

Collectif 1806

VOLUME 04: TEXAS

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Find out why George Kaiho is "the guy with the ascot" and why the best martini needs to be stirred 50 times.

THE COUNTRY BOY: AN INTERVIEW WITH ELIAS POPE

Here is the latest, and easily the LARGEST, project from Pope's HG SPLY CO. Adjacent to the American Airlines Center, the 25,000 square-foot-space features six bars, an arcade, a commissary, and might as well be called "The Eighth Wonder Of The World."

QUEEN MARGARITA: LEANN BERRY

The ever popular, effervescent Dallas bartender with the spiky blonde hair is now running the program at the Canvas Hotel. We talked mezcal, margaritas, and Leann even spouted off about her favorite bartender pet peeves.

SHAKE, RATTLE, AND... ROSEY SULLIVAN

Rosey is the GM at Armoury DE, but we wanted to get down with her to talk about her most recent project: The Shake Up, the first all-women bartending competition that she launched in February 2019.

BLACK SWAN SALOON, WITH GABE SANCHEZ

The name of the bar comes from a popular philosophy book on the subject of randomness and there's a soul trapped in a drain in the backroom of the bar. Gabe can pour a pretty decent cocktail as well.

Austin

THE ROOSEVELT ROOM, WITH JUSTIN LAVENUE AND DENNIS GOBIS

Two months after opening, Lavenue won a prestigious bartender competition with his Poet's Muse cocktail. Word spread like wildfire through Austin and The Roosevelt Room has been a cocktail destination ever since—presumably the poetry scene in Austin also benefitted.

'TOBERFEST, AN INTERVIEW WITH TRAVIS TOBER

We sat down with Travis to find out why Nickel City, his friendly neighborhood cocktail bar, was named one of the best bars in the US by *Esquire* magazine. Apparently part of Nickel City's success can also be traced to a review in *Garden & Gun* magazine, but we still think he's joking that there's a magazine called *Garden & Gun*.

DRINK. WELL. WITH. JESSICA. SANDERS.

In this exclusive interview, Jessica shared some of her thoughts on the personal and professional tragedy that almost shuttered her bar two years ago, but don't worry, most of the interview is about happy fun times: her life, her career, and why she insists that Drink.Well. must have two damn periods in it.

PÉCHÉ'S LEGEND OF SIN

Péché was one of the first modern cocktail bars in Austin and thus anyone who is anybody in the Austin scene is somehow connected to the place. We spoke with owner Rob Pate, as well as three former employees—Justin Elliott, Robert Bjorn Taylor, and Anup Mistri—about why Péché has had such a lasting influence on the Austin scene.

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Any interview that begins with someone in a banana costume is always going to go good places.

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This interview has everything: professional baristas, homoerotic bar fights, trombones, SoulCycle meditation, and Jazzy Jumpers—Jazzy Jumpers? You know, it's that thing when hyperactive children perform jump rope routines during Laker halftime shows.

San Antonio

BOHANAN'S

It has all the iconic elements of a good steakhouse bar that gives it that Old World feel—like the best steakhouses of New York or Chicago—but Bohanan's remains quintessentially Texan.

ESQUIRE

The gritty Esquire Tavern, which has stood at the corner of Commerce and St. Mary's for 86 years, recently reinvented itself in 2011 as a modern cocktail destination with a world-renowned program featuring a menu that is firmly rooted in the region's indigenous flavors.



EMILY ARSENEAU

Publisher's Note

It's said that the margarita was invented by a Dallas socialite in 1948 and, let me tell you, its legacy is alive and well in Texas.

Tequila, Cointreau, fresh lime: a celebration for the senses.

Want it frozen? Spicy? Infused-tequila with beets? A dash of olive brine and served up? Texas has your bases covered.

The scope of availability concerning my favorite cocktail is reason enough alone to relocate (and no income taxes), but that's not how I ended up in Texas. It was because of reality TV. It's a long story. You should ask me about it sometime. To summarize, though: because of a reality TV tattoo show, my boyfriend and I moved from Portland, OR to Dallas, TX—a place I never imagined I would ever end up. It was culture shock to say the least. More so for my liberal, tattooed, Pacific Northwest boyfriend, but not as much for me.

