

BY CYNTHIA NIMS

BAR STARS

*Here comes the
next generation of cocktail wizards*

I got an email from Ryan Magarian while he was on the cruise ship M.S. Prinsendam, going through the Panama Canal. The next day, he called from the coast of Costa Rica. Seattle-based Magarian certainly has created a cool niche for himself in the world of mixology, one good slice of which is developing and implementing the onboard bar program for Holland America Line's 12 cruise ships. Part of the Kathy Casey Food Studios creative development team, through which he consults with independent restaurants, corporations and spirits companies such as Brown-Forman, Magarian has tapped a vein of interest in contemporary cocktails. "I love what I do," says Magarian, "working the craft of making cocktails and doing so for so many different projects. The creative possibilities are endless."

Magarian's livelihood is just one example of where a career path lined with creative cocktails might lead these days. A decade ago the landscape was very different for the professional bartender, with few options that allowed him or her to get out from behind the bar. Today, in addition to making great cocktails for thirsty customers, the country's hot bartenders are finding new niches – teaching, consulting, writing – that have developed in recent

years. Below you'll meet eight others who are carving out a spot for themselves in the realm of craft cocktails.

VEGAS LIGHTS

Michael MacDonnell is one of the current bar stars, shining neon-bright in Las Vegas. His job title is corporate mixologist for the Olive Group, chef Todd English's Boston-based restaurant group, but his home base is at Olives in the Bellagio Hotel & Casino. From there, he travels the country to help open all new English restaurants, getting bar systems set up and creating cocktail lists. He also touches base with existing restaurants on a regular basis to update beverages and incorporate new spirits, always working to "keep things fresh and creative," MacDonnell says. He has a mission to "stay on the cutting edge of cocktails."

Olives Las Vegas re-opened in August after renovations – which included an expansion of the bar area. This is where MacDonnell does his best work, he says. One new signature drink is a fusion of Belvedere Pomrancaza Vodka, fresh lemon, pineapple and pomegranate juices, and a splash of orange curaçao, topped with a float of Gosling's rum. Another blends aromatic fresh ginger and mint with Belvedere Citrus, finished with a squeeze of fresh lemon juice.

Another new player in Vegas is Rodney Kettler, bar-



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tender at Piero Selvaggio's Valentino in the Venetian Hotel. He's been plying his craft in Sin City for 6 years, an economics graduate from Minnesota who, by way of Los Angeles, has parlayed his econ savvy into a successful cocktail career. At Valentino, the cocktail list isn't encyclopedic, and instead features a stable of standards and three signatures: the Grill Cocktail (Campari with prosecco), Valentino Punch (Grey Goose L'Orange, watermelon liqueur, apple liqueur, sweet and sour, pineapple juice and a splash of cranberry) and the Vanilla Swirl (Grey Goose La Vanille, Chambord, pineapple juice and sweet and sour).

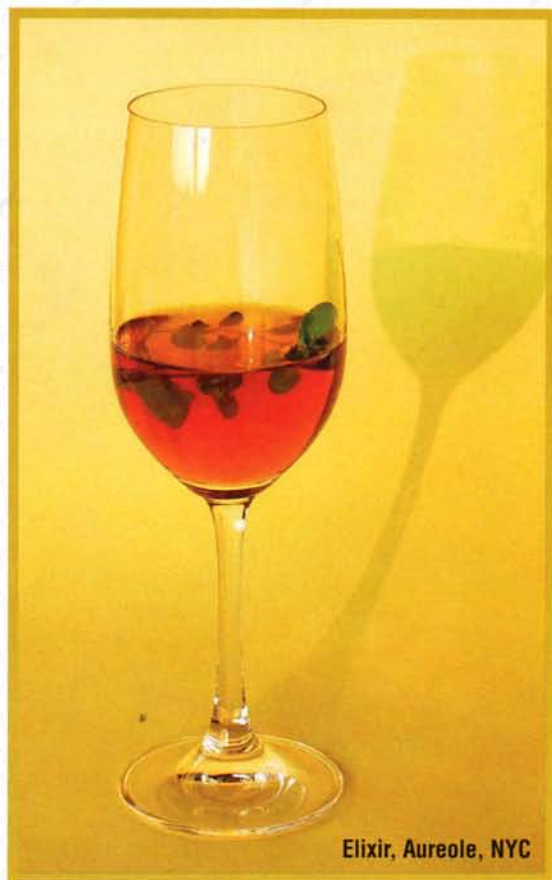
Kettler says he gets his biggest kicks when an undecided customer says simply, "make me something different, I usually like X, Y and Z." On-the-spot creativity and seeing a bar full of happy customers are what jazz Kettler about his job, which he doesn't really consider to be a job at all.

