

Getting down in E-Town

The past, present and future of Evanston nightlife.

WRITTEN BY **JADE THOMAS** // DESIGNED BY **GRACE CHANG**

**Names of underaged students have been changed to preserve anonymity.*

McCormick third-year Anna* has developed a definitive system for her weekends. One night is devoted to a bar or club. The next night is for a house party or a similar event. The final night is more lowkey, like staying in with friends.

“It’s fun at Northwestern because I feel like there’s a pretty wide range of house parties happening or a lot of going into the city, and you can kind of choose your own battles depending on the weekend,” Anna* says.

This kind of tried-and-true system isn’t new for Northwestern students. Joel Sternstein (Weinberg ’91), used to balance elaborate annual “beach parties” at the Chi Phi fraternity house with occasional outings to see plays or grab dinner in downtown Chicago.

“I kind of knew that for any type

of nightlife, it was probably going to be necessary to go into the city,” Sternstein says.

Even though Anna* and Sternstein think nightlife can take on a variety of forms, there’s a clear throughline that manifests: Chicago is the main hub of the Northwestern nightlife experience.

There are simply fewer places in Evanston for students to party. This may be for economic reasons, namely Evanston’s 6% liquor consumption tax. Evanston is the only municipality near Chicago with a tax this high.

Illustration by Grace Chang

Photo by Grace Chang

TAXING TIMES

There aren't many establishments that primarily serve liquor in Evanston, but the nightlife scene is changing by the day thanks to owners who picture a boozier future for the city.

Bitter Blossom, a cocktail bar located on Maple Avenue across from the Davis Metra stop, describes itself as "a little

geeky" and "a little punk rock" on its website.

The bar opened in September 2023, and its co-founder and general manager, Lo McGrath, characterizes the bar as "the island of misfit toys." McGrath wants to

help expand the nightlife scene in Evanston, a development they say is much-needed.

"Nightlife is where true counterculture finds a gathering point," McGrath says. "The weirdos in Evanston who want to see true counterculture, true nightlife, true queer nightlife, we all exist."

Before opening Bitter Blossom, McGrath managed the tasting room at FEW Spirits, Evanston's

first distillery. Before that, they managed a live music venue in Washington D.C., an experience they say taught them to "dream a lot bigger than what [they] see in Evanston."

McGrath says for nightlife to actually take off in Evanston, the city needs more establishments like theirs.

"At this stage of the game, [competition] doesn't exist," McGrath says. "We need more businesses like this to survive in the long term."

Diana Hamann owns The Wine Goddess, a wine bar on Main Street. She agrees the liquor consumption tax can make doing business in Evanston difficult, but she appreciates the consumers of Evanston.

"What I would prefer would be the city to change their ways," Hamann says. "I don't even think about leaving Evanston because I live here. I do business here. My customers are my friends. Why should I leave?"

ON DRY LAND

Unlike other areas around Chicago, alcohol sales are a relatively recent development in Evanston.

In 1855, Northwestern's Board of Trustees asked the Illinois General Assembly for an amendment to the school's charter. They wanted a zoning distance of 4 miles to be drawn up around the school, banning any sale of alcohol within its limits. The amendment passed.

As a result of the temperance movement's fierce advocates, prohibition became a national guideline with the 18th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution in 1918. Even after it was reversed with the 21st Amendment in 1933, Evanston City Council didn't approve the sale of alcohol until 1972.

Frances Willard, who was present at the founding of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in 1874, was also an Evanston resident. When she became president of the WCTU in 1879, she continued to live at her home, down the street from what is now Whole Foods on Chicago Avenue.

Willard's national advocacy paired with the alcohol-free history of Northwestern cemented Evanston's dry status — the effects of which still loom over the area today.

"I think [because of] the history of being a dry town, certain businesses developed and others didn't, and certain traditions developed and others didn't," Evanston Mayor Daniel Biss says.

Medill fourth-year Michael Barthelemy is from Evanston. Despite growing up in the area, he didn't know what the Evanston nightlife scene would look like. As someone who graduated from high school at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, his experience was made all the more unique.

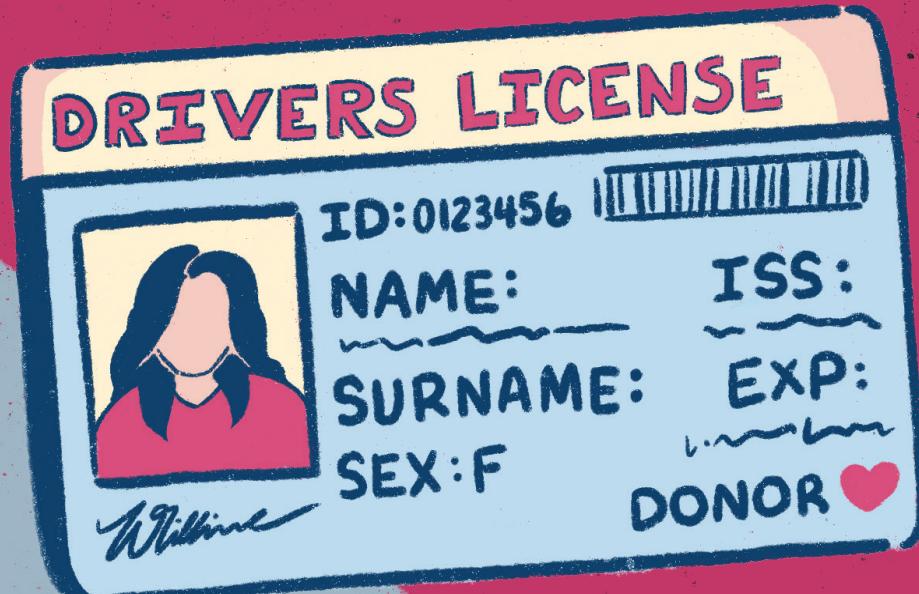
First and second-year students were not allowed on campus for Fall Quarter in 2020. When students did arrive for Winter Quarter in 2021, they had to quarantine for two weeks.

