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LORDS
OF THE
MACHINE

SAN FRANCISCO'S
PINBALL WIZARDS

OUR MAN IN

Pinball Wizards

Pinball enthusiast **Brittany Shoot** discovers San Francisco's thriving pinball culture and the tournament players ready to welcome even novice players into the fold

Images by [Gene X Hwang](#)



When I moved to San Francisco 18 months ago, I had no idea I'd landed in fierce pinball wizard territory. I grew up with two machines, a Bally Paragon and a Williams Pharaoh, in my Midwestern basement. Much like you never forget how to balance on a bicycle, my hands instinctively

know how to handle a wide-body, late-1970s pinball machine. But I hadn't played a proper game in at least 15 years when I started competing in tournaments.

Per capita, San Francisco might have the highest concentration of high-ranking competitive players in the United States. Many of the men and women at local tournaments are within the top 100 players on the planet, according to rankings from the International Flipper Pinball Association. While the best SF players might test your mettle during competition, they're also just as likely to offer pointers to beginners. If the

robust SF pinball scene surprised me, the warm welcome I received from my competitors was even more impressive.

My experience is far from abnormal, and I have a couple of theories about why this happens. For one, competition makes us all better. Moreover, a fledgling game like pinball can only survive based on collective demand. Players need competitors. Collectors need buyers. Welcoming fellow pinheads into the fold creates more opportunities for everyone — including a truly incredible array of bars and arcades where public practice is encouraged.



AT THE READY

/ Pinball is both a competitive and welcoming pursuit

You can easily spend an entire day playing pinball in San Francisco. First stop: Musee Mecanique at Fisherman's Wharf, an arcade filled with vintage mechanical games and carnival memorabilia. To beat the crush of giddy tourists that fill the bayside warehouse, I arrive right when the doors open. Dan Zelinsky, the second-generation owner, glides up on roller skates to greet me. As a young boy, Dan's father, Ed, started amassing a stockpile of coin-op orchestrions and antique slot machines. Zelinsky and his sons now maintain the collection, which is open to the public 365 days a year. "I think what's fascinating to people is that you can interact with pinball," he explains over the chorus of bling! bling! that fills the arcade. "Unlike a video game console, a pinball machine is something that you can participate with physically."

I play a few rounds on an old Gottlieb Sing-A-Long before I head back into town. As I leave the waterfront, I swing into Boudin Bakery for one of its famous sourdough rolls. The chewy buntides me over until I make it to Gestalt Haus in the laid-back, mural-covered Mission District. I pull up a seat at the bar and order a kielbasa, side of warm potato salad, and Delirium Tremens pale ale — but not before I play a game of Funhouse. Manager Ryan Blumenthal is a pinball enthusiast



CITY LIGHTS/ Pinball has seen a resurgence in San Francisco

and rumoured to be responsible for the rapidly expanding collection of machines at the back. The line of players that wait patiently each night for their turn to plunge the ball is proof that pinhead manager or not, Gestalt knows how to tap into the cultural zeitgeist and keep local barflies satisfied.

Next, I head for Shotwell's, a dimly lit cash-only Mission pub that's ostensibly one of the oldest bars in all of California. In a nook that houses side-by-side Medieval Madness and Theater of Magic machines, I sidle up to Eric Wagensonner, one of the administrators of the Pinball Map smartphone locator app (pinballmap.com). It's a natural role for a location player who delights in sharing secrets discovered the old-fashioned way: by ambling between bars, testing out the games on site, and sampling the IPAs on tap. Shotwell's

doesn't offer any bar fare beyond a basket of pretzels, but prides itself on being BYOF: bring your own food. The burritos and fresh guacamole from nearby taqueria San Jalisco can't be beaten.

As we scoop salsa onto warm tortilla chips, Wagensonner confides that just two days ago, a nearby club notorious for its run-down machines brought in an Avatar. If we were casual players,

TWITTER PITCH

According to ZZ Top, everybody's crazy for a sharp-dressed man. With that in mind, here are some high-flying tailors that you should be following

● **HH Tailors**

The head honcho of Savile Row's Henry Herbert Tailors, offering a tailoring-by-scooter service, where tailors Vespa to you around the clock
[@HenryHerbert](https://twitter.com/HenryHerbert)

come for high-quality custom suits made on the cheap
[@hoiantailors](https://twitter.com/hoiantailors)

● **Tailor Made London**

London-based tailor who uses the latest body scanning technology to create the perfect clothing that fits the on- and off-line consumer
[@iamtailormade](https://twitter.com/iamtailormade)

● **Sam's Tailor**

Sam's Tailor is the premiere supplier of bespoke tailored business and formal wear in Hong Kong. Clients have included Kevin Spacey and Bill Clinton
[@samstailor](https://twitter.com/samstailor)

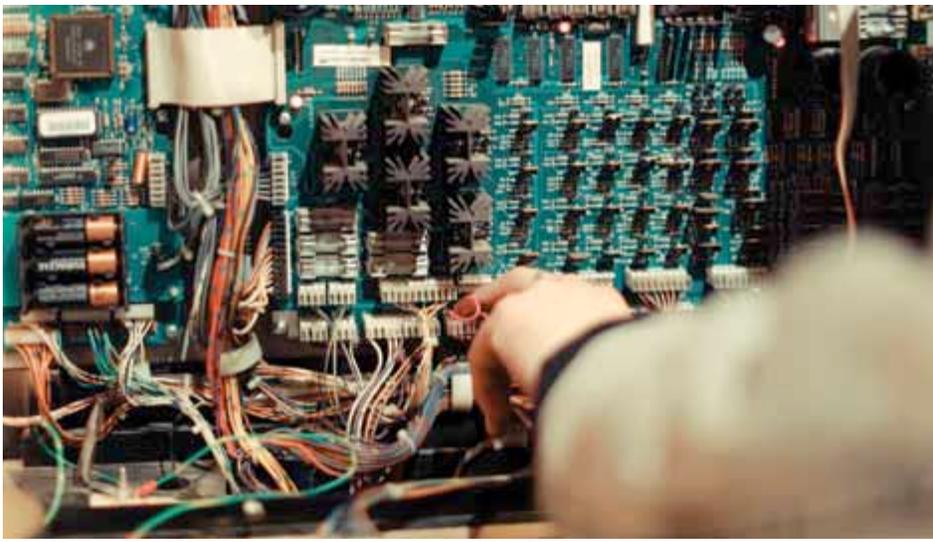
● **Brooklyn Tailors**

Trendy Williamsburg-based tailors producing bespoke and ready-to-wear products with an appreciation for hand-made quality and small artisanal production
[@OldeGoodThings](https://twitter.com/OldeGoodThings)

● **Hoi An Tailors**

As Vietnam's leading tailors, Hoi An Tailors attracts swaths of locals and tourists alike, who





IN THE GAME / Pinball league night at Free Gold Watch in Haight Ashbury



we might care about a new Stern game in the neighbourhood. But we smirk at one another and shrug. There are too many places where the machines won't be sticky from spilled beer or have burned-out backboard lights. We won't bother.

Between the Mission and neighbouring Castro district, there are dozens of bars with machines tucked into an alcove: Doc's Clock, Kilowatt, Molotov's, and Lucky 13, to name a few. Spending several hours moseying between them all doesn't feel retrograde so much as the epitome of San Francisco's unique blend of laid-back attitude and competitive edge. In a town where everyone has an idea for the next big tech start-up or a

BETWEEN MISSION AND CASTRO DISTRICT ARE DOZENS OF BARS WITH PINBALL



posturing hipster pastime (if not both), there's an ambitious undercurrent in everything we do. But most San Franciscans are also unusually welcoming and helpful, embodying a mellow Californian vibe that takes the edge off our overly friendly American tendencies. Pinball – part

esoteric interest, part practice-reliant skill, part friendly rivalry, part collective pursuit – is an organic convergence of core San Francisco values.

It's league night, so Wagenonner and I make our way through the fog to Free Gold Watch, a screen-printing and design shop in the Haight that has ten machines and counting. There are a number of pinball clubs in Northern

California that host regular practice nights, but long-time player Per Schwarzenberger only recently founded the first San Francisco-specific league, hoping to encourage more regular matches in the city. As Wagenonner and I approach the door to the cavernous store, we hear the thunk-thunk-thunk of pop bumpers and spot our pal Andrei Massenkoff, a true wizard of the sport and the 2011 Professional and Amateur Pinball Association World Champion. The SF native is bent over White Water, a machine with a leaderboard that (like most in the shop) bears his initials. He glances up and beckons me to watch him hip-check the machine. "Do you know how to release multiball on this one?" he asks, gently bumping the console. He might be one of the best players in the world, but he's also just a regular guy who eagerly offers tips to his friends. I watch until his final ball drains. Game over. He steps aside and gestures chivalrously. It's my turn now.