He developed the Valentino Punch and Vanilla Swirl for the recent Condé Nast Grey Goose Tastemakers Contest, testing his mettle against bartenders across the country. The Vanilla Swirl came out on top, one of the four national winners (there was one winner for each of the Grey Goose vodka flavors: traditional, L'Orange, Le Citron and La Vanille). Not your everyday cocktail competition, this one culminated in a New York City photo shoot with other winning bartenders and an advertisement featuring them that appeared in late-summer issues of *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair* and *Condé Nast Traveler*.

Cocktail competitions are a leading indicator that bar professionals are being encouraged to advance their careers, grow their skills and challenge cocktail norms. Since 2002, executives at the luxurious MGM Beau Rivage resort in Biloxi, MS, have held their Signature Drink Contest, an annual competition for the property's bartenders and bar porters. It's the finale of a 3-day spir-

its and cocktail training program, conducted by Dale DeGroff last year, with more than 70 participants. The winner for 2004 was Shawn Lane, a casino bartender whose creation, the Beau Aces (Bacardi Limon, orgeat syrup, splash of bitters, soda and Sprite) will now be featured on bar menus throughout the property. "I've got a high respect for bartenders," says George Goldhoff, Beau Rivage VP of food and beverage. "Some just rise to the top," Lane being one of them.

Restaurants Unlimited, Inc., (RUI), the Seattle-based multi-unit operator, also holds an annual staff cocktail contest among all its 30 restaurants in 19 markets across the country. Such collegial competitions help spark creativity and enthusiasm among their staff. Don Adams, vice president of creative development, notes that the contest is a "way to elevate the professionalism of bartenders internally, but also raise the profile of the company as well" with regard to quality cocktails.



Elixir, Aureole, NYC

ENGINEERING CHANGE

You could call Dushan Zaric a "cocktail engineer" if for no other reason than that he holds a masters degree in mechanical engineering; today, he's a co-owner of the new Employees Only restaurant and bar in New York City's West Village. Like many top bartenders, he artfully bridges the past with the present, creating drinks that have foundations in tradition but with a new creative touch.

"When was the golden age [of the cocktail?]" he asks, rhetorically. "From the late 1800s up to Prohibition, there was no vodka then, very few off-the-shelf mixers." He takes a tip from that do-it-yourself era and plays around with creating signature bar ingredients such as herbes de Provence dry vermouth and chai-infused sweet vermouth. The latter is used in his Mata Hari cocktail, blended with fresh pomegranate juice, brandy, simple

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syrup and a touch of lemon juice, garnished with a dry rose bud.

A significant new development for Zaric and his partners is the imminent opening of the American Bartending Institute, due later this spring. It will offer an intimate setting (10 students maximum) in which to gain a solid education in the art of the bar, not only the cocktail-making craft but also the requisite interpersonal skills to help equip bartenders with skills for the human side of the job.

Michael Vezzoni, bartender at the elegant Fairmont Olympic Hotel in Seattle, has a handle on contemporary cocktails, but Vezzoni looks back in time for inspiration as well. He recreated cocktail history with an interesting twist recently. The hotel kicked off celebration of its 80th year in December, which includ-

ed an “Eight Decades of Cocktails” list created by Vezzoni, with the Harvey Wallbanger in honor of the 1960s, the Singapore Sling for the 1920s and the ubiquitous Cosmopolitan for this decade.