I am from Louisiana. I'm no stranger to the ways of the South. But this unexpected move changed the trajectory of my life: I was embraced by the bartending community, I met lifelong friends, I was propelled on a career path I never could have obtained in Oregon, I bought a house, I got married—life was good. For the majority of my time in Texas, I was a portfolio brand ambassador for Remy-Cointreau USA via Collectif 1806 and traveled between Dallas, Austin, Houston, and San Antonio as I championed brands I still cherish and work with today. Heck, they are paying for this magazine (have your margaritas with Cointreau to say thanks to them for me, will ya?).

There are fabricated rivalries between the major Texas metroplexes, but as an outsider, I never felt the need to take sides. I deeply love all of these places, each so unique and special. Dallas is metropolitan and business oriented. Austin is creative and emotional. Houston has the best food, dives, and art. San Antonio celebrates history and heritage. Our motley crew road tripped through the state to connect with exemplary Texans that embody the collective spirit of their beverage communities. Much like their great state, these people are undeniably unique, defy archetypes, and have an inspiring sense of place.

I live in Brooklyn now, but my four-plus years tenure in Texas were some of the happiest memories of my life and speaking with all the professionals featured in this magazine reminded me why. Thank you to everyone featured for giving us your time and insight, we forever appreciate you. Thank you for the memories riddled with hugs, tears, playlists, Topos, tacos, and some of the best cocktails in America.



DAVID ROSS

Introduction

Hello and welcome to the fourth edition of *1806*. Unlike the three previous issues, each of which was dedicated to a particular city, this issue celebrates the cocktail scene in an entire state: Texas—well, not the entire state, that would be ridiculous given Texas' enormous size, but we visited four of its most beloved metropolises: Dallas, Austin, Houston, and San Antonio.

The crew collected for this road trip through Lone Star cocktail territory consisted of myself, Amy Florez (1806's Southern Regional Ambassador), Ryan Stutt (Canadian Executive Creative Director), and Emily Arseneau (Collectif 1806 Senior Manager). It was a fairly quick little trip, but we did get to enjoy a lot of the best things that Texas has to offer like barbeque, Tex-Mex cuisine, tacos, a chain of peculiar gas stations managed by beavers, and margaritas—lots of margaritas, all of them perfect and proper. If there's one thing that Texas and California (where I'm from) can agree on, it's that bad margaritas are against the law. Don't quote me on this, but I'm pretty sure it's law in both states? "You make bad margarita, you leave."

To compose this issue we arranged all of our interviews by city. Each city's section has its own unique color and design motifs, and you can easily reference where you're at by finding what city is highlighted in the city index that appears at the top of every left hand page. Here are the cities and their signature, Texas-inspired, color names:

DALLAS

CHICKEN
FRIED RED

AUSTIN

LONGHORN
HAZE

HOUSTON

ESTRANGE?
NO, ASTORANGE

SAN ANTONIO

RIVERBOTTOM
NIGHTMARE
BROWNE

My dream job has always been to be a color namer person (the official title for the position is "color marketing manager"), but I think I think I need to take some classes or something.

I would, however, like to say one thing about San Antonio's signature color name because it is both a nod to the river that winds through downtown, but also a reference to a band of ne'er-do-wells who appeared in *Emmet Otter's Jug Band Christmas* (directed by Muppets creator, Jim Henson) called, The Riverbottom Nightmare Band (RNB). They're not exactly Blind Lemon Jefferson or Lightnin' Hopkins, or anything, but their eponymous hit song, "Riverbottom Nightmare Band," became a part of our Texas road trip soundtrack—every road trip needs a stupid soundtrack—because RNB is a master of stupid lyrics:

*We take what we want, we do anything that we wish,
We got no respect for animal, birdy, or fish*

Genius.

Despite the fact that we were (for the most part) all very well-behaved, professional adults throughout our tour of Texas, the song did inspire us at times to adopt that peculiar, pirate-like swagger one is supposed to have on any road trip. "We take what we want!"