For some fourth-years, like Barthelemy, their official introduction to nightlife didn't begin until their second year at Northwestern.

Reza's Restaurant, which specializes in Mediterranean and Persian cuisine, opened its Tap Room and Lounge in August 2021. Barthelemy says he visited Reza's twice.

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Daniel Biss
Evanston Mayor



"You went one time and you got the general vibes of it just being very stuffy, a lot of people, very crowded, not a lot of room for yourself," Barthelemy says. "And then you get to the second time you go like, 'OK, I think I've had enough of this,' especially because, at least for us, it's very freshmen-centric."

Anna* echoes Barthelemy's reflections, but she says she enjoyed her nights out near campus.

"I definitely have some fond memories of freshman and sophomore year going to the little bars in Evanston," she says.

But she agrees the Evanston scene is insufficient, even if alternative options pose their own problems.

"Unfortunately, the solution a lot of the time is just to go into Chicago, which is kind of tough, just 'cause it gets so much more expensive when you're going into the city," Anna* says. "And then obviously if you're underage, it's harder."

McGrath says bars specifically intended for college students are the best solutions to the current dearth of establishments.

"Y'all need more spaces that are not just going to be welcoming to college students but have y'all's safety in mind," they say.

When SESP second-year Samantha* envisions nightlife, she says she thinks about "going out, getting drinks, dancing" or "going into clubs"—things she figured didn't really exist in Evanston when she applied to Northwestern.

When she visited a friend at The Ohio State University, she says she was surprised at the number of college student-friendly bars around its campus.

"We left her dorm and walked five minutes to go to one bar. And then [at] that bar, we got bored," Samantha* says. "So we went to a different bar that was a minute walk from there. There's just like, a street full of bars that let in college students."

Despite a perceived lack of nightlife, SESP fourth-year Jacob Rosner says he mainly stayed in Evanston his first two years. He enjoyed going to house parties and local establishments like Reza's or Bob's Pizza.

But now that Rosner is 22, he says Chicago has a lot more to offer, with much better options.

"It's a lot of fun having all of Chicago, at your disposal," Rosner says. "There's



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so many different environments you can immerse yourself in, whether that's clubbing, or bars or speakeasies. It's such a big city, and I think there's something for everyone."

Even still, Rosner, who is on the swim team, says he's had fun in Evanston. He likes hosting gatherings in the backyard of the "swim house," where he can grill and play games with friends.

"I mean, it gets a bad rep compared to other schools who are like, 'Nerdwestern' and things like that," he says. "But I've enjoyed the social scene here."

A BRAVE NEW EVANSTON

In December 2023, Evanston's Liquor Control Review Board recommended the liquor consumption tax be decreased from 6% to 2%. Biss, the board's commissioner, says the current liquor

consumption tax is an outlier compared to other municipalities and poses a serious competitive disadvantage for businesses in Evanston. For reference, nearby Skokie currently has a comparable packaged liquor tax of 2%.

According to Biss, the tax currently brings the city around \$3 million in revenue. If the tax is lowered, the city has to make up that loss.

He says the board originally had the idea to replace this tax with a more common one, like a food and beverage tax. This suggestion resulted in pushback from restaurant owners, so the board considered raising the sales tax, which corresponds to most purchased goods and services. But Biss says that would make the Evanston sales tax higher than its neighbors.

Right now, Evanston and Skokie have the same combined local and state sales tax of 10.25%.

Biss says the Review Board took a variety of opinions and considerations into account when it created the proposal for a replacement. Now, Evanston City Council is using that recommendation to inform its discussions of how to handle the situation.

"We're in the process of doing the

research and interviews to make sure that when it goes to council, we have the information we need to make a responsible decision for the community," Biss says.

Barthelemy says he believes the city is at a crossroads or "an identity crisis." Its location relative to villages like Wilmette or Kenilworth, paired with its

combination of the student population and other residents, has created a challenge, he says.

"In general, Evanston is somewhere in between Chicago and the North Shore and it hasn't quite figured out where it wants to stand," Barthelemy says.

But Biss hopes restaurants, bars, events and public spaces in Evanston can bring people together in a meaningful way.

"My vision is an Evanston that is here to facilitate people being together," Biss says. "Life is at its best when it is easy and comfortable and fun for us to be with each other. I would like to see the City of Evanston do everything it can to make that easier." ●

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