Count back 80 years and you find yourself in the early years of prohibition. In honor of the hotel’s day-of anniversary celebration in early December, Vezzoni went so far as to put together a big batch of bathtub gin – with more than a dozen botanicals (including juniper, coriander, orange zest, cassia bark and caraway) – for the night’s Martinis. Sounds something like the infusions of today; history does love to repeat itself.

All mixologists are artists in their own right, but who better to understand the art of what’s possible in a cocktail glass than an artist. Ektoras Binikos has been mixing things up at Aureole in New York for six years, after other New York stints that include Chez Es Saada. His approach to creating cocktails takes into account a multi-sensory experience that satisfies first the eyes, then the nose and finally the palate, a crescendo as he calls it, up to that first sip.



Newton, Palisade, Restaurants Unlimited



Rose Cocktail, Aureole, NYC

THE ART OF BEVERAGES

When not bartending, Binikos is a mixed media artist, so it’s little wonder his cocktail creations also blend some unlikely cohorts. “I see making cocktails to be the same thing as art, the same creative process.” And he uses an experimental, hands-on process to come up with his distinct concoctions for Aureole customers.

One inspiration is Titian, an Italian High Renaissance painter who, Binikos explains, was known to use deep red colors in his paintings. In tribute to this master, Binikos created the deep ruby-hued Titian cocktail based on a pomegranate-merlot syrup to which he adds orange vodka, passion fruit purée, Grand Marnier and lime juice.

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Other cocktails are inspired by travels, as with The Moor, which he created following a trip to southern Spain. It uses Cognac infused with tea, roses, bergamot oil, clove and other aromatic spices, to which Binikos adds the caraway, cumin and fennel-flavored liqueur, kummel. He's always on the lookout for new ingredients to include in cocktail creations, be they regular bar fare or not. When chefs in the Aureole kitchen get an unusual herb or exotic fruit, they'll pass some along to Binikos, knowing he'll want to explore its cocktail possibilities.

In Portland, Oregon, Lucy Brennan is making her mark on the cocktail scene with side-by-side operations, Mint and 820 Lounge. She opened Mint, so named because of the herb's symbolism of hospitality in Greek mythology, in 2001. Its Latin/Caribbean menu was accompanied by ten cocktails, and her avocado Daiquiri became a sudden signature. The 820 Lounge opened alongside in 2003, a more serious nod to cocktail culture, with a serpentine bar as centerpiece and a menu of lighter, more casual fare. By now, the shared list of house cocktails numbers 40 selections, including the Ad-Lib (vodka muddled with cilantro and lemon-lime juice), the 816 (citrus vodka, triple sec, passion fruit purée with lemon-lime juice) and the Gin Cooler (gin, grapefruit juice and a splash of soda). "The fun comes in marrying the kitchen and the bar together," Brennan notes. "I like



Passion,
Aureole, NYC

to push the envelope but still remain true to the foundations of cocktail making." She makes just a few house vodka infusions, including one infused with beet that is used in her Ruby (shaken with lemon-lime juice).

An outgrowth of Brennan's success has been teaching. Last year she began holding monthly cocktail classes at Mint, in addition to private classes. She covers the basic building blocks of cocktail-making techniques, as well as exploring individual ingredient components with her students as they learn to make some of Brennan's signature drinks. "I want people to learn how easy it is to make cocktails at home, and also to be able, when they go out, to understand what it is that makes a cocktail great." She hopes to take her classes on the road in the near future, and another avenue for this educational penchant of Brennan's is publishing. This spring she's finishing her first cocktail book with Chronicle Books, due out next spring. As for the future? "I think the possibilities are endless," she says. "I have yet to see the end of the horizon where cocktails are concerned."

With each passing year, bartending is increasingly seen as a noble profession. Whether behind the bar, on the high seas, in print, or consulting with clients to brainstorm a new cocktail list, this troop is only part of a creative new generation of bar artists.

Cynthia Nims is the food editor of *Seattle magazine*.