Except that we did not take what we want because everyone we met throughout our journey graciously gave us anything we wanted and more. Everyone we met was incredibly generous with their food, their time, their knowledge, and, most importantly, their cocktails. Before this trip it was rather odd to think of a cocktail scene in Texas (the image in my head was of a weathered old cowboy riding a longhorn steer while sipping a martini), but after our visit I can assure you that the cocktail scene is alive and well in Texas—and, sure'nuff, it has its own distinctly Texan flair.

Thank you to everyone involved in making this issue happen. We had a grand ole time and we're fixin' to return. Enjoy.



MIDNIGHT RAMBLER

**THE COCKTAIL IS MORE
THAN WHAT'S IN THE GLASS.
IT'S THE TOTALITY OF THE
EXPERIENCE.**

Midnight Rambler hit Dallas like a bolt of lightning in 2014 and has kept the city's cocktail scene electrified ever since. It wasn't the first craft cocktail bar in the city—that honor belongs to the now-closed Victor Tangos—but Christy Pope and Chad Solomon consulted on that bar in 2007 and after many years of advising bar owners around the country and abroad, when it was time to settle down and establish their own house, they returned to the home of JR Ewing, the Cowboys, and Texas Instruments (maker of the calculator with excessive buttons no one uses after graduation). Though neither is from Dallas, the couple behind Midnight Rambler returned because it made sense.

WORDS - BRER WYANT || PHOTOS - KATHY TRAN



THE SPACE OPENS TO REVEAL A SET OF ROOMS WITH WIDE BARREL ARCHES VENEERED IN STRIATED WOOD AND STUDDED WITH LIGHTS AT SUCH LOW BRILLIANCE THEY SEEM TO DUST THE AIR WITH GOLD.

"Dallas was the right market for us to do this project," Christy told me the day after a particularly long Saturday night. The closing party for this year's Dallas Art Fair, which usually takes place around Tony Tasset's famous "Eye" sculpture across the street from the Joule Hotel, beneath which the bar you're reading about hunkers, was cancelled due to the city's famously inconsistent early Spring weather. The art folk, already well aware of Midnight Rambler's achingly well balanced cocktails and the sonic richness of vinyl played through the custom designed speakers, stormed across the street to party at Christy and Chad's sleek bar. That the space was already in the swing of a Saturday night didn't hamper anyone's fun.

"The Dallas-ite isn't afraid of beauty and a sense of design," Christy said. "So this bar can be beautiful and designed, but also be casual and approachable. Midnight Rambler works in Dallas. People want fun, they want that New York mentality."

And New York they got. Like so many of the best bars in NYC, the entrance to Midnight Rambler is tucked away and unmarked. Accessible by a switchback staircase off the art-filled lobby of the Joule, guests make their way down a short hall with a slight turn that

maintains the suspense of discovery for a few moments longer. And then, finally, after rounding a corner, the space opens to reveal a set of rooms with wide barrel arches veneered in striated wood and studded with lights at such low brilliance they seem to dust the air with gold. Midnight Rambler is imbued with dark glamor.

Christy and Chad wanted to capture the essence of the original Max's Kansas City and Studio 54, even Dallas's own Starck Club that closed in the 1980s. One of the major design inspirations for the space is David Lynch's Paris bar, Silencio. Christy studied painting and studio art in Florida and Chad focused on cinematography while studying film in Austin. Lynch is not only a favorite director of the couple, but also a huge influence aesthetically and musically. On that same trip to France the couple experienced the headiness of the Cointreau distillery in Angers before flying to Marseilles and driving to Cannes where they happened upon the Silencio pop-up and watched the new *Twin Peaks* premier with the director in the audience. Already passionately educated with an innate ability to create a bar with soul, the couple realized the cosmos was directing them toward a feeling and a style that they readily indulged.





