



Images: Peter van der Arend; Alina Lucia Cichozki; Latte Bosscheer Fotografie

Clockwise: LuminAir's Alejandro Saravia; Peter van der Arend; LuminAir cocktail; Flying Dutchmen Cocktails' Alina Lucia Cichozki; Vindict's Jan-Jaap Altenburg

CityScapes

AMSTERDAM

Amsterdam's beverage landscape may still be predominantly associated with its centuries-old beer culture and historic brown cafés (cosy pubs with tobacco-stained walls and wood-clad interiors), but these days the Dutch capital is seeing a surge in high-end bars that cater to clients who don't mind spending big on a top-notch experience.

Especially in the last decade or so, the city has witnessed a significant transformation with exciting new wine and cocktail bars opening their doors, putting it on par with cities like London, Paris and New York.

The craft beer industry isn't lagging behind either. Specialised beer bars are attracting enthusiasts eager to discover unique brews, while gastropubs are looking beyond the ever-popular deep-fried *bitterballen* and dishing up well-prepared fare alongside carefully curated beer menus.

The scene

Amsterdam has one of the fastest-growing drinks scenes in Europe, especially when it comes to cocktails, according to John Papatylianios, bar manager at Super Lyan (the first international Mr Lyan venue opened by

From a growing demand for sophisticated non-alcoholic beverages to a discerning clientele willing to spend more on a night out, Amsterdam's on-premise scene is coming of age. **Paola Westbeek** reports

award-winning British bartender Ryan Chetiyawardana). "Since 2015, more bars have introduced cocktail menus, bartenders are elevating their skills and global-level competitions have emerged," he says.

"Driven by the country's rich liquor history, there is a clear shift from traditional drinks to exploring cocktails. This has resulted in an increased prevalence of cocktail menus in regular bars and restaurants."

Bartenders Alina Lucia Cichozki (Flying Dutchmen Cocktails) and Alejandro Saravia (LuminAir) have noticed that more high-end venues have opened in the past few years, indicating a rapid evolution. Both note that 2024 will bring even more exciting developments to the city, such as new bar concepts and a slew of events, competitions and masterclasses.

In terms of beer, Peter van der Arend, who opened four of Amsterdam's top craft beer bars (Proeflokaal Arendsneest, Craft & Draft, BeerTemple and Mikkeller at More-

beer) noted that around 2010, the city experienced a beer revolution that resulted in an explosion of bars offering a diverse range of brews. Unfortunately, a lot of them quickly closed their doors, yet the more specialised bars serving distinctive beers have remained constant. Ten or so (among them In De Wildeman and Golleem) are found in the city centre.

With a population of roughly 918,000, Amsterdam is a relatively small city. While most of its popular bars are concentrated within the historic centre, Amsterdam-Noord, located just across the IJ River, is rapidly emerging as a sought-after area.

"By the end of 2025, this part of the city is expected to count 150,000 inhabitants," Jan-Jaap Altenburg, sommelier and co-owner of Vindict, the area's first wine bar, points out. What makes the north especially appealing, he highlights, is that it's only a three-minute ferry ride from Centraal Station, just far enough from the inner city's tourist crowds. »

The trends

» Although the Dutch have a preference for sweeter cocktails, bartenders report a wave of change. “Two years ago, at least half of the drinks ordered were pornstar martinis, but this trend is shifting,” says Flying Dutchmen’s Cichozki. “Classics like the clover club, old fashioned and martinez are experiencing a revival”, she says, while carbonated and spirit-forward cocktails are gaining traction.

From beer to spirits, non-alcoholic drinks have found a place at all bars and restaurants across the city, reflecting growing global trends. All the venues surveyed agree it’s important to offer a quality selection of no/low-alcohol beverages.

“At our wine bar, we have between eight and ten non-alcoholic choices, some are wine-based, others tea-based,” says Vindict’s Altenburg. “If you offer good non-alcoholic alternatives, this will attract people who can’t or don’t want to drink. At the Michelin-starred restaurant where I worked, we offered a non-alcoholic pairing with every course, at the same price as the normal pairing.”

