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CULTURE

Under the Volcano marks 35 years with food, drinks and (cover band-free) music

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The Green or Red cocktail at Under the Volcano.
Courtesy Under the Volcano

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As bars and restaurants continue to shut down in this city, it's nice to know that a beloved neighborhood spot will celebrate its 35th anniversary this weekend.

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Rice Village bar, eatery and music venue Under the Volcano will be throwing a weekend-long anniversary celebration, where the festivities will be broken into two parts. Saturday will feature a lineup of special-guest DJs, along with a complimentary buffet, a frozen drinking contest and raffle prizes, while Sunday will have live afternoon music from Dem Roots Music (who performs there every Sunday during "Reggae Brunch") and the KPFT 90.1 show *Blues in Hi-Fi* broadcasting live. They're also bringing back the Artisan Bazaar, an open market of local artists and vendors that was briefly a recurring event in the early 2000s.

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The celebration basically encompasses everything people have come to expect from the place, nestled right in the middle of Bissonnet between the Museum District and the Kirby area. You can get drinks, food, all different kinds of music—whether live or through a playlist. Once upon a time, they barely had snacks. "All we had was potato chips in a bag," co-owner Vera Mitchell said. "That was the trend back then—people would go out and drink and that was it."



Under the Volcano cocktails, including the Frozen Screwdriver that has been on the menu since 1989.
Courtesy Under the Volcano

Mitchell and her husband Peter have been running the establishment since it opened way back in 1989. Originally owned and operated by Bob Precious, who opened the Ginger Man chain of neighborhood bars (the Houston location closed earlier this year), the property was already home to an icehouse in the 1940s and, later, a non-profit music venue and cafe called Munchies. Both the name and its Latin American decor Precious got from Malcolm Lowry's 1947 novel *Under the Volcano*, about an alcoholic British consul in Mexico on Dia de los Muertes (aka Day of the Dead).

"He had opened it in '89 and we bought it in '98," Peter Mitchell said. Mitchell, who worked alongside Precious running the Ginger Man bars, is the one who first brought live music into the fold. "I wanted to do something and I didn't know what, and I was sort of chicken-s--t about it, really," he said. "I knew I didn't want it to be a full-time music place. I wanted it to be a bar with music."



Pete and Vera Mitchell, owners of Under the Volcano.
Courtesy Under the Volcano

The increase in live performers came when New Orleans's New Birth Brass Band began doing a weekly residency there shortly after Hurricane Katrina forced members to move around these parts. Soon, local musicians including Kevin Russell of the Gourds and Mike Stinson approached him about doing weekly stints. These days, Under the Volcano has a regular weekly lineup of recurring and guest artists coming in to play everything from jazz to country to bluegrass to reggae.

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As a fan of international music, Mitchell welcomes all types of musicians—except a couple. "I generally have a rule not to have cover bands or tribute bands," he said. "Now, I've altered that slightly with this band, The Repeat

Offenders. They do covers, but they're deep-cut covers. I hate tribute bands with a passion, and cover bands are right behind them for me."

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Apart from that brief bit of vitriol, the Mitchells are proud with what they've accomplished with Under the Volcano. It's truly a family business—their son and daughter have served as bartenders, while Vera's sister Barbara Misto helps with publicity and social media. The spot has become a cozy watering hole that's amassed a lot of cool memories and even cooler patrons. Back when he was music editor for Houston Press in the early-to-mid aughts, the late journalist John Nova Lomax used to hold roundtable gatherings where his music writers and other local music insiders could hang out and talk shop. Before he passed away, singer/songwriter/novelist Kinky Friedman was also known to pop by when he was in town.

More importantly, Under the Volcano is there for people who need more than cocktails and Taco Tuesdays. When Hurricane Beryl recently ravaged Houston, they opened their doors for people who needed to recharge, relax and get Wi-Fi.

"We say the Volcano is the epitome of the neighborhood bar, really," Misto said. "It's kind of like the *Cheers* of Houston. People come and they've hung out over the years. It's a place where they can come and chill and relax, and they really feel like home."

Under the Volcano 35th Anniversary Celebration



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