Given all this rigorous attention to perfecting the bar experience, it's surprising to find out neither Christy or Chad worked in the service industry until phenomenally good luck brought them into one of the most important bars in the United States at the dawn of the 21st century. Both moved to New York separately to pursue music and, in one of the only moments where you could use the word "cliché" in reference to either of them, they took jobs at bars. An indisputable fact: the best way to enjoy living in NYC, while also affording to live in the City, is by working in the service industry. Christy bartended at Milk & Honey, the first true craft bar in the country. Sasha Petraske's unwavering dedication to simple elegance, a social construct that encouraged graceful human interaction and purely classical cocktails brought life back into a dormant drinking culture. He instilled these values in his employees. After a few great gigs at other bars, and joining the family at Milk & Honey, Chad also earned a position at Pegu Club, run by the visionary Audrey Saunders. Without Audrey, gin may not be as ubiquitous a base spirit, rye whiskey might still be near-impossible to get outside the states where it's distilled, your cocktails would not have fresh juice, let alone all the botanical liqueurs and vermouths enhancing and balancing flavors, and forget about Luxardo cherries—you couldn't find a Luxardo cherry on a shelf anywhere in the US back then because Audrey was buying every single jar when she first opened Pegu Club.

Under the tutelage of Sasha, Audrey, and all the other bartenders in the community at the time, both Christy and Chad fell in love with cocktails. At this time, you had a very clearcut timbre of drinking establishments. First, respectable and grand places like Bar Hemingway in Paris, or The Rainbow Room in NYC. These are epic places that fit the bill for rarified

nights saturated with history and tradition, but becoming a regular at this type of place is unlikely. Second, there are clubs. Heading to the club on a Tuesday, or even a Friday, might not always be up your alley. Third, the suburban plethora of commercialized bars with no philosophy behind what goes in the glass are easy to find in strip malls off the freeway. These places have the added benefit of blooming onions or all-you-can-eat fried appetizers to accompany electric-colored, high-octane cocktails. And last, but probably most loved in many of our hearts, the dive bar. Dive bars have idiosyncrasies and individual philosophies that are amazing and long-standing, but tied to the larger tradition of cocktail they ain't. Up until the last day of 1999, when Milk & Honey opened, there really were no places that held a high regard for the product while also being a place you'd want to visit on a night to yourself, or with a date, or whenever a tippie would hit the spot. Why was the culture of the cocktail so stale?

"We have a complicated relationship with alcohol in this country," Chad responded when asked why the food revolution that changed the way chefs were cooking was so late to effect the bar. "Some bad behavior in the 19th century drove a demand for temperance. It created a fork in the road for cocktail history. From Prohibition, into Repeal during the Great Depression, then adopting preserved foods and drinks after the Second World War, that progress broke the chain of knowledge in the cocktail world and a lot of things weren't passed down. The Atomic Age, and the novelty of quick and easy food, took us farther off the road. By the time the kitchen started adapting to a new style of cooking based on fresh ingredients, chefs looked at bartenders as clowns. By the 1970s, drunkenness wasn't funny, alcoholism was acknowledged as a disease."

BY THE TIME THE KITCHEN STARTED ADAPTING TO A NEW STYLE OF COOKING BASED ON FRESH INGREDIENTS, CHEFS LOOKED AT BARTENDERS AS CLOWNS.

