-2 a.m. Monday to Saturday, 2 p.m.-midnight Sunday.

apple juice, Leopold Bros. tart cherry liqueur and eucalyptus tincture for a frothy, aromatic result. Simultaneously smoky and refreshing, it tastes like none of its components but like some better, unified whole. The Hip Hops, one of the vermouth-based cocktails (dry vermouth, grapefruit, pineapple gum and that Anchor Steam tincture; \$8), has all the appeal of a sweet citrus juice, with just enough bitter interest from hops. You could demolish a pitcher of it on a sunny day in the park — and with just 2½ ounces of vermouth, it's got about the same alcohol content as a glass of wine.

Word has spread around town about the Breakfast Negroni (\$12) — that's the Cocoa Puff drink — for which Bezuidenhout blends a traditional Negroni (Beefeater gin, Campari, Cinzano 1757 vermouth), then steeps Cocoa Puffs in the concoction for a day before straining out the cereal. It's served in a bowl, sans spoon, with orange peels cut into kid-friendly shapes floating among the ice cubes.

"I'd been seeing things on the Internet about people experimenting with breakfast cereals and spirits," Bezuidenhout says.

Why not Cocoa Pebbles, or Count Chocula? "Cocoa Puffs are all natural, and they had the flavor I was looking for — a little cinnamon, and a lot of sugar."

Yes, "all-natural" does seem like a strange justification for bringing Sonny the Cuckoo



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Bartender Christina Cabrera, the consultant behind Old Bus Tavern's cocktail menu, pours a Dale's Gibson at Wildhawk, which replaced the lesbian bar Lexington Club in S.F.

Bird into your back bar, and yes, it does cheaply pander to taste-memory nostalgia. But it works. Its turn on the mid-palate from supersweet to bitter happens unexpectedly.

Some drinks, however, don't live up to their promise, like the 9 Deaths of the Ninja (\$12). The idea for the drink began, improbably, with its vessel: a cup engraved with ninjas, which Bezuidenhout happened upon and then decided to fill with Japanese whiskey. Kikori is infused with toasted coconut, then mixed with white Port and pear eau de vie. Surprisingly, it's barely sweet — and in fact barely tastes like anything at all, besides dilute whiskey. Served on the rocks, it doesn't benefit from the addition of egg whites.

As seems to be the trend these days, the Wildhawk menu pays homage to other bartenders: Each month, a friend curates a variation on the martini. Recently, it was an excellent Gibson from Beefeater's master distiller Desmond Payne (\$14). With Lillet, a balsamic-caramelized onion and (you guessed it) Beefeater gin, the drink is clean, saline and floral, made tangier and earthier when interspersed with bites of onion.

Also on-trend: Highlighting a geeky spirit category, like vermouth. If you've always recoiled at the thought of

drinking vermouth on its own, assuming it's better relegated to the background of martinis or Negronis, it would be worth asking a bartender to pour you some tastes of this versatile and extremely sippable aromatized wine (\$7 a glass). Try a dry vermouth, like the grassy, citrusy Martini Ambrato; the smoky, off-dry Delprofessore; and the more robust La Quintinye, a sweet red vermouth that tastes like iodine and cherries, in a good way.

The Lexington Club was always going to be a tough act to follow. Heartfelt memorials attended the cherished queer institution's shuttering last spring: "I'm scared of how it's going to feel to miss you," said one grieving patron, quoted in The Chronicle's April 2015 tribute. The closing of the Lex was more than the loss of another San Francisco dive bar; it was the uprooting of a community. It suggested a kind of nail-in-the-coffin moment for the Mission, too: Was this haven for artists, for queers, for marginalized populations truly, finally disappearing?

Breakfast cereal-infused cocktails: Is *this* what we're doing now?

Well, yes, for better or for worse. Today, Wildhawk's craft-cocktail celebration feels at home on that block of 19th Street between Mission and

Valencia, joining a \$185 tasting menu (Lazy Bear), a restaurant specializing in oysters and charcuterie (Hog & Rocks) and a farm-to-table eatery (Rad-ish). It wasn't just the Lexington; it was the whole neighborhood.

"We need to win everybody over," acknowledges Bezuidenhout. "There are some people who don't like change, and the only thing we can do is open the doors and welcome them all."

For the discerning foodie, the choices on 19th Street have never been better. But even in such a rapidly changing city as San Francisco, the eulogy music seems to blare particularly loudly on this corner.

But it is not keeping lots of people from enjoying their time at Wildhawk. It's a great bar. On any night, you'll spot crowds of friends lounging on its inviting, funky upholstered sofas, lifting cereal bowls to their mouths. They nod with recognition when Janet Jackson, the Beatles and Tears for Fears come on the sound system. Yes, the drinks are different. It's still a night out in the Mission.

Esther Mobley is The San Francisco Chronicle's wine, beer and spirits writer. Email: emobley@sfcronicle.com Twitter: @Esther_mobley Instagram: @esthermob