

D

PHOTO BY SCOTT THOMAS ANDERSON



Head bartender Marc Allen pours for the afternoon crowd at McGee's in Nevada City.

DRINK

## A mine shaft of mystique at McGee's

160-year-old saloon in Nevada City defies labels and explanations

BY SCOTT THOMAS ANDERSON / [scotta@newsreview.com](mailto:scotta@newsreview.com)

**It's not unusual to find someone in a pith helmet** hunched over the bar at McGee's, as if its clutter of triple-blended scotch and high-end spirits are the prime prey in an alcohol-inspired safari.

As it happens, it's fine to sport touches of vintage attire in this 160-year-old Nevada City saloon. The pub openly embraces the shades of its white-knuckled past while using inventive décor to get the mine wheels of the imagination turning. That ambiance comes from a rare fusion of western Victorian grit and quirky industrial futurism. A lazy writer might describe it as the Gold Rush meets steampunk—an assertion guaranteed to annoy most people who love McGee's.

Like many hideouts in Nevada City, this bar is a free-wheeling anomaly unto itself: evocative, transporting, a snapshot in time that doesn't entirely give over its meaning. Oh yeah, it also has a jail cell under a trapdoor in the shadowed recesses of its basement.

For decades McGee's has been owned by Richie Costello, who took the name from his late mother's favorite moniker. It was the Irish-descended Mrs. "McGee" who first bought this saloon building that dates to 1852. Costello still tends bar there most mornings and then spends his afternoons by the front window, telling jokes, swapping stories and keeping the place a laid-back magnet for luses and local characters.

Visitors are often entranced by what they see on McGee's walls. Its artistic arrangement of gold gears, copper tubes and automated mine wheels were designed by Costello's wife, Michelle, which, along with other oddities, brings a little escapism to the

drinking. There's the skull statue wearing aviator goggles. There's the carved bear head in a top hat wrapped with Christmas lights. There's the pilgrim musket modified to a hand-held blast cannon. It all says Nevada City—and it all says McGee's.

The saloon's slightly devilish style doesn't stop there. Every Monday, it morphs into the only bar in the Sierra foothills that hosts a DJ-driven gothic night. That's part of a broader music program that head bartender and general manager Marc Allen has brought. Allen also programs a monthly line-up of live bands and throwback dance nights. He says what he likes most about McGee's is how inviting it is.

"If you come in here any day after 3 p.m., you're going to see 20 or 30 people hanging out that have lived in Nevada City their whole lives," he says. "It's a range of people from their 20s to their 70s. It's dynamic and diverse; and so are the stories that you hear."

One person who also enjoys that atmosphere is McGee's bartender Shawna Cleary, who originally hails from Dublin, Ireland.

"It's unique in a lot of different ways, and it's an old bar, too—the only Irish bar in Nevada City," Cleary says. "People in this area like to eat good, and dance and wear clothes that are kind of ... different. I like it here. It's a good energy." □

Visit McGee's in all its mystique at 315 Broad St., open daily in Nevada City; [facebook.com/McGeesNC](https://facebook.com/McGeesNC).

Restrictions apply.

# THE CREATORS OF TOSTADA THURSDAY

DINE-IN ONLY

11AM - Closed

Now serving Margaritas & Micheladas.

1413 21 Street Sacramento, CA (916) 492-0727

JalapenOS

Did someone say *fried chicken?* (and bahn mi, and ramen)

Join us everyday for our multi-Asian inspired menu, and reserve for our Chef's Counter and Kaiseki dining experiences.

**origami** ASIAN GRILL

4801 Folsom Blvd | Sacramento | 916.400.3075 | [origamiasiangrill.com](http://origamiasiangrill.com)

# Bring this ad in for \$5 toward an entrée\*

**The MORNING FORK**

\*1 PER TABLE, ONLY VALID MONDAY - FRIDAY

**EARLY BIRD SPECIAL**  
7:30AM TO 8:30AM EVERYDAY  
**3 SIDES & A JUICE OR COFFEE FOR \$11**  
CANNOT BE COMBINED WITH OTHER OFFERS

1111 21st Street | Sacramento  
[www.themorningfork.com](http://www.themorningfork.com)