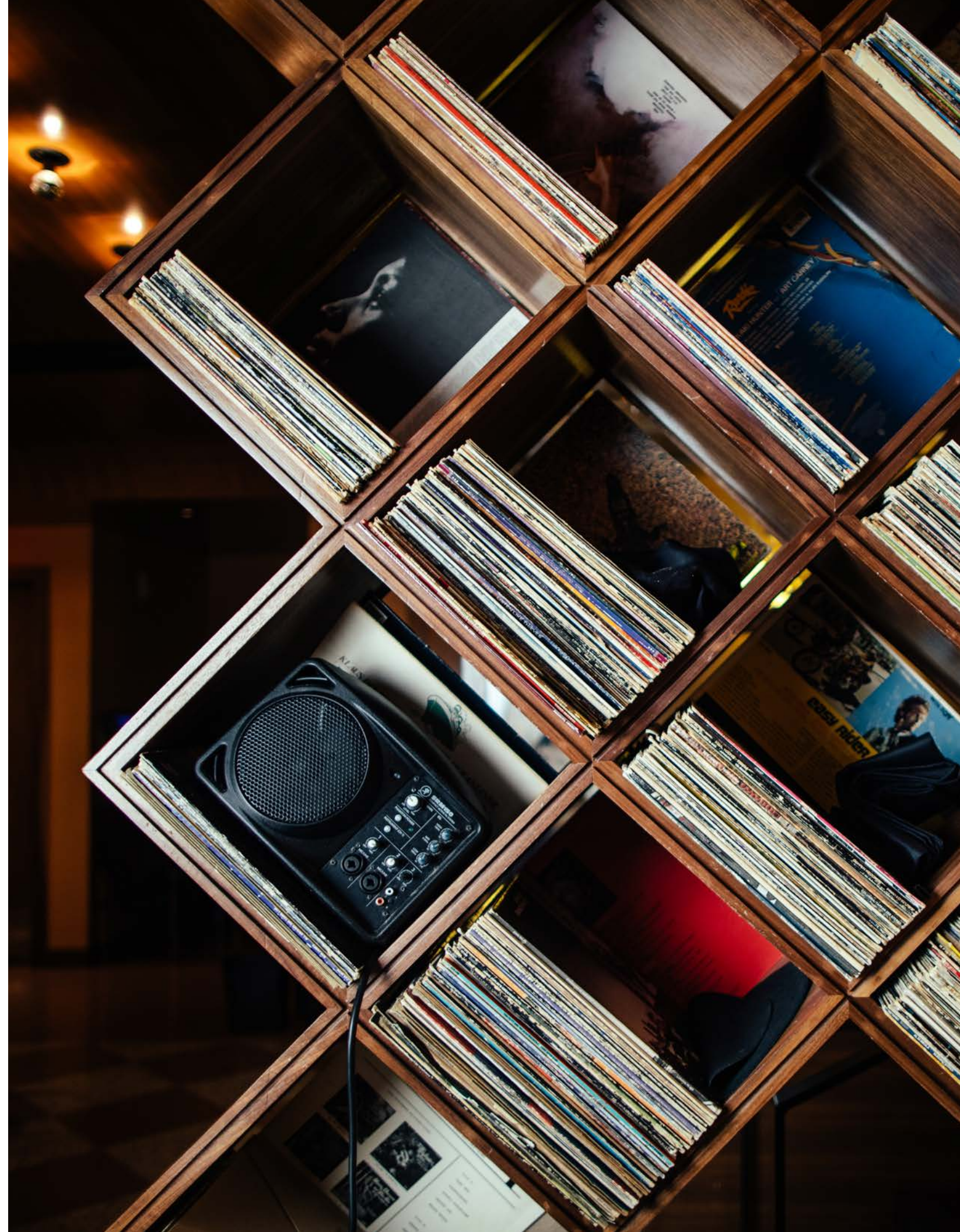
Chad is the ideal person to talk on this subject of lost and rediscovered knowledge. Due to a serious back issue while working at Pegu Club, emulsifying egg whites in a tumbler with a long wet shake was near impossible. He discovered the seemingly unheard of trick of dry shaking the ingredients to create the foam, then wet shaking with ice to chill the drink before straining. What became a revolutionary staple for the contemporary bar was actually commonplace in the 1950s, but had been lost to time. As cocktails became legitimate and novices got their hands on books by their forefather bartenders, the old techniques like house-made bitters, clarified fresh citrus juices, and labor-intensive orgeats replaced the commercialized and bottled ingredients everyone else was using. Cocktails became crafted again.

Christy noted that a change of public opinion also started the cocktail revolution of the past twenty years. "No one would tell their parents they wanted to be a bartender, that they were going to survive on a fly by night type of job. After Alice Waters championed fresh ingredients in California, and when that idea spread east, attitudes changed. Someone like Dale DeGroff at the Rainbow Room, who used the now simple idea of fresh juices in cocktails, became a public figure and professionalized the bartender. At that point, you could make a living and be proud of the craft."

At the center of all this is the literal cocktail. We know what a cocktail is by definition, but how do we define a cocktail philosophically? What are the emotional connections and memories behind choosing a dry gin martini over a sidecar? What makes a spirit in a glass so alluring?

"The cocktail is more than what's in the glass. It's the totality of the experience," Christy responded with enthusiasm. "Starting off, there is what's in the glass, the making of, the creation of, the conception behind the drink and how you bring that to life for people. Beyond the glass, it's the overall experience you provide your guests. The connection and interaction with the bartenders, the space, the sound, it's a five-sense experience. Cocktail is a lifestyle. With every cocktail we try to bring it fully alive and we want all those connections made all the way. In order to have a soulful experience in the bar you have to have a good relationship with your staff and continue to educate and push everyone who works for you to have a wide and deep knowledge of the craft."

