Classic Cocktails in Five DC neighborhoods.

Participants at ARLIS conferences are not immune to a well-made cocktail if the lively scene at the hotel bar during our conferences is any indication. Washington takes its liquor seriously—cocktail hour is often an extension of the work day—and helped usher in the craft cocktail craze that has now proliferated across North America. Homemade syrups, tonics, and preserved fruit are now ubiquitous in most of the city’s hot spots. Below are five places where you can experience a different part of the Capital city with both classic and contemporary cocktails.

--Gregg Most, ARLIS/NA President

Penn Quarter

Red Robin Bar at the Willard Hotel: 1401 Pennsylvania Avenue NW

The Willard Hotel is one of the city’s oldest hotels and its putative claim to fame is that the term “Lobbyist” was coined here after the many men waiting in the lobby to collar government officials in the Grant administration. Located two block from the White House, the Round Robin Bar has seen its fair share of deals being brokered over a libation. It’s famous for making a mighty fine Mint Julep (remember we are in the South, y’all) that combines bourbon and mint-infused simple syrup to make a rather sweet but potent drink.

H Street NE

Boundary Road: 414 H Street NE
http://boundaryrd.com/

In the hipster H street neighborhood one of the best places for a finely-made cocktail is Boundary Road. My favorite sip here is a perfect Rye Manhattan, an old school drink of that spicy rye (rather than corn mash that is now popular again) mixed with bitters, and both sweet and dry vermouth. The brandied cherry is a treat. More popular with the younger patrons is “I’d Rather be Riding A Vespa” which is a twist on a classic Venetian ‘spritz’ made with blood orange juice and Prosecco.

Convention Center/Shaw

Columbia Room: 1021 7th Street NW
http://columbiaroomdc.com/

The Columbia Room is the creation of DC’s father of the craft cocktail, Derek Brown. If you really want an experience, reserve a seat in this small room at the back of The Passenger (yes, it’s a bar within a bar) and watch the true art of a cocktail unfold. Drinks are paired with small plates that perfectly complement each other. This is the ideal venue if you are a cocktail nerd—a classic Martini will be temperature-checked to ensure that it
is perfectly chilled. You can even sample DC’s locally distilled gin, Green Hat! The low-key bar in front is best for larger groups.

U Street NW

The Gibson: 2009 14th Street NW  http://thegibsondc.com/
and more usefully—http://www.yelp.com/biz/the-gibson-washington

The Gibson can be hard to find if you don’t know the address (just look for the black door). Billed as a “speakeasy” to let hipsters feel like they are doing something naughty, the Gibson does deliver on finely-made drinks. The downstairs bar is by reservation only and you have to leave when your time is up. Upstairs you can walk in—if there is space available. If you are adventurous, you can ask the mixologist to create something for you with a few guides like citrus and rum. They can be amazing—but sometimes not. I suggest ordering an Aviation—gin, lemon juice, Maraschino liqueur and crème de violette. It is a smoky, lavender-colored delight!

Gallery Place

Proof : 775 G Street NW
http://www.proofdc.com/

Located across from the National Portrait Gallery and Smithsonian American Art Museum, Proof is a go-to after work meeting place for my friends. Their cocktail menu changes seasonally but I can usually get them to make a favorite if they have the ingredients on hand. One of those is The Bee’s Knees, a carefully balanced coupe of gin, lemon juice, and honey. Proof has an amazing selection of charcuterie and we try to pair our cheese and salumi selection to accompany our cocktails. The small bar gets crowded early but the seats turn over regularly.