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# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## Now That I'm Sober-Curious, Do I Have to Toss My Beautiful Bar Cart?

Decor columnist Michelle Slatalla asks experts if her glittery little speakeasy on wheels is sabotaging her attempt at living healthier

By *Michelle Slatalla* [Follow](#)

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Morris thinks of a bar cart as a decor chameleon. “A bar cart is a treat in a room, and because it’s small and on wheels, there are many ways you can use it,” Morris said.

“I used one in a dining room for a gentleman who wanted the formality of chateaubriand being delivered to the table by a chef,” she said. “Or it can be used as a flower cart to create a vignette in a little-used corner of a room.”

Other creative uses she’s found include “putting toys on it in a playroom or art supplies on it in a crafts room. And it’s easy to move it if you want to make Caesar salad on it at a dinner party.”

When it comes to bar carts, she loves all shapes—rectangles, ovals and round carts—and sizes. If it’s really tiny, put a chair next to it to give it more weight in the room, she suggests. If it’s large, put it behind a sofa with a lamp to add depth to a room.

“But I do prefer a brass cart, because it adds sparkle,” she said.





*Toronto designer Lori Morris transformed a bar cart into a trolley from which to serve chateaubriand. Photo: Brandon Barre*



## DESIGN & DECORATING



JOHN W. TOHNS ILLUSTRATION ©MICHELLE SLATALLA (BAR CART)

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DECOR / MICHELLE SLATALLA

"It's ironic, but when alcohol was forbidden, people got more interested in finding new ways to serve it in their homes," she said. "A lot of bar carts from that era have funny design elements, like hidden compartments for alcohol bottles."

On Stylish, vintage bar cart styles run the gamut of 20th-century design: from midcentury Danish teak to '70s black-glass-and-chrome, to neoclassical brass filigree.

"What they have in common is that bar carts have a very social aspect—they signal you might be about to have friends over for a party," she said.

"They do add a certain grown-up-ness, a sophistication to a room," I said.

Of course we used to think that ashtrays were a design element that added sophistication. But then smoking got banned, and you never see ashtrays any more. With the surgeon general recently call-

**I don't want mine to have a new purpose as toy storage or a flower cart.**

ing for stronger health warnings about alcohol and new research indicating there's no "healthy" amount to drink, will bar carts also disappear from our lives?

"I don't think so," said Sally Augustin, a Chicago-based environmental psychologist. "They're too handy for too many purposes."

But I realized: I don't want mine to have a new purpose as toy storage or a flower cart. It looks beautiful as its maker intended,

adorned with a brass tray and colorful bottles of liquor and an adorable brass shot glass.

"You can make other small changes in your environment—it's called nudging—that will make it less likely that you will indulge in a negative habit even if the bar cart is still in the room," Augustin said.

One example of nudging: Turn on bright lights as evening approaches because studies show that in general people have better self-control in a space where the light is brighter, she said.

Another way to boost self-control is to hang a mirror on a wall. "If you can see yourself in a mirror, research shows you are more likely to act in a socially appropriate way," she said.

"You know, a mirror would look really good hanging above my bar cart," I said.

After I hung up, I got out a measuring tape and took some notes. Twilight fell while I was browsing Etsy for vintage gilt mirrors and I didn't even notice the gin bottle. Maybe I am ready for change. How would my husband look in a chef's toque, pushing his famous chateaubriand into the dining room?



## If I'm Sober-Curious, Do I Have to Toss My Bar Cart?

**AFTER ALL** the recent health news that's come out about how bad alcohol is for you, I have cut back on drinking.

But my bar cart still whispers to me every day when I walk past it at 5 p.m., when the light falls just so on the gin bottle.

"Hi, stranger," Bar Cart coos seductively.

I avert my eyes from the brass-and-glass temptation, ignoring its come-hither display of shiny cocktail shakers and graceful, stemmed Nick-and-Nora martini glasses.

"Just looking?" it asks.

My bar cart used to be my favorite piece of furniture, with its curvy Deco frame and jaunty brass wheels. But now that I'm sober-ish?

"I feel like my old friend the

bar cart has turned on me and become a bad influence," I told Keith Humphreys, a Stanford University psychologist whom I called for advice. "Can having a specific piece of furniture in my house be bad for my health?"

"Well, it is sending you a behavioral cue every time you see it," he said. "And humans are not much more advanced than Pavlov's dog when it comes to behavioral cues."

In other words, like a dog con-

ditioned to salivate at the prospect of food, I have been conditioned to crave a cocktail whenever I walk past my bar cart.

"When the light shines through the gin, it looks so...inviting," I admitted, fantasizing about a crisp Hendrick's martini with just a whiff of vermouth. And two olives.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he agreed. "I see the cocktail shaker gleaming, and I think about the nice sound when it's full of ice and I'm shaking it up," I said.

"OK, that's two cues—the bottle and the cocktail shaker—and they can be hard to resist, despite best intentions, on days when you are tired or you are stressed," he said. "I recommend people who are trying not to drink don't keep alcohol

in the house."

"Maybe I could get rid of the alcohol but keep the cart?" I asked.

"Try it," he said. "If the bar cart is still a cue, cover it up."

Like, throw a shroud over it?

There are better solutions, said Lori Morris, a Toronto interior designer and bar cart champion who recently decorated a room in a condo in Florida with three side-by-side bar carts because "three next to each other is an extravaganza on wheels."



The author's problematic cart.

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In fact, bar carts—and their bar-furniture ancestors from earlier centuries—have always been prized for their pizzazz, said Silke Berlinghof-Nielsen, furniture historian and owner of online vintage furniture shop Stylish.

"Ever since wealthy 18th-century European aristocrats started displaying their liquor collections in special cabinets with glass doors, bar furniture has been a luxurious statement piece," she said.

We can thank Prohibition for the birth of the mobile bar cart, Berlinghof-Nielsen said.