"High-five, Christy," Chad said after a moment of contemplation. "That detail, of how we push this in the glass, how do we make it better, how do we execute the drink better, how do we increase volume, how do we make the guest experience better, it's all really just climbing the stairs. Here's the next step in our evolution and development. So, being in Dallas, and what Midnight Rambler has become, is a culmination of a ton of professional evolution and really learning about cocktails and learning the total product experience. Balance two things that don't always reconcile. Make the drinks more approachable and expose people to this quality of drinking. I want a guest who leaves after having a good time thinking about the great drinks they had. If someone is curious and asks, then we can have that conversation instead of pushing the technique and overt preachiness that can creep into craft cocktails. We don't need to do that here. We need to make this approachable, fun, and delicious. The rest will come."



WE DIDN'T CREATE THE ELASTIC FIRECRACKER, THE DRINK DEMANDED THE NAME.

Part of the fun, and possibly one way to get a conversation started, is the evocative names the couple comes up with for their cocktail menu. They each have "name banks" that grow with each interesting idea they come across, new music they listen to, or remember from years past. They don't necessarily create a drink based on the name, but they think of drinks as dioramas and let their imaginations run wild.

In one case, they tinkered with a bell pepper smash originally created for Victor Tangos. The riff on a margarita uses fresh red bell pepper juice, cumin, cayenne, tequila, mint, and Cointreau. The cocktail explodes in the mouth with a great width and reverberation on the palate. Thinking back on possible names, the title of the Dallas-based band Tripping Daisy's 1995 "I Am An Elastic Firecracker" was evidently the perfect moniker for the drink.

"We didn't create the Elastic Firecracker," Chad says, "the drink demanded the name."

Another cocktail, The Psychedelic Sound Of The Improved Bergamot Sour—an arresting name that should inspire any guest to ask for more information—actually started as a nod to The Thirteenth Floor Elevators, the first band to use "psychedelic" to describe music. The flavor profile, built around Cointreau and gin, including bergamot, Earl Grey, absinthe, and maraschino, is a liquid version of psychedelic music. The flavoring compounds don't stop at the traditional bar ingredients. Chad also adds high-pH mineral water from Texas and mineral saline to the build. The drink is out there and bizarre, yet delicious and definitely an improvement on a sour.

"It's not about just creating this crazy name," Christie adds. "There has to be a relational aspect, a conceptual line that goes from start to finish for why it works. Those kind of big, epic names work only when there's a strong story and relationship."

The couple is inextricably connected to every aspect of Midnight Rambler. After all the paperwork is done and they come out of the tasting lab in back, after they check in with staff and make sure everything is going smoothly, you'll find Christy on the turntables and Chad behind the bar. Chad mentioned climbing the stairs earlier, but they're not finding the next step in the dark. When these two got to the top of the stairs and saw there was still space to grow, they built the next stair. And the one after that, and after that, and kept climbing. The experience of working with Sasha and Audrey gave them better tools and more nuanced methods to keep ascending to where they are now. With this range of knowledge behind them, Christy and Chad found the right tenor to bring a beautifully curated and designed experience that was not only lacking in Dallas, but also lacking from the general populace.



— ⊗ —

JETTISON

— ⊗ —

ASCOTS, MARTINIS, AND GAS STATION TACOS

— ⊗ —

Before we visited Jettison, I said I was hungry. I hadn't eaten all day and the idea of drinking "the best martini in Texas" (thus spake Emily Arseneau) on an empty stomach sounded dangerous. Amy said something about gas station tacos.

"Gas station tacos?" I said. "That sounds very Texan. Sure."

I live in Los Angeles, practically on the border of Mexico, so we eat tacos all the time. I still haven't had any tacos in LA that are as good as the ones I once had in Mexico City, but outside of Mexico Los Angeles boasts some of the best tacos in the world. I know, because I've sampled tacos from around the world and the taco formed the basis for a theory that my wife and I have about food in general:

The further you get from a dish's source, the worse that dish becomes.

