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By Kara Newman

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(Reuters) - Forget what you've heard about the slow Southern draw. Bar Manager Brian Stanger is talking extra fast today, mere hours before the grand opening of Southern Art and Bourbon Bar (southernart.com/) in Atlanta, located within the Intercontinental Buckhead hotel.

Although Atlanta is not traditionally known as a cocktail town, offerings have strengthened in recent years.

"In the last seven years we've made great strides in getting this town caught up with a few other cocktail centers in the country," he says. "In fact, I'd say we surpassed some of them." It helps that Atlanta's airport is one of the busiest hubs in the world, delivering thirsty travelers by the plane-load.

Eating and drinking are strongly intertwined here; most upscale cocktail outposts are attached to restaurants, rather than standalone destinations. Stanger's top choices for out-of-town tippers include Top Fir (www.topfir.com/), a two-storey restaurant/bar in Midtown with long late-night hours, where rustic fare is accompanied by cocktails such as the Rye Tai (Redemption Rye, bourbon, Cointreau, maple-walnut or geat, orange juice). Despite the "outrageous" wine list, Stanger says "people don't go in there to drink anything but cocktails."

From the same team also comes The Sound Table (thesoundtable.com/)

in the historic Old Fourth Ward district. DJ-spun music is a big part of the scene, as well as the street fare-inspired food.

Meanwhile, in the Buckhead area uptown, Holeman & Finch Public House (holeman-finch.com/) tips its hat to pub grub, bistros and Southern cooking (keep an ear out for the 10pm "burger bullhorn"). The cocktail menu is similarly eclectic, showcasing drinks with forward-looking ingredients such as the Valley Forge (Bluecoat gin, Cocchi Americano, Canton ginger liqueur and Bittermen's grapefruit bitters).

Clearly, Atlanta's cocktail choices have grown considerably. And tonight another bar-restaurant will be added to the Atlanta scene. Just ask Stanger, whose mind already has raced ahead to count up cocktail chores at a staccato pace: "I have to go peel some ginger and pour smoke over the ice and."

RECIPE: Le Grand Voyage

(Courtesy of Navarro Carr, The Sound Table) 2 oz Famous Grouse blended scotch

oz lemon juice

oz St Germain elderflower liqueur

oz Strega Good dash Angostura bitters Shake all ingredients in a cocktail shaker with ice, and strain into a rocks glass over fresh ice. No garnish.

(Editing by [Peter Myers](#) and [Paul Casciato](#))

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