



## **Bar tab: \$1,000 VIP treatment: Priceless?**

*By: Alexandra DeLuca - For the North County Times*

Would you pay \$350 for a bottle of vodka? For more and more San Diegans, the answer is yes.

Bottle service, the nightclub practice of allowing a table to purchase all alcohol by the bottle, and all the "VIP" privileges that come with it, has long been a staple in night life meccas such as New York and Miami, but is a relatively new concept in San Diego.

However, seemingly overnight, every restaurant, bar and nightclub in the Gaslamp Quarter has added a VIP section and jumped on the bottle-service bandwagon. Driving the trend is a recent spate of openings of ultra-upscale restaurant/lounge/nightclub hybrids such as Belo, Confidential, Heat and Stingaree. To stay competitive as San Diego's night life grows increasingly sophisticated, even downtown institutions such as Martini Ranch (The Shaker Room) and On Broadway now offer bottle service.

Are we really ready for \$1,000 bar tabs? Just what do you get for spending the equivalent of a month's rent in most North County cities on a single night out? And who exactly are these so-called VIPs?

### **Bottle service beginnings**

First, a brief history. Bottle service began decades ago in nightclubs in Asia and Europe, where wealthy businessmen and members of the social elite held court at reserved tables and bought champagne, wine and liquor by the bottle, which the club would store for them until their next visit.

In the 1990s, the custom came to New York, where exclusive clubs like Au Bar and Spy Bar began offering bottle service to their mostly celebrity clientele. The practice soon spread to Miami, Los Angeles, Las Vegas and other cities with night life.

Once an extravagance for the famous and fabulous, bottle service is now available to the general public ---- if they can afford it. In some ways, modern bottle service has become the antithesis of its earlier incarnation: Now anyone can buy their way past the velvet ropes and become a VIP.

### **The Side Bar effect**

In January 2003, the bottle service era began in San Diego with the opening of Side Bar just days before the Super Bowl.

"We basically started it here in San Diego," said James Brennan, 33, owner of Side Bar and Stingaree, which opened last December. He and co-owner Demien Farrell modeled Side Bar after exclusive lounges in their native New York, hoping to elevate San Diego's night life.

"We really just felt like that was the direction the city was moving in," said Brennan.

Side Bar was an instant success, spawning many imitators, he said. "Some were successful, some weren't."

Bottle service in San Diego is no longer confined only to nightclubs: At 30-Two, San Diego's first "members only" lounge, which opened earlier this year, what owner Alex Thao calls "old school" bottle service is just one of many VIP perks for members. And The Keating, a luxury boutique

hotel scheduled to open in the Gaslamp Quarter this fall, will offer bottle service in its lounge (called simply The Lounge) for hotel guests and paying members.

Robert Watson, 40, founder and president of BOND Urban Habitat, who developed The Keating with real estate developer Eddie Kaen, said that although most San Diego nightclubs now offer bottle service, it's often more about the bottle than the service.

"So often, bottle service means they drop a bottle at the table and walk away," said Watson.

Jeff Fink, 41, a partner at a San Diego law firm who is a frequent patron of both Side Bar and Stingaree, agreed.

"Anyone can sell a bottle," said Fink. "The difference is the service that goes along with the bottle."

#### Selling service

Why would anyone spend \$350 on a bottle of vodka they could buy for \$20? It's all about the service, said Brennan.

"The experience starts before you even enter the club," he said.

At Stingaree, a VIP host greets bottle-service guests at the door, which is separate from the general entrance. Guests do not wait in line or pay a cover charge, and are asked upon arrival what they'd like to drink. By the time they're escorted to their private table or rooftop cabana and introduced to their waitperson, their bottles are waiting on their table, with glasses, ice, mixers and garnishes. Guests can mix drinks themselves or have their waitperson make them.

"The service is just impeccable," said Fink. "You take two scoops of ice and they bring you a new bucket. You use up a quarter of your juice and there's a new bottle. That's real bottle service."

On one occasion, Fink said, he had a bus boy order a pizza from a nearby restaurant at 1:30 a.m. and bring it to his table at Stingaree.

Such requests are not unusual, said Brennan. "It's almost like a concierge service within the club. As long as it's within our power and it's legal, we'll get it for you."