In regard to tacos, I have yet to be proven wrong. I've met a lot of people who think their city has a good taco joint, but they don't.

Texas, as you surely know, also borders Mexico, so, if our theory is correct, they should have good tacos. And they do. These particular tacos weren't the best ever, but if a fast food chain in a gas station can produce a respectable taco, then you can expect quality from the "real" taquerias. I sampled many, and they did not disappoint. Thank you Texas for making good tacos.

My belly satiated with gas station tacos, I was ready for a martini. We entered Jettison.





THE MARTINI, FOR EXAMPLE, IS A CLASSIC COCKTAIL. IT'S BEEN AROUND FOR LIKE 200 YEARS. SO, WHEN I WANTED TO LEARN HOW TO MAKE THE BEST MARTINI, I LEARN FROM JAPANESE.

Jettison is the brainchild of Sean Henry. He's the owner of Houndstooth Coffee (seven locations) and also a roasting company. When he opened the Sylvan Ave. location in the fall of 2016, he decided to use the small space adjacent to realize his dream of opening a bar. In the process of looking for a bartender, he met George Kaiho. George has been the bar manager ever since. George and I sat at a table in the quiet (closed) coffee shop to chat about Jettison.

"Sean had a pretty clear vision of what he wanted to do for his bar," George explained. "He wanted to feature mezcal and mezcal cocktails, sherry and sherry cocktails. And because it was adjacent to a coffee shop, he wanted cocktails with an essence of coffee rather than coffee with liquor in it. So based on Sean's views, I have created a menu and that's still the theme today."

George has a very precise and methodical way of speaking. He has a slight Japanese accent. He seems stoic at times, but it's more that he considers his words very carefully before he speaks, which is congruent with his bartending philosophy as I was to soon learn. All of these qualities just enhance his wry personality and make his dry sense of humor all the more delightful when it comes out.

"Was mezcal a spirit you were familiar with?" I asked.

"Personally, it was easy for me to get into mezcal because I love Scotch whisky," George explained. "I used to collect a lot of single malts. And I liked smoky, peaty, Scotch whiskies. So because I liked the smokier profile, it was easy for me to get into mezcal flavor-wise."

"In your scotch collection," I asked, "do you have any bottles worth bragging about?"

"I didn't have anything expensive because my main reason of collecting was I wanted to try out, and study, all the different single malts," George said.

I've studied scotch also, although when I was studying scotch, I was "studying" scotch, in quotes. Given what I know about George now, I'm fairly certain he was actually studying, as in acquiring knowledge, about the spirit known as scotch.

He also seems to have studied the martini because as Emily promised, it was delicious. There's not much to say about it other than: proper. As it's described on the menu, it's made with "Botanist Gin, [French vermouth], orange bitters, stirred 50 times to serve, lemon or olive garnish."

What I found interesting, of course, was: "stirred 50 times to serve." This made me wonder, why 50? Do you really stir it 50 times? Does it taste different at 49 stirs, or 51 stirs? It reminded me of the philosophical thought experiment known as "The Paradox Of The Heap": if you have a heap of grain and you remove one grain from the top, is it still a heap? Sure. But if you repeat the process enough times, at some point you will end up with only one grain remaining and a heap it is no more. At what point did the heap become not a heap?

I thought George would have enjoyed some ridiculous philosophical banter, but he skillfully, but politely, evaded my inquiry about the 50 stirs. He was all business when talking about his martini.

"To be honest," he replied, "it is not any different from any other martini. Anybody can buy a bottle of Botanist gin, a bottle of [French vermouth], orange bitters, and make it at home, but the ratios, the skill, the details—I think that's where it's at. A martini is such a simple drink, and I used to feel that a bar should not have a martini on the menu, but then, over time, my point of view changed. [Our martini] is more like a suggestion that this is what I think is the best, and I want everybody to try what I think is good. I mean, this is a Remy Cointreau magazine, and I use Botanist gin, but it wasn't because of the relationship, it's because I personally picked Botanist gin. I like the flavor profile, I like how it's balanced compared to other spirits. This is what I think tastes