

TOP STORY | EDITOR'S PICK

Napa's Hollywood Room offers a tapestry of local talent

From the The Napa Valley A&E Scene: Art, movies, music and more series

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Mar 20, 2024



Napa band Last Pleasure played at The Hollywood Room in February. The venue inside Napa Valley Distillery hosts local bands and other live entertainment.

Damian Burford photo

Samie Hartley

Chances are you've passed The Hollywood Room on the outskirts of downtown Napa dozens of times and never realized you've overlooked Napa's newest menagerie for local entertainment.

For the unacquainted, The Hollywood Room is the cocktail lounge next to Napa Valley Distillery on Stockton Street. The space that was originally reserved only for distillery club members opened to the public last year as a venue to highlight local talent. Think: a place for locals, by locals, featuring locals.

On any given weekend, you will find local bands, comedians or singer-songwriters on The Hollywood Room stage. You'll also find DJs, karaoke, paint nights and cocktail workshops. It's a tapestry of talent that is ever-evolving in its infancy.

“We wanted to create a place for the community, a place to bring the community together,” said Hollywood Room bar director Hanzel Dingler. “Damian has been great in helping us build this communal space, creating a space to showcase local bands and talent.”

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The Damian he refers to is Damian Burford, a self-proclaimed “old punk rock guy” who came to Napa after years in the Denver area, where he worked as a concert promoter. A lifelong lover of all things musical, Burford was anxious to explore the local music scene in wine country but was surprised to find that there were few opportunities for local bands to perform original material in front of paying customers.

With his knowledge of the music industry, Burford began a personal crusade to find a venue to give local musicians and artists their much-needed platform.

“When I came to Napa, I looked all over for live music, but what I found – it was what I call ‘happy hour’ music. You’ve got an act in the corner playing covers for two to three hours,” Burford said. “It’s more for background noise. No one is really listening. I

wanted to know where the local talent was. I wanted to know where bands go to play their own songs – their own original music. I went up and down the valley, but I couldn't find it, so I thought maybe I need to create it myself.”

A daunting task, for sure, but Burford found inspiration during a tour and tasting at Napa Valley Distillery. He surveyed The Hollywood Room and took note of the flexible space in the distillery's welcome area just kitty-corner to the cocktail lounge. You could put up a small stage near the spirit barrels and move the seating around to accommodate seated rows for an audience, or even clear out the chairs and tables to make room for dancing.

“I thought: *This is just the spot to build something,*” Burford said. “I just couldn't get it out of my head.”

Burford presented his idea to Dingler, who had been looking for a new way to open up The Hollywood Room to the greater Napa community. Napa Valley Distillery **opened ArBaretum**, a cocktail lounge in the heart of downtown Napa on First Street, in 2022. The location was perfect for catering to tourists, but Dingler knew Napa Valley Distillery owners Arthur and Lusine Hartunian wanted to have a space where locals could go to escape the tourist-saturated downtown area while still supporting a local business.

It seemed like a bit of a conundrum, but not impossible. Maybe the solution was in front of them the whole time.

“I guess they liked me,” Burford said. “They brought me on as a server, which I was terrible at, but eventually they tapped me to explore turning the space into a live entertainment venue, and I got to work.”

Burford is now The Hollywood Room's events coordinator.

Since opening to the public in February 2023, The Hollywood Room has offered a plethora of live entertainment. While the types of entertainment you'll find on stage varies from week to week, Burford strives to make sure the artists are local – ideally based in Napa Valley – or have significant local ties.

Burford said there aren't many venues that will take a chance on new artists, but he's hoping The Hollywood Room can become a place to foster talent, creating a space for musicians to hone their skills in front of a live audience while introducing audiences to new music.

He references Bay Area rock icons Green Day as an example. While the band has roots in the underground music scene in Oakland and Berkeley, **Rolling Stone reported** that the band's first live show took place at Rod's Hickory Pit in Vallejo. You read that right: Green Day, the Grammy award-winning band that was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2015, played its first public show at a 24-hour barbecue diner in Solano County in 1987.

You never know when the next "big thing" might come along, but The Hollywood Room would like to be an option to aspiring and seasoned artists looking to pave their own way.

"The challenge of it – the fun of it – has been bringing in all these different lineups," Dinger said. "We do Latin music nights. We have DJs. We've done karaoke. We try new things to see what the crowds want. We want to give people a chance to play in their hometown."

Ross Rubin, singer-songwriter of Jealous Zelig, has been performing around Napa and the greater Bay Area for 10 years. Jealous Zelig has brought their "country-soul-jazz" vibe to The Hollywood Room for several performances since the 2023 opening. While more venues, such as Folklore and The Garden, have opened in the past year offering space for local bands, Rubin said The Hollywood Room helped lead the way.

"We love playing the Napa Valley Distillery since Damian Burford reinvented their Hollywood Room as a dedicated and welcoming cabaret for myriad styles of performance and the community at large," Rubin said in an email. "It's always a warm, diverse crowd there, and the Hollywood Room fosters a genuine intimacy between the audience and performers."

Singer-songwriter Zak Fennie has played all over Napa, from hotels and wineries to dedicated music venues such as Blue Note Napa and community events such as Porchfest and Napa City Nights.

Fennie describes Napa's music scene as "interesting."

"We have a lot of musicians and music lovers in our community, but we're also a luxury tourist town, so the majority of music venues are looking for easy-listening, crowd-pleasing acts that cater to the masses," Fennie said in an email. "Festivals like BottleRock and Porchfest have definitely added some prestige to our local scene, but there are very few venues where locals can find original underground music like you would find in a larger city."

Fennie has played The Hollywood Room a few times in the past year and says he likes that Burford is creating a venue that is fun for fans while fostering creativity among local musicians.

"The bands that play there often show up to support other bands, and they bring their friends too. I think that's something really special," Fennie said.

Fennie admits the venue is off the beaten path and music lovers, even locals, may not know what The Hollywood Room has to offer, but the mystique lends to the speakeasy-like ambience.

Leaning into the Prohibition-era aesthetics, The Hollywood Room also caters to cocktail connoisseurs. In an effort to open The Hollywood Room to locals, the lounge has begun offering Community Nights. In March, the focus has been "Healthcare Happy Hour" — offering discounts to health care workers and first responders on Thursdays.

"We want to take care of those who take care of us," Dinger said. "It's one of the many things we are trying out. We want this to be a place for locals — a place where they can come to enjoy a quiet drink or maybe step out of their comfort zone and listen to some new music."

The Hollywood Room is located at 2485 Stockton St. in Napa. Lounge hours are Thursdays from 4 to 9 p.m., Fridays from 4 to 10 p.m., Saturdays from 2 to 10 p.m., and Sundays from noon to 6 p.m. Hours of operation vary when bands and other live entertainment are scheduled. Check [napadistillery.com/events/live-events](https://www.napadistillery.com/events/live-events) for full details and to purchase tickets for upcoming shows.