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AMENITIES

2023's Most Covetable Way to Entertain? A Backyard Bar

The finishing flourish of your outdoor setup, whether for entertaining guests or just yourselves, might be a counter (or even a little cottage) to serve up cocktails. It was for these homeowners.

BY MICHELLE SLATALLA | ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED ON JUNE 16, 2023 | [THE WALL STREET JOURNAL](#)



Minneapolis homeowner Mark Tierney loves 'tending bar' from the portion of his garage that architect Christopher Storm fashioned into a pub.
PHOTO: ADYSSA LEE



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THE BACKYARD PUB CRAWL started last summer right after Lauren Smith got her bar hut.

A couple of guys from Taverns-to-Go had arrived on a truck and within an hour assembled the prefab bar in her yard in Long Beach Island, N.J. To four pressure-treated lumber walls they added a corrugated metal roof, lots of shelves to hold bottles and glasses and the bar countertop itself. Her deluxe model, 5-feet-by-10-feet, even had enough wall space to mount a TV.

Smith painted the hut white, bought four white bar stools and strung up some twinkly lights. It was easily visible from the street. "Everyone driving by was asking, 'Where did you get your bar?' " she said. Soon the people across the street got one. Then the neighbors down the block. "Now we do little pub crawls at our bars on the weekends," Smith said, adding, "It brings together a neighborhood. I suggest everyone get one. How is this just now becoming a thing?"

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By any objective measure, backyard bars are very much becoming a thing. As recently as 2021 only 4% of U.S. homes had one, according to a National Home Trends Institute survey. But when the pandemic forced people to socialize outdoors, they discovered they really, really liked it out there—even after it was safe to go back indoors. And now?

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Architects and designers say clients are clamoring for \$50,000 built-in bars so they can play bartender at pool parties. Appliance makers say sales of weather-resistant kegerators, refrigerators, [ice makers](#) and undercounter [wine coolers](#) are surging. “Warm-weather states are hot spots, but even in the Midwest people are putting in outdoor bars at their lake houses,” said Heather Shannon, director of brand marketing for Milwaukee refrigerator manufacturer Perlick.



Architect Christopher Brandon bumped out his pool house, in Costa Mesa, Calif., to accommodate a handsome bar.
Manolo Langis

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Some backyard bars are swanky enough to feel like a resort. Architect Christopher Brandon's is a sleek, cedar-clad extension to the pool house in his Costa Mesa, Calif., backyard. With a concrete countertop and a midcentury-tile backsplash, the bar has all the bells and whistles: a sink, an undercounter refrigerator and a dishwasher drawer. With views of both the sport court and the pool, the bar "allows us to [have a few couples over](#), serve food, fix drinks and keep our eyes on the kids to make sure nobody is bleeding or drowning," Brandon said.

At the lower end of the budget spectrum are the [offerings of Etsy sellers](#) such as Liam Gallagher. His Pearl River, N.Y., company, Bars to Yards, sells \$2,500 prefab bar huts, and Gallagher says demand is spiking. "We sold 70 in 2021, 300 last year, and we expect to double that this year. Customers send us photos after they give them a nautical theme, or do them up as tiki bars. Others...paint them all different colors."

Perhaps it was inevitable that after Americans spent the past three years maxing out their backyards with fancy furniture, [big grills](#) and [plunge pools](#) they would turn their attention to what may be the last frontier of outdoor entertaining: adorable playhouses for grown-ups.

"It was the final piece of my backyard oasis," said Diana O'Connor, a hospital administrator in Pearl River. "I come from a big Italian family—Sunday dinner can be quite an event—and I'm planning a pool party for 70 people for my daughter's first birthday. I needed this bar hut." She bought it this spring, after learning that Gallagher lived in the neighborhood. O'Connor invited him to survey her backyard. "Next thing I know, he comes with a team and they put the pieces together boom-boom-boom in an hour," she said. "It's not even painted yet, but my husband and I can't resist it—we're sitting outside next to this unfinished pine thing watching TV. It's like we're on vacation."

That's precisely the allure. After growing to love their backyards more over the past three years, Americans are ready to pretend—without actually leaving them—that they have traveled somewhere else. Depending on the décor, an outdoor bar has the power to transport its owner to a faraway destination: to Gilligan's Island, say, or a breezy St. Barts cabana or even a sea captain's snug.

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The interior of the Nantucket backyard pub created by Paton, with swing-down awning windows.

Read McKendree / JBSA

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On Nantucket, designer Kristin Paton recently transformed a derelict 19th-century ironmonger's shop in the backyard of a home into a meticulously restored gem—a Mini-Me to match the architecture of the circa-1760 main house. The bar hut has windows paned in antique glass, a tiny pitched roof and a trellis for a climbing rose. “The intention is to make it look even more twee, like an antique dolls’ house with roses all over,” she said.

Minneapolis homeowner Mark Tierney’s backyard bar creates a different mood. Located inside his garage, the bar is an elegant stage set. As with an antique roll-top desk, its magic is hidden behind a mahogany louvered screen that lifts to reveal the bar counter, on which sits a little cut-glass tabletop lamp and its glowing red lampshade. Inside the garage, Tierney plays bartender against a backdrop: A pair of antique glass and mahogany screen panels salvaged from a defunct department store’s dressing rooms “hide the garden tools and cars parked behind him,” said architect Christopher Strom.



Minneapolis homeowner Mark Tierney loves ‘tending bar’ from the portion of his garage that architect Christopher Storm fashioned into a pub.

Alyssa Lee

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The false wall is key to creating the mood, Tierney said. "When you're the bartender—enclosed by the backdrop and facing the three stools sitting on a raised wooden platform on the other side of the bar—it creates an unusual feeling of intimacy. The bartender and the 'client' are within two feet of each other, and the conversations are fabulous."

Atmospheric décor has long been a hallmark of outdoor bars. The ancient Romans lounged against marble columns and stucco wall reliefs at their open-air drinking parties. In 19th-century New York City, German immigrants introduced the airy freedom of elaborate beer gardens with billiards tables, dance floors, bowling alleys and panoramic views of the city. And in lower Manhattan an open-air saloon called Niblo's Garden created magic with colorful hanging lanterns, said food historian Cathy Kaufman, an assistant professor at the New School in New York.

These so-called urban pleasure gardens anticipated today's backyard bars in the sense that they were "socializing places, not just for drinking alcohol but also where you might go for courting—a young lady might come with a chaperone—or to take a family to get an evening ice cream in a lovely illuminated place," said Kaufman.

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Nowadays, a few key elements are all it takes to create the backyard enchantment that "makes you feel like you're transported to another, more exotic place," said Steve Griggs, a Blauvelt, N.Y., designer specializing in elaborate suburban landscapes in the tri-state area.

"Colors and textures of plants play a crucial role as a backdrop for creating the right emotions for your bar," Griggs said. "If you want a romantic resort atmosphere, plant grasses that blow in the wind."

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Manhattan design firm Fox-Nahem had a custom bar built of treated cedar and local stone for a home in Southampton, N.Y.

Peter Murdock

Other design elements to consider: lighting (“you want to create a candlelight effect,” he said), a fountain or bird bath (“the sound of water transports you to tranquility”) and even wind chimes (“another sensory sound to evoke emotions”).

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For small, tight spaces with no room for a stand-alone bar hut, an awning window on the side of a house can re-create the mood of a snack bar on a beach. “An awning window swings up and out of the way and can connect your outdoor bar to your indoor kitchen, which has everything you need to serve drinks,” said Erin Sander, an interior designer in Dallas. “On the exterior, all you need is enough space for a countertop and bar stools.”

Sander, who currently is working on five vacation-house projects for clients who have requested outdoor bars, said foldaway bar stools are another space saver. “We call them integrated bar stools,” she said. “They can be connected to the house and swing out into space when you’re using them, then fold back underneath the serving counter.”

Big or small, a backyard bar “is the centerpiece everybody gathers around, no matter where you put it,” said Jodi Lyn Tomlin. She should know. The Mattoon, Ill., homeowner’s reclaimed-wood bar, delivered from Etsy last winter, found a temporary home indoors, in her family room, to protect it from snow and wind. Even before the weather warmed up enough to consider moving the bar to the backyard near the hot tub, her 25-year-old twin sons started using it regularly. “They like to sit at it and eat their lunches there,” Tomlin said, “and they don’t even drink.”

More: [A Golfer’s Guide to Luxury Living](#)

4 Backyard Bars That Are Ready to Serve

There’s lots of time left before summer’s last call. Here, options for saloons that need little or no construction on your part, from vintage bamboo to cool concrete.



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Hemingway Hideout

Like Papa in Key West, this set will age better if protected from sun and rain in a covered area. Four swivel stools complete the vintage vibe. 1950s Wood and Bamboo Dry Bar Set,



South Pacific Pub

Slatted acacia panels and a petite peaked roof will transport the tropics to your backyard, with stools included. Assembly required and weatherproof cover recommended. 3-Piece Patio Bar Set,

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The So-Cal Saloon

With a sealed concrete counter and mortise-and-tenon acacia base, this model can brave the open-air elements even on a grassy sand dune. Bonus: built-in bottle opener and steel foot rest. Abbott Outdoor Bar,

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The So-Cal Saloon

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Seaside Speakeasy

This 8-feet-by-5-feet unit is clam-shack chic, made of pressure-treated lumber and a galvanized roof assembled by carpenters who deliver coast to coast. Castlebar,

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