

The Hotel Minibar Is Not Dead

A recent study showed a decline in hotel minibar sales across the country, a sure sign for many that the in-room service might be taking its last breath just four decades after its birth.



But is it? Nevin Martell explains why it's not only alive, but thriving.

JUNE 3, 2014

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“Goodbye, And Good Riddance, To The Hotel Minibar” proclaimed [one recent headline on Huffington Post](#), while [CNN declared](#), “The hotel minibar is dying; long live the nearby convenience store.”

These sky-is-falling stories are largely based on a study released this spring by PKF Hospitality Research, which determined minibar sales have dropped 28% between 2007 and 2012. Further buttressing the end-is-nigh claim is the fact that big name chains like Grand Hyatt, Starwood and Marriott are phasing out minibars at some of their properties.

But the minibar is far from dead. In fact, it's flourishing.

It's been four decades since minibars made their big splash at the Hong Kong Hilton in 1974. Legend has it that when the hotel added fridges stocked with miniature bottles of liquor to all 840 of its rooms, they boosted room service drink sales by 500 percent and added five percent to the company's overall bottom line. When that story got around, other hotels couldn't install their own minibars quickly enough.

In the beginning, the fridges were called “honesty minibars” because guests were supposed to report how much of the contents they had consumed when they settled their bills. Unsurprisingly, guests didn't always do the right thing, so, initially, housekeeping was burdened with the task of monitoring usage. Ultimately, electronic systems were created to remotely track what had been removed.

So often minibars are about as exciting as airline drink carts—bland brand booze, meh mixers and sky-high prices. Rarely does it seem worth it to fork over the same amount of money for a couple of mini bottles of Absolut or Captain Morgan that you might for a

375 ml bottle of better booze if you just manned up, put on some pants and took a quick walk to the nearest liquor store.

The current evolution of the minibar—from afterthought, to, in the case of these hotels, a hyper-curated amenity—goes hand-in-hand with larger trends in the bar industry, where everything is either “bespoke,” “housemade” or “handcrafted.”

These days though, creative thinking hotels are wooing discerning drinkers by stocking their amped-up minibars with everything from housemade bottled cocktails and dirty Martini kits to locally sourced beers and spirits.

At the [Four Seasons Hotel Singapore](#), the minibar houses a DIY Singapore Sling kit and frosty Mango Tango Popsicles boozed-up with locally brewed Tiger beer. Ready-made bottled cocktails from forward-thinking mixologist Tony Conigliaro—who also oversees the lounge downstairs—greet guests at the [Zetter Townhouse](#) in London. Choose between several options, including a Negroni, a Manhattan or a Martini. If you’d like to enjoy the cocktail in the style in which it was intended, call downstairs to have various tools of the trade sent up, including bar equipment, ice, garnishes and glassware.

Instead of a traditional minibar, in the Empire Suite at the [Café Royal Hotel](#) in London, guests can dip into a leather-encased cabinet holding top-shelf liquors, glassware and cocktail-making tools. They go one step further at [The Dylan](#) in Amsterdam. Luxury rooms boast fully stocked silver leaf-lined cabinets blinged-out with mother of pearl handles.

Stateside hotels are also raising the minibar, as it were. At [North Block Hotel](#) in Yountville, CA there’s a do-it-yourself dirty Martini set, which includes Charbay vodka distilled nearby in Napa Valley and house-cured vermouth olives. By contrast, [SLS Hotel South Beach](#) offers two pre-made bottled options, a traditional Cosmopolitan and a Tuscan Affair made with Aperol, gin and sweet vermouth.

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To meet the demand for more relevant options, some hotels are giving guests drinks options that are connected to the area they’re visiting. For many of the hotels that cited a dedication to local spirits, beers, and wines, the minibar has merely become an extension of the philosophies driving the restaurants housed within them. Farm-to-table and locavore are the buzzwords at Terra restaurant in the [Four Seasons Resort Rancho](#)

[Encantado Santa Fe](#). In keeping with this philosophy, executive chef Andrew Cooper says, “I wanted that philosophy to extend throughout the hotel.”

Starting at the end of last year, Cooper oversaw the rollout of a revamped minibar highlighting New Mexican products. Guests now have the option to enjoy five beers from the nearby Santa Fe Brewery, as well as gin, vodka, whiskey and brandy from Santa Fe Spirits and sparkling wine from Gruet Winery in Albuquerque.

These local products are stocked alongside well-known national brand options, but it turns out that many guests prefer the former. “The local beers sell better than Corona or Budweiser,” says Cooper, who added that spirit sales were roughly evenly split between local and national brands. Overall the minibar is a profit generator for the hotel.

The same is true for [HotelRED](#), a 48-room boutique hotel in Madison, Wisconsin. The hotel’s minibars come packed with national brands, but also feature local products, including beers from New Glarus Brewing and Lakefront Brewery, gin and vodka from Death’s Door Distilling and Yahara Bay Distillers’ rum and whiskey. According to Jason Ilstrup, the hotel’s general manager, their local offerings also outsell the more recognizable brands. And since the hotel implemented the program in the summer of 2013, its revenues have doubled.

Sometimes it’s not about where the minibar’s items came from or who made them. Instead, it’s about combatting the idea that they’re a blatant rip-off that should only be enjoyed by travelers armed with an expense account. After all, who in their right mind pays \$8 for a bottle of water or \$5 for a Snickers bar?

To overcome negative stereotypes, the [Loews Regency](#) in New York City is taking a more bombastic approach to its minibar. At the end of March, the hotel rolled out a new program dubbed “Milk the Minibar.” For an extra \$30 a night, guests can eat anything and everything in their minibar. There’s a hook: it’s never replenished. Visitors who do decide to go whole hog on the minibar get an array of non-alcoholic options, classic snacks and a selection of booze—red and white wine, Champagne, four spirits and a quartet of beers, including Brooklyn Lager.

Likewise, trend-setting boutique hotels are trying to outdo themselves by adding unexpected, and often lavish, amenities, on top of an already well-curated fridge.

In midtown Manhattan at the [James Hotel](#) the rooms are stocked with cocktail crafting accoutrements. For a fee, guests can call down for their choice of spirits and mixers. And for a further charge, they can even request for a member of the bar staff to come up and give them a private mixology lesson.

A mile downtown at [The NoMad Hotel](#), the emphasis is on rest and relaxation. What looks like a steamer trunk is actually a minibar stocked with red and white wine, Champagne, snacks and glassware—as well as a scented candle and rosewater mist. That beats a fridge full of Jack Daniel's, Bacardi and peanut M&Ms any day of the week.

So never fear, the minibar hasn't shuffled off to join the choir invisible nor has it started pushing up daisies. In fact, if you book at the right hotel, you'll have a chance to enjoy what can only be described as the minibar's second golden age.