Equally noteworthy is that bars are starting to serve more than just bites with their drinks and providing a full dining experience. This results in clients staying longer and spending more. Gastropub Het Lagerhuys, for example, stands out for its fusion of great cuisine with an extensive beer collection.



Craft bars Beer Temple (left) and Proeflokaal Arendsnest, which only sells Dutch brews



Image: Peter van der Aard

The local players

Amsterdam’s cocktail bars are proud ambassadors of Dutch brands such as Voerman Vieux (spiced brandy), Ketel One Vodka, De Kuyper (cocktail liqueurs), House of Bols (spirits and cocktails), Spirited Union (botanical rum) and, of course, the city’s renowned distillery, Wynand Fockink. In the no/low realm, Saravia highlights Amsterdam-based The Stillery’s alcohol-free distilled spirits brands Ginamis and Rumamis, which are used in LuminAir’s virgin cocktails.

While Heineken may be the city’s undisputed beer giant, local breweries are widely supported. Standouts include Walhalla, Poesi at en Kater, Lowlander and Oedipus (based in Amsterdam-Noord). Proeflokaal Arendsnest on Herengracht 90 only sells Dutch brews, making the bar a hotspot for tourists eager to discover the country’s best beers.

The desire to promote national drinks is also evident at wine bars. The Netherlands has about 300ha of vineyards and produces roughly 1.4m bottles of wine each year.

“At Vindict, we feature between 80 and 100 Dutch wines, showcasing the quality and growth of our wine industry,” Altenburg points out. “Even the Dutch aren’t aware of the fact that we produce great wines, which can be just as good as those from leading wine countries like France and Italy.”

The international players

The influx of foreign brands vying for representation in Amsterdam indicates a strong interest in the city’s hospitality industry. “Every week we welcome global brand ambassadors to show off their drinks during masterclasses,” Saravia says. Among the

major players currently dominating the cocktail industry are Bacardí (including Patrón and Grey Goose) and whisky brands such as The Dalmore, Woodford Reserve, WhistlePig and Ardbeg.

On the wine front, Altenburg notes that more people are keen to explore the world of champagne and lesser-known grape varieties. Additionally, he anticipates a growing demand for wines from cooler-climate regions. “Due to climate change and the fact that higher temperatures mean a higher alcohol percentage, we are looking towards wines from up-and-coming places in Europe such as the UK, which has more than 4,000ha of vineyards — and counting,” he says.

Challenges & opportunities

Amsterdam seems to have quickly recovered after the Covid-19 pandemic, and even rapidly rising inflation rates haven’t slowed the city’s burgeoning on-premise scene. All those surveyed noted that while people are indeed going out less frequently, they are seeking out better and more immersive experiences.

“People appreciate a night out more,” Cichozki says. “We recently had to raise our prices, but except for one or two slower days during the week, we haven’t noticed a significant decrease in clientele. In fact, on weekends, we have twice the number of people we had in 2022.”

Papastylianos concurs: “From what we see, it is the opposite compared to before the pandemic. People are spending more money on nights out.” The main challenge, he believes, is staff shortage. “Part-time jobs have become more common, making it difficult to find full-time employees,” he says. “This is the reason a lot of bars made the decision to open five days a week instead of seven.”

Interestingly, though Amsterdam’s bars and restaurants are focusing on making wine more accessible by emulating the lower pricing models of wine countries like Spain, France and Italy, there is a notable interest in more expensive wine, with clients frequently opting for those in the EUR10–EUR15 (US\$11–\$16) per glass range.

Altenburg believes this trend reflects a hunger for wine knowledge. “People are becoming more aware of what they’re drinking,” he says. “Every wine course we offer is consistently sold out.” **GDI**



Image: Klaitte Bosscheier Fotografie

Vindict wine bar (above); Ryan Chetiyawardana’s Super Lyan (below left); bar manager John Papastylianos



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