

# Cheers

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## The Magic of Disney In a Glass

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# Specialty OF THE HOUSE

● Pepper Delirious, a Gimlet at S Bar in Los Angeles made with Aviation Gin and fresh lime, muddled mint and hand-pressed yellow bell pepper.

Creating signature drinks that make your establishment stand out requires planning, a sense of adventure and knowledge of both the guest and the venue.

By James Scarpa

## Memo to signature cocktail creators: better bring your "A" game.

With the use of premium spirits, fresh mixers and classical bartending techniques spreading, the ante has been raised for signature drinks, those libations that draw guests back time and again, attract attention and make powerful statements about the establishment serving them. Customers' expectations are higher, too, now that they've had a taste of quality cocktails. Those operators going for the pot with a signature drink had better be holding more than a pair of aces.

"If you're going to label it your signature drink, you better deliver," says David Commer, president of Commer Beverage Consulting in Carrollton, Texas.

Of similar mind is Tylor Field, vice president of wine and spirits for Morton's The Steakhouse, the 77-unit upscale steak chain that showcases Heavenly Mortinis. "If I see the word 'signature' on a drink, I expect to have an experience that is not typical."

So how do you conceptualize and execute winning signature cocktails? *Cheers* tapped some of the leading on-premise operators and consultants for insight.

While deft handiwork in the glass certainly matters, the only way to get there is through detailed planning.

For example, when Portland, Ore.-based mixologist and consultant Ryan Magarian tackled the signature cocktail list of S Bar, SBE Restaurant & Nightlife Group's swank new Philippe Starck-designed nightclub in Los Angeles, he was given several months to distill the restaurant's style and personality.

The renowned French designer's work was described with phrases such as "strangely beautiful," "whimsically precise" and "deliciously obtuse," Magarian says. Among the flourishes at the restaurant are mismatched chairs and table lamps hung up-



side down from the ceiling. Magarian also was directed to design for a clientele that was young, hip, moneyed and receptive to new ideas, but still preferred cocktails with some familiarity.

Using classics like the Gimlet and the Margarita as templates, Magarian plugged in unexpected ingredients and combinations that echo Starck's virtuosity. The result was a dozen exciting yet approachable signature S Bar cocktails.

Take the \$14 Pepper Delirious, a Gimlet made with Aviation Gin and fresh lime plus unusual touches such as muddled mint and hand-pressed yellow bell pepper. "The flavor profile, while totally unique, is layered on a classic and well-understood foundation," points out Magarian. The garnish, an oversized yellow bell pepper ring, completes the impression of Starckian style. "For me, a well thought-out signature cocktail program is part of a larger picture," says Magarian. "It works to reinforce the total ethos of the concept."

Similarly, before mixologist Bridget Albert tips a bottle in earnest on a signature cocktail assignment, she goes on a fact-finding mission. "I like to find out the history of the building, how it was named and as much information as I can get about the owners," says Albert, who is director of mixology at spirits distributor Southern Wine & Spirits of Illinois in Bolingbrook, Ill. "I like to know the colors of the décor and whether the chef has any kitchen ingredients that we can use out front. I even take a sample of the glassware home."

## DRINKS THAT TALK

The payoff for such forethought is a signature drink attuned to the venue's personality. An example is Sunday in the Park, a cocktail Albert created for The Garden Restaurant at the Art Institute of Chicago. The cocktail is inspired by Georges Seurat's 19th century painting of Parisians at leisure, one of the museum's masterpieces. Albert noted Seurat's pointillist style of painting with dots of color, which brought her an idea.

"I gave the drink a periwinkle sugar rim that looks like little dots, and I put a plastic monkey hanging off the glass," she reports, referring to a monkey on a leash in the painting. The color of the drink, which is made with Grey Goose La Poire vodka, fresh lemon juice, guava nectar and Champagne, also mirrors the painting's pastel tones. "It came out a beautiful light pink hue because the painting has very soft colors like that," Albert notes.

Equally true to its sources is the Tomato Consommé Martini, the summer signature of restaurant Kelly Liken in Vail, Colo. It reflects chef-owner Kelly Liken's penchant for seasonal, local ingredients. The drink, priced at \$14, is made with Colorado-grown heirloom tomatoes and CapRock Organic Vodka, which also is made in the state.