30-Two and The Lounge at The Keating take it a step further: In keeping with the origins of bottle service, guests can store unfinished bottles for the next time they visit, as is still customary in Europe and Asia.

"Our bottle service is a true service," said Watson.

#### The bottom line

Such service comes at a premium: At most San Diego clubs, the cost of a bottle of vodka ranges from \$200 to \$400, depending on brand. Also, usually a minimum number of bottles must be purchased depending on the group's size (one bottle split among 12 people is not going to happen).

"It's an afforded luxury," said Brennan. "The majority of our customers are well-off guys who have the disposable income to sign a \$1,200 or \$1,400 bill."

Despite the hefty price tag, Fink said, bottle service is well worth the expense.

"I never liked to wait in line; I never liked crowds," he said. "I always preferred to have my own

space, my bottle and my friends at my table and have someone at my beck and call, and I was always willing to pay a premium for that."

Eddie Kaen, 29, of The Keating, said bottle service is all about being in control.

"You want your drink when you want it and how you want it," he said. "You may like a little more vodka, you may like a little less vodka. It lets you tailor the drink to your liking."

Another appeal, said Fink, is that bottle service attracts a more mature crowd.

"I don't need my wife or my clients bumping into some 23-year-old musclehead from the beach," said Fink.

Brennan said the bottle-service demographic is not the typical 18- to 25-year-old nightclub crowd. Rather, it is professionals in their late 20s to late 40s.

"It's a different kind of crowd," Kaen concurred.

The female factor

Brennan sees the rise in bottle service as directly correlated with the trend of men waiting longer to marry, and therefore having more disposable income well into their 30s.

"Our bottle service customers are mostly male, mostly single, and they certainly don't have kids," he said.

And bottle service makes it easier for men to meet women: Instead of fighting a crowd to buy a woman a drink at the bar, a man can simply invite her to sit at his table and mix her a drink.

"You're paying for the real estate, and you're paying for looking like a hot shot," said Brennan. "For a lot of guys, it's money well spent."

The 'average Joe'

Still, not everyone who orders bottle service is a high roller: It's not uncommon for a group to split the check three or four ways, said Brennan.

"It gives you a prestige level when someone sees you with a bottle," said Thao. "At a nightclub, you're paying for the image."

Meelad Sadat, 34, a public relations director from Carlsbad, said that he ordered bottle service at a club in Chicago a few years ago and the experience was worth the price.

"We went from being nobodies to VIPS," said Sadat. "It really was that experience of being removed from the rest of the people. That's the allure of it."

Still, Sadat said he's not sure he would order bottle service in San Diego. "I don't think it would have as much of a payoff as in L.A., where just getting in (to a club) can be hopeless," he said.

Dennis Horton, 28, a chef at a Del Mar restaurant, hasn't ordered bottle service yet, but said he would consider it.

"Depending on the occasion, I would rather order a bottle than pay a cover charge or admission fee," said Horton. "The bottle is yours, you don't have to wait in line for drinks, and if you're with enough people, the price of a bottle is affordable."

Horton said the appeal of bottle service is simple. "Who doesn't want to be a VIP?" he said.

Oceanside resident Chad O'Neil, 28, disagreed.

"I think it's a ripoff," said O'Neil, an admissions counselor at a local college. "It's pretty cool for millionaires, useless for the average Joe."

Even if he could afford bottle service, he said, he would feel self-conscious about it.

"When I go out, I don't need to be noticed ... or made fun of, like, 'Look at the guy in the VIP ---- who does he think he is?' " said O'Neil.

Here to stay

Apparently not everyone feels that way.

"We've got 53 tables at Stingaree and we're sold out every Saturday night and most Friday nights," said Brennan, who said 30 percent to 40 percent of the club's income comes from bottle service.

As San Diego's cost of living and reputation as a night life destination continue to grow, so will the demand for bottle service, he said. "It's what the public wants. If you don't have it, they're going to go somewhere else."

"I think San Diego is a couple of years behind, but it's catching up," agreed Thao. "Everywhere here has bottle service now. As long as people don't mind paying for it, they're not going to stop."

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