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Setting the Mood For Romance

Meaghan Dorman creates bars with a special lure for couples.

By ROBERT SIMONSON

The Raines Law Room, a well-upholstered, low-lit underground speakeasy in the Flatiron district, seems engineered for intimacy. Cushioned alcoves can be shielded from prying eyes by floor-to-ceiling curtains. Call buttons, a common fixture in taverns a century ago, are at every booth and table, allowing a guest to summon service without breaking the mood.

Then there's the wallpaper: Up close, its frilly squiggles reveal themselves to be silhouetted couples in various states of coitus.

Patrons may be getting some ideas from that wallpaper. On any given night, Raines is filled with couples locking eyes over cocktails. The same is true, to a lesser extent, at the second Raines in Midtown, at Dear Irving in Gramercy and at the Bennett, newly opened in TriBeCa.

All four bars, decorated in dreamy fashion by the Belgian interior designer Delphine Mauroit, are the work of the partners Yves Jadot, Alberto Benenati and Meaghan Dorman, who as bar director sets the tone.

Some New York cocktail bars boast of having the most cutting-edge drinks list; others, the most extensive selection of spirits. Ms. Dorman's are arguably the city's most romantic.

"Every time I go to these bars, there's always people on dates," said Joseph Sherinsky, a regular at the original Raines Law Room since it opened in 2009.

Tom Richter, a bartender at Dear Irving, said: "They're totally romantic. Very couple oriented."

Ms. Dorman, 34, who is less keen to pigeonhole the appeal of her bars, chose the word "intimate" but added, "All of them are

places where you come with whom you intended to come."

She also allowed that her bars "have a good track record." People have proposed there. Other couples have dropped by after a proposal is accepted, or gone on to marry after a first date there.

Brad and Margot, regulars at both Raines and Lantern's Keep—a Midtown hotel bar where Ms. Dorman worked as a consultant—are two of those fortunates. In 2011, after becoming engaged, they retired to Lantern's Keep for Champagne and cocktails and closed the place down.

"The bars all do have that similar, inviting feel," said Brad, who did not want give his last name, to protect the couple's privacy. Ms. Dorman, he added, "is very focused on making sure everyone is having a good time."

Ms. Dorman can be found at one of her bars on most nights. She is easy to spot. She has alabaster skin set off by a red bob, and is usually wearing a dress. Unlike many cocktail bartenders today, she is not ostentatious. Rather, she is something like a colleague's recent description of a Bloody Mary recipe Ms. Dorman was trying to nail down: "perfectly balanced, understated and elegant." (The description didn't please Ms. Dorman. Nobody wants an understated Bloody Mary.)

Almost by stealth, Ms. Dorman has swiftly amassed a cocktail-bar empire as big as any in New York. She grew up in Branford, Conn., and after several years of beer-slinging there, became head bartender at the Raines Law Room not long after it opened.

For years, that was the only place you would find her, aside from Lantern's Keep, which still bears her elegant stamp. Then, in

2013, she and her partners opened Dear Irving, where each of four rooms evokes a different era: the reign of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, the Victorian period, the Jazz Age and the "Mad Men" years. The other two bars followed quickly.

Most mixologists would trumpet such achievements from the bar top. That's not Ms. Dorman's style.

"My dad, his whole model is, 'Put your head down and do your work,'" she said. "When I got a job at a sports bar in 1999, I didn't think, 'One day I'm going to get to go to Peru because I'm doing this.' My focus has always been on the bars and being there. I'm very of the opinion that it's your regulars and your neighborhood that keep you in business. It's nice to be recognized, but I'm very conscious of who's actually coming in."

The amorous aura of Ms. Dorman's bars has even worked its magic on her. She met her beau, Frank Mazzarella, a director at Bank of America, at Lantern's Keep. On the Bennett's cocktail menu is a drink named in his honor: Frank of America, a strong, stirred rye drink.

"I had the idea for the drink there before we started dating," Ms. Dorman said, "but I never made anything worthy of the name until this most recent attempt."

Romantic, right?



FRANK OF AMERICA

ADAPTED FROM MEGHAN DORMAN, THE
BENNETT, NEW YORK
YIELD: 1 DRINK

- 2 ounces rye whiskey
- ½ ounce Amaro Abano
- ½ ounce Byrrh
- 2 dashes Angostura bitters
- 1 teaspoon maple syrup
- Orange twist, for garnish

In a mixing glass three-quarters filled with ice, combine all liquid ingredients. Stir until chilled, about 30 seconds. Strain into a chilled coupe glass. Twist orange peel over glass and drop into drink.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRYAN THOMAS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Meaghan Dorman, top, at the Bennett, one of four Manhattan bars where she is the director. Center, the scene at the Bennett, in TriBeCa. Left, at Dear Irving in Gramercy. Below, the cocktail Frank of America.