The "consommé" refers to the luscious juices that ripe tomatoes exude when left in a sieve overnight, Liken explains. It's her take on the piquant tomato preparation Italians call *acqua pazza*, or "crazy water." Combined with the vodka, shaken with ice and garnished with heirloom cherry tomatoes, "it's reminiscent of a Bloody Mary, without being thick and heavy," says Liken.

● Top: S Bar, SBE Restaurant & Nightlife Group's swank new Philippe Starck-designed nightspot in Los Angeles. Bottom: Ryan Magarian's Celery Superstar typifies the offbeat ethos of S Bar with its combination of Roberto Cavalli Vodka, fresh citrus, hand-crushed Serrano chili and freshly pressed celery juice.

## Five Steps TO A GREAT SIGNATURE COCKTAIL

1. Know the customer. Age, gender and spending power all play a role in shaping beverage preferences.
2. Know the establishment. Great signature cocktails often are inspired by a venue's theme, décor, physical structure, history or menu.
3. Know the right price. In one venue, it may be appropriate to price a signature cocktail moderately to serve as a traffic builder, while in another a high price tag might serve as a badge of exclusivity.
4. Know how to make it special. Top-notch spirits, fresh juices and garnishes, unique twists of flavor (perhaps with ingredients from the kitchen) and masterful mixing techniques are necessary to wow today's savvy cocktail crowd.
5. Know where to find an expert. Independent consultants, agencies and distributors have the mixology know-how to help craft a winning libation.

At the upscale restaurant Viand in Chicago, unusual house-made spirit and syrup infusions put a signature stamp on fall and winter cocktails. Mixologist Steve Budrow authored the Snap Frost, made with Ciroc grape-based vodka infused with fresh figs, grapes, pears and sugar cane, as well as the Spiced Steaming Bulleit, made with hot apple cider and Bulleit Bourbon infused with orange peel, cinnamon, cloves, honeycomb and apples. There's also the Spiced Chocolate, sporting a zesty syrup of bitter chocolate, cinnamon and cayenne, mixed with Van Gogh Dutch Chocolate Vodka and Godiva Original Chocolate Liqueur. Each is priced at \$11. "I'm interested in things that haven't been done before, versus a raspberry Cosmo," says Budrow.

The Kryptonite Rita, house signature and best-selling drink at the Fox & Hound casual restaurants, one of two concepts operated by 88-unit, Wichita, Kan.-based Fox & Hound Restaurant Group, capitalizes on an otherworldly green hue and a pop-culture reference.

The drink, a collaboration among Fox & Hound corporate staffers and Patrick Henry Creative Promotions of Stafford,



The green color and trendy ingredients give the Kryptonite Rita signature status at Fox & Hound locations.

Texas, stands out from the Margarita crowd. Its name and vivid color—the latter produced by its recipe of Jose Cuervo Especial tequila, Cointreau, Finest Call Margarita Mix and pineapple juice, plus a float of Midori—reference kryptonite, the fictional green element that weakens Superman. That connection gave the drink a bit of notoriety when it debuted at the same time in 2006 as the film "Superman Returns."

"When we brainstormed names, we wanted to appeal to our predominantly male demographic," says Erin Shipley, marketing director. Presented in a 24-ounce glass, she notes that it causes a "huge wow factor" in the dining room. The drink is priced at \$8.95.

### CLASSIC ORIGINALITY

At Morton's The Steakhouse, Heavenly Mortinis manage to be distinctively different, yet keep with the concept's classic Martini legacy, thanks to their premium-brand foundation and elegant presentations. The four offerings are designed "to drive trial into Morton's by being the newest and most exciting thing while holding on to our culture," says Field.

The drinks appeal to female guests and young adults in general who might overlook a textbook extra dry Martini. "The Martini is not just vodka or gin straight up anymore," notes Field. "A Cosmopolitan or a Lemon Drop fit into a Mortini."



## Inspiring Mixology

Check out the winner of the 2008 Cheers Best Signature Drink Award, Walt Disney World Resort's Blue "Glow-Tini," on page 38. For examples of signature drink recipes, including some mentioned in this article, see Drinks on page 14.

with fresh pineapple and mint; and the Heavenly Pomegranate, with Absolut Vodka, Monin Pomegranate and Funkin Passion Fruit purée.

