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Under the Volcano celebrates 30 years — and more than 1M frozen screwdrivers

By **Marcy de Luna**, *Houston Chronicle*
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Kinky Friedman speaks to a young voter (Hudson Hansard) while Kevin Russell and the "Shinyribs" performed at Under the Volcano in 2016.
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A fixture on the Houston bar scene is celebrating 30 years of business this week.

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Under the Volcano, a cozy, eccentric bar at 2349 Bissonnet, opened in 1989. Thirty years is a long time for a bar in a town where some watering holes come and go with the seasons.

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Owner Peter Mitchell attributes the bar's longevity, in part, to staying ahead of the curve.

"We were lucky in that we got in on craft cocktail before there was even a term for it. We were also doing more with craft beers before other people," Mitchell told Chron.com.

Another reason for the bar's success, Mitchell noted, is adapting to changes in the fickle hospitality industry.

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"We were a college bar at first. Now, it's more of a neighborhood place where people come to eat and drink," he said. "It's evolved over the years."

The one-story house near Rice Village was first home to an ice house in the '40s, followed by Munchies Café and Volcano.

The bar got its name from a novel by English writer Malcolm Lowry published in 1947. The novel tells the story of Geoffrey Firmin, an alcoholic British consul in the Mexican town of Quauhnahuac, in 1938.

"All of the action takes place on the Day of the Dead," Mitchell said. "The paintings and décor are inspired by it and we bought all of the furniture in Mexico."

Mitchell, a native Houstonian who owns the bar with his Argentinian wife, Vera Mitchell, has been at Volcano since the beginning.

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"I was running the bar when it opened and then we bought it in 1998," he said.

The kitchen at Volcano serves up tacos, carne guisada, baja marisco, other Mexican favorites and Sunday brunch fare, while the bar doles out beer, wine and craft cocktails with an emphasis on Latin America.

A strawberry basil margarita and an icy cubre libre are among the more popular drink orders; however, it's another frosty drink that's the biggest hit.

Mitchell estimates the bar has served up more than a million frozen screwdrivers to date. "It's a simple idea that just worked," Mitchell said.

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Volcano also offers a well-curated roster of live music acts.

And while Mitchell has fond recollections of some of the famous faces who have walked through the doors, including former Rockets coach Rudy Tomjanovich, Olympic track star Carl Lewis and several Texans players, his favorite memories were made with the bar's neighbors.

"We were quick to reopen after Hurricane Harvey. You'd be surprised at how many people didn't prepare. We had a ton of people pour in to eat," he said. "It was such an emotional time. It helped to gather together. These are the types of moments that stand out the most to me."

As for the future of Under the Volcano, the bar will soon launch lunch service and a new roster of seasonal drinks, Mitchell said.

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You can toast to Under the Volcano's 30th anniversary Saturday from 7 p.m. to midnight when the bar offers $3.75 frozen screwdrivers (the 1989 price of the drink), special guest DJs, Jell-O shots and a photo booth.

"I want to thank our customers. Their support has allowed us to work and raise a family in a great neighborhood in a city we love."

Marcy de Luna is a digital reporter. You can follow her on Twitter @MarcydeLuna and Facebook @MarcydeLuna. Read her stories on our breaking news site, Chron.com, and on our subscriber site, HoustonChronicle.com. | Marcy.deLuna@chron.com

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