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THE SMOKING GUN
SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

**The evidence is in,
and this 70's-inspired
bar is guilty of a
good time.**

The Gaslamp Quarter of San Diego is full of eateries, nightclubs, and bars focused on drawing in tourists, but The Smoking Gun offers something for the locals.

"I wanted to bring something back to downtown that has that neighborhood vibe. There are a lot of residents here too," says Eric Johnson, Owner/Operator of The Smoking Gun. "I wanted to have something with cheaper prices, a casual feel where you don't have to dress up, and a place that isn't like going into a club."

Together with his business partners—Aaron Langellier, Dave Jones, and Joey Vaught—Johnson opened The Smoking Gun last August after a few months spent remodeling and touching up the space.

The goal from the start was to give the venue a 70's makeover. "We were going for a funky, soul vibe," says Johnson. "We wanted the décor to be something that people could look at and talk about."

The partners brought on a designer

and architect who got them started with some renderings. A lot of items were also found scouring the Web and the local area. "I would buy signs off eBay," says Johnson. "I bought an old 70's couch on Craigslist that was in mint condition. We also found things around town."

Ultimately, the space came together with a bright green bar, retro orange and yellow striped walls, and purple booth seating. A large "Smoking Gun" sign mounted to the ceiling looks down on everything.

The name "The Smoking Gun" is a nod to the 70's theme, but it's also a hat tip to the building's history. "This is a historical building that started out as a gun shop and a gun range," says Johnson. "Downstairs in the basement there was a shooting range, and there are still bullet holes down there. There's a little plaque on the building that talks about it, so we called it the Smoking Gun."

The bar's 70's theme is carried over into the menus, as well. "We use old Pee Chee folders as our menus and

Viewfinders so you can look at pictures of the drinks," says Johnson. "The ViewFinders were a great way to bring people back in that nostalgic way, but also get them to see what they're going to pick out because some people prefer something visual versus just reading down a list."

The bar also offers a variety of nostalgic games like ping-pong, shuffleboard, and foosball. "We added those games to have as entertainment so people aren't just bored watching TV," says Johnson. "You don't see much of the old shuffleboard tables in San Diego. It brings people back, and some people have never seen it before in their life. It's cool to see people playing these games that have been around for a long time."

The bar has also started offering trivia nights, and on the weekends, a DJ spins 70's, 80's, and disco hits, which Johnson says is a marked departure from the club music typically found at venues in the Gaslamp Quarter.

Not everything has been brought back to the 70's, however. The bar also has a variety of TVs so guests can catch the sports games of the present day.

The Smoking Gun isn't the only thing Johnson and his partners opened. The entire leased space is 8000 square feet, which the partners knew was too much space for one bar. "We didn't really need that much space for a bar, and many bar and restaurants had done that before us

and were unsuccessful, so we wanted to break up the space," says Johnson.

They split the space into thirds. One-third was used for The Smoking Gun, one-third was subleased to another business, and the final third was used to open a coffee shop. "We created one area for the coffee shop because we love coffee," says Johnson. "I have some

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friends who opened up a bunch of coffee shops here called Dark Horse Coffee Roasters, and they're doing really well, and I had them consult with us. We buy all our beans through them, so it's worked out as a good little partnership."

Johnson and his partners named the coffee shop Spill the Beans, a layered pun that also pairs nicely with The Smoking Gun's name. "We thought about it in light of a trial case—someone would always spill the beans, and it coincided with the Smoking Gun

theme," says Johnson.

A wall separates the two businesses, but they share a bathroom. Sometimes the owners will allow groups from the coffee shop to use The Smoking Gun for meeting space. The Smoking Gun utilizes the coffee's shop's coffee in a variety of cocktails, as well.

The Smoking Gun's cocktail menu changes seasonally and is a nod to the craft cocktail movement, but in a way that makes it more approachable. "There were going to be a lot of tourists and people who don't know extensive cocktails," says Johnson, "so I tried to make it very approachable for people—things that they would know and spin-offs of old drinks."

The menu includes a few twists on an Old Fashioned—including one that uses Spill the Bean's coffee—as well as some original concoctions.

There are also a number of what Johnson calls "old-school party drinks" to choose from, including bombs and boilermakers, but with a craftier spin. For example, a customer can order a strawberry-infused aperol in a tropical Red Bull.

On the boilermakers side, Johnson figured customers were going to come into his bar and order a beer and a shot anyway, so he thought it would make sense to have pairings already on the menu.

"The menu was designed so that if you wanted to have a really good Old





Fashioned or a variation of some sort of sour or Gimlet or Collins, you could have that," says Johnson. "But you can also get a Miller High Life or something, and you don't feel awkward ordering it."

Guests can order their drinks alongside a variety of urban style street food and southern comfort dishes. Selections include meats that are smoked for 24 hours, fried catfish, sliders, soups and salads, and an array of sides such as cornbread and mac and cheese.

"All in all, I would say our menu is comfort food. Stuff that we wanted people to come in, eat, and fill up and not spend the bank," says Johnson. "I think we were going more for a bar with food than going full restaurant, but it's definitely right in the middle."

The Smoking Gun also serves brunch on the weekends with brunch cocktails and southern-inspired dishes. One of the highlights of the brunch cocktail menu is the milk punch cocktail, Cinnamon Toast Punch. It's served in a

milk bottle and infused with cinnamon toast crunch cereal. Two varieties of slushies—a rosé and a coffee version—are also available.

Johnson says the traditional champagne brunch cocktails remain popular, as well. "Anything with bubbles is a big hit," he says, citing the bar's Strawberry Fields cocktail with strawberry aperol, champagne, pineapple, and lemon. 🍹

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Eric Johnson | OWNER/OPERATOR

Eric Johnson started in the industry behind the bar, where he built up his talents and his name. He's spent the last few years owning and operating a variety of bars, many of which leaned into the "fine dining" category. "I realized I wanted to get back into more of a neighborhood style bar," he says. Luckily, a group of his friends were looking to open something in downtown San Diego, so he joined them. "They're a real successful group. They own 10 bars and restaurants around town," says Johnson. "They were going with a theme I'd already done with another bar, Sycamore Den, which was a 70's-80's throwback theme, so it was a perfect fit."