Each is crowned with a "heavenly foam" that adds a second flavor impression to the drink. Francesco Lafranconi, director of mixology and spirits educator for Southern Wine & Spirits of America, devised the frothy garnish from pasteurized egg whites, Grand Mariner, passion fruit purée and sweet and sour, all whipped together in a CO<sub>2</sub>-charged whipped-cream dispenser. "We challenged him to make this great cultural idea over-the-top," says Field. "We tested it and our guests were blown away. Heavenly Mortoni's have become destination drinks."

At Eastern Standard Kitchen & Drinks in Boston, bar manager Jackson Cannon touts original creations like Au Provence, priced at \$10, a Gimlet of tarragon-infused simple syrup, fresh lime and Rain Organic Vodka. He also promotes drinks of outside origin "that we have defined as signatures because they've become synonymous with us and our guests."

Typifying the latter is the Whisky Smash, \$10, a classic cocktail of bourbon, sweet lemon and mint. "I learned that recipe from Dale DeGroff, and Audrey Saunders had it at Bemelmans Bar," says Cannon, citing a pair of New York celebrity mixologists. "It's a signature of ours—we do hundreds per week."

Another specialty, the Jack Rose, also \$10, made with applejack, lemon and house-made grenadine, entered Cannon's consciousness when his father read Hemingway's novel "The Sun Also Rises" to him as a child, he recalls. Many years later, after perfecting the grenadine and enlisting fellow Boston bartenders to test vintage recipes, he revived the drink, which had its heyday in the 1920s and '30s. "It's a personal signature, even though I didn't come up with it," says Cannon.

Pricing of signature drinks is an important issue not to be overlooked. "Generally, a signature drink can command a higher price," says Commer, "unless your strategy is to price it at entry level and sell a ton of it." In that case, a modestly priced signature may drive traffic and sales in the dining room as well as at the bar.

"Don't break the bank," advises Albert. "A signature drink should have a friendly price point so that customers can buy more than one and feel good about it—and want to come back to buy it again."

*James Scarpa is a Chicago-based freelance writer who frequently covers food and beverage topics.*



Top: The bar at Restaurant Kelly Liken, Vail, Colo. Bottom, from left: Crenshaw Cocktail (in stemmed glass), Blueberry Smash (in rocks glass), Cucumber-Lime Elxir (in highball glass).

The foursome are the Heavenly Cosmopolitan, made with Ketel One Citroen vodka, Grand Marnier, fresh lime and cranberry juice; the Heavenly Margarita with Jose Cuervo Especial tequila, Cointreau, Daily's Sweet & Sour and fresh lime juice; the Heavenly Palm Beacher, with an infusion of Skyy Vodka

# TWINKLE, TWINKLE, BIG BAR STAR



The cocktail  
revolution has brought  
us the celebrity bartender.  
Do we cringe or cheer?

By Jack Robertiello

Once upon a time, few bartenders were known outside the places where they labored. The job had its perks, of course, especially if you had the better shifts. But, in most cases it was unglamorous, consisting mainly of grunt work: stocking beer, cutting fruit, counting bottles, gunning sodas, pouring carafes of wine and mixing a few cocktails.

In the dark days until the mid-1990s, Martinis, Manhattans and Old-Fashioneds were the few classics a potential hire needed to know how to make. Depending on the decade, American drinkers mostly ordered Scotch and sodas, Screwdrivers, Sea Breezes, wine coolers or frozen Margaritas—not exactly challenging drinks, not exactly creative mixology.

A bartender's income largely depended on his or her charm and on the establishment's seasonality. The job paid little up front, often involved split shifts and long, smoke-filled nights and little professional advancement.

That was then. Today, a young person entering the bartending field finds a myriad of possibilities, not the least because now there are bar stars.

Today, the celebrity bartenders are everywhere. They're on television—Tobin Ellis on the Food Network's "Throwdown with Bobby Flay", or Francesco Lafranconi on "Martha Stewart," Tony Abou-Ganim and Bridget Albert on "Iron Chef." They're creating drinks for new spirit brands, such as Willy Shine and Aisha Sharp mixing for Depaz Rhum Agricole. They're consulting with cruise lines and restaurant chains, such as in the cases of Robert Plotkin and Ryan Magarian. They're quoted in newspaper and magazine articles—Audrey Saunders, Julie Reiner—and some, like Charlotte Voisey and Bobby "G" Gleason, are working as brand and supplier ambassadors. They're also training legions of bartenders across the country, as in the case of Alpert, Armando Rosario and others.

## GUIDED BY THE STARS

With these and other bartenders routinely appearing in major media and at wine and food events, the bartending celebrity suddenly is unavoidable, and is making the job of bartending suddenly very attractive.



JULIE REINER



TONY ABOU-GANIM



RYAN MAGARIAN

This development is great news for an industry in which employee recruitment and retention is a challenge. Yet, many observers wonder about the true effect of the ascent of the bar star on the drinks business and, ultimately, on the consumer.

It was one thing when bartenders experimented and used house-made ingredients. But, increasingly, today's cocktail enthusiasts are given pause when they hear of "cocktail geek" bars where were they to order a Cosmopolitan, they would be laughed back onto the street. Or of bartenders who deign to make only drinks with personal recipes and extra secret ingredients in lieu of serving up what a guest might actually desire.

Is the bar star good for the bar business? Will the bartender celebrities, like their chef counterparts, disappear from their actual establishments and becoming "bartenders" in name only? Or, is the emergence of the man and the woman from behind the bar an unalloyed positive?

"This is absolutely good for the business because it helps educate more young bartenders to a renewed profession," says Dale DeGroff, widely considered the best-known bartender in the U.S. DeGroff emerged as the pioneer bar star when he garnered celebrity status while tending bar at hotspots including the famed Rainbow Room in New York City during the 1980s and '90s.

"This is such an exciting time to be doing what we're doing," adds young bar star Charlotte Voisey, who cut her teeth in London's bar scene and is now a brand ambassador for Hendrick's Gin in the U.S. "There's no doubt that the opportunities are expanding every day."

The main reason there are so many opportunities—consultant, brand representative, media personality—is because bar and restaurant customers now are more sophisticated about spirits and cocktails. The craft has been raised to satisfy the demands of an increasingly educated consumer, and now there is a need for more differentiation, more education. From this

inevitably comes a crop of celebrities.

"I feel like I've been very lucky," says Tony Abou-Ganim, who consults for many spirit brands and appears at events such as the South Beach Food and Wine Festival. "As with chefs, back then, I started with little opportunity to be in control. I tried to be the very best bartender I could be, and that gave me more control. It's like I was the bartender in the right place and the right time with the right message and the right platform."

Since meeting DeGroff almost 15 years ago and subsequently working in New York City, San Francisco and Las Vegas, Abou-Ganim has put his focus on the craft of bartending. Today, he consults with major hospitality companies, including Hilton, which is featuring him in its latest drink promotion program, and created quite a buzz when he appeared on "Iron Chef."

"I certainly didn't have any glamorous aspirations when I started," he says, "and had no idea that there'd be such a thing as an 'Iron Chef' competition for bartenders."

#### WHY STARS SHINE SO BRIGHTLY

Publicist Laura Baddish ferried American bartenders to Europe for competitions for years while representing Bacardi. She says those leaps into international competition by bartenders like DeGroff and Abou-Ganim, where they mixed it up with career professional bartenders, was a turning point in the evolution of the American bartender from amateur to pro.

"The mixologists who have risen to the top—the Dales and the Tonys—have done so not only by re-establishing the reputation of the cocktail, but by educating the future of the business. They're looked up to," observes Baddish. Now that they and bartenders like them are showing up on television, she says, they're upgrading the reputation of the entire spirits business.

Gary Regan tended bar in New York City before he began writing about the craft he knows and loves in the early 1990s,



ARMANDO ROSARIO



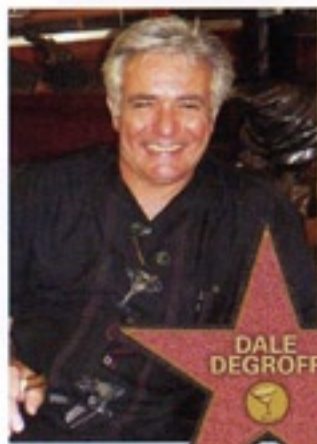
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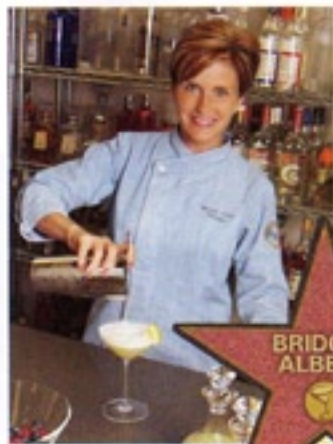
AUDREY SAUNDERS



CHARLOTTE VOISEY



DALE DEGROFF



BRIDGET ALBERT

thus gaining notoriety and becoming one of the rock stars of the cocktail revolution (he currently writes for the *San Francisco Chronicle*). He sees a parallel between the emergence of the bar star and other aspects of the food revolution.

"I see it exactly the same way as what happened for chefs in the '70s and '80s—the same phenomenon for the same reasons. Bartenders are developing styles of their own, creating drinks particular to themselves and their bars, and creating spaces for their skills."

Drink creation is an area where bar stars are now able to display their skills, whether for brands or for new operations. "I was shocked when I first came here and discovered that distributors would write the cocktail list for a new operation," says Voisey. "Distributors have lots of skills, but unless an individual has a background running a cocktail bar, they're probably just regurgitating drink recipes that won't necessarily help the bar."

Creating successful new drink menus, whether for one's own bar or on hire, helped make the London bar scene successful and also made the bartender as brand representative an attractive proposition for both the bartender and the brand, says Voisey.

The practice spread to the U.S. market, and today few spirit brands are introduced or repositioned without the advice and assistance of one of the many bartender-owned consultancies.

DeGroff points out that the many brand ambassadors out on the road—he and Abou-Ganim recently completed a multi-country tour on behalf of Finlandia Vodka—are making an impact on the cocktail quality and bartender education. "As each of these guys we train in turn trains their employees and opens their own joints," he notes, "the world of cocktails is getting better."

## SHOOTING STARS?

But even the bar stars themselves are concerned about the new bar world.

"At the end of the day, it's all about keeping the guest happy," says Audrey Saunders, partner in New York City's cocktail-centric The Pegu Club. "They call it hospitality for a reason. When you walk into my bar, it's not about me and what I like, it's about you."

A good bartender shouldn't say "No, I don't serve that at my bar."

If there is a down side, says DeGroff, it is younger bartenders expecting too much too soon. "You've got to be willing to put in the years. The young bartender has to realize that it is the relationships that he develops with the public that define the profession even more than the craft."

Voisey agrees. "There is no substitute for experience, and it takes five or more years working under many circumstances on a busy Friday night to figure out your trade." She also warns that the media spotlight might focus on mixologists who are the most attractive, rather than those grounded in the basics, which is unlikely to further professional standards.

Regan bemoans the insider nature of some of the changes in the industry. "There's a very small minority of bartenders who are getting so full of themselves, they're keeping recipes secret or refusing customers service. Some forgot that the job of the bartender is to make customers happy, not to make drinks."

Abou-Ganim warns that the rock star image has made the trade appear more glamorous than it is. "We should be paying more attention to the drinks than the image."

With better menus and drink programs should come better service standards, says Saunders, which is not necessarily the case at many places known for bar stars.

"At the end of the day it is the hospitality business, and there are a handful of people with ego problems who don't get what a good bar experience should be," she says.

Egos aside, bar stars elevate the profession and refine the experience. "Today, there are all different types of bars and bartenders, but as we elevate our knowledge about cocktails and spirits," stresses Abou-Ganim, "we offer a much better bar experience."

*Jack Robertiello has worked with or written about spirits, wine and beer for most of his adult life. He judges several spirits competitions, and has earned a Certificate of Excellence from the Beverage Alcohol Resources (BAR) training program, the spirits and mixology equivalent of a Master of Wine program. Robertiello was editor of Cheers for eight years.*