

The Art Of Bartending

By Sherrie Wilkolaski



SHUTTERSTOCK

It's a Saturday evening. Your standing reservation at a favorite bistro is scheduled for eight o'clock and you arrive early so you can enjoy a cocktail at the bar before dinner. You make your way to the lounge and your neighborhood bartender welcomes you with your favorite cocktail. The last drop of your martini transfers from the shaker into the chilled glass, and in drops two olives just the way you like it. You stretch out your arm as if to shake hands with the tonics wizard but instead, you caress the

glass and bring it up to your lips for the first taste of the rest of your evening. The bartender greets you by name and you know you're home.

We've all experienced such a scenario, but do we appreciate the role the bartender plays in our lives, and the multitude of skills it takes to succeed in a fast-paced, alcohol saturated profession? To succeed in this line of work, it takes tenacity, innovation and determination. Bartending is not just for college kids anymore. Spirits companies,

interested in going the distance to compete for shelf space, must find the right bartender representative to build their brand. They need to be high energy, understand the craft and know how to entice consumers with signature cocktails that will keep them coming back for more. I was recently introduced to Jacques Bezuidenhout, Bartender Ambassador at Tequila Partida, and he won me over with his knowledge and dedication to the craft.

Jacques' career started in South

Africa, working in bars and restaurants almost 20 years ago. The time he spent working the London bar scene was where his passion for the art of bartending blossomed.

In 1998, Jacques moved to San Francisco and started working at the Irish Bank Bar & Restaurant. He developed what is considered one of the most extensive Scotch Whiskey selections in the Bay area, while at the Irish Bank. His expertise continued to develop and he consulted with numerous bar and



Guild. He has judged various spirits and cocktail competitions, and was voted Best Bartender in San Francisco by Anthony Dias Blue.

He was hired to develop the Million Dollar cocktails recipes for Harry Denton's Starlight Room and continues to work with them on their menu. This is what Jacques had to say about his experience, "That was really fun. I got to work with some very rare and expensive spirits like 24-year-old Macallan single-malt scotch and Dom Perignon Champagne. All the fun was in the tasting and evaluation of those spirits so I could work on creating the cocktails. They are still on the menu at Starlight Room."

When he steps out from behind the bar, I wanted to know what he likes to order and if there is one cocktail that is his go-to drink. Jacques said, "I don't just have one but a small handful. I generally stay classic, depending on where I am drinking. These are my favorites: a fresh Margarita, Negroni, Gin Martini, Manhattan and a fresh Daiquiri."

When you're working for a brand like Partida and are their Bartender Ambassador, there is much to think about when developing recipes that will tempt the taste buds of consumers. On the methodology of designing new recipes, Jacques said, "I always start in understanding the flavor profile of the base spirit so I can build on it. With Partida, it is easy, as I know the Tequilas very well after spending a close 8 years with them. Once you understand the flavor profile and what direction you want to take, then you start mixing."

Flavor is his focus and should be the basis of any recipe, right. But then I wanted to know how many attempts it takes him to get a final recipe that he feels he's nailed. "Sometimes, it is within a couple of tries. Sometimes, I just have to put that recipe away for a while after numerous tries. It helps to leave it alone and come back to it. I don't mind either way. To me, all the fun is in the trying and the mixing." He tells me that once he feels he has achieved a cocktail that is close to perfection, he will adjust the recipe within a quarter ounce with most ingredients, to see where it goes so that he is ultimately happy with the final cut.

When it comes to cocktail recipes, his favorite flavor to work with is orange. "I would say the range that you reach for most is one of the



Jacques Bezuidenhout

orange liqueurs like Grand Marnier, Cointreau or Pierre Ferrand Orange Curacao. I also love working with Mathilde Pear, which works nicely in my La Perla Cocktail."

His advice on the makings of a successful cocktail recipe; "Most of the time, it is staying within 3 to 5 ingredients, keeping it simple and making sure all ingredients are great quality. I also ask myself if I would have that drink more than once. A cocktail can taste great through one sitting, but if you would you have another is a very important question."

In addition to the work he's doing with Partida, he is also consulting with Kimpton Hotel Group to help launch a variety of their new bar and restaurant openings. He is working with the chef(s) to develop complementary cocktails to coordinate with their menu. "I always love to work with the chefs, to see what they are using and where they get their inspiration. It is important to me, that the cocktail list complements the theme and style of the restaurant. It is also important to cater towards the guest." Property-wide, he is focusing on the classics, while still designing unique cocktails for each hotel. "For me it is always mostly unique to that property. I don't think we have one drink that is in all Kimpton properties. Every restaurant bar is different and appeals to different styles and tastes. The only time that changes slightly is when I incorporate classics on each list. Classics are there for a reason, because they are great and deserve

to be on a list. It also gives the guest a familiar go-to cocktail."

When it comes to advice for the future bartender and mixologist generation, he says, "The first skill you always look for is hospitality and work ethic. We can teach skills of making a great drink for the most part, but you cannot teach natural hospitality." He sees the future of the art of bartending becoming more and more refined, "I see it spreading out of the craft cocktail bars and into more mainstream bars where bartenders want to make great drinks. Most important is that our craft needs to become more open and approachable, so that other bartenders and guests do not get intimidated."

What is next for this mixing artist? He wants to see the world and "enjoy all its cocktails, food, wines and people," and would like to further his knowledge and keep on working towards getting better at what he does behind the bar and in his cocktail test kitchen.



restaurant businesses to launch openings, and then served as Brand Ambassador for Plymouth Gin.

Jacques completed work at Tres Agaves, which has gained acclaim as one of the best bar programs in the United States. While at Tres Agaves, the Bar Program won "the Spirits Restaurant of the Year 2006" from Sante Magazine, due to work done by Jacques and Julio Bermejo.

Jacques has been instrumental in organizing the San Francisco chapter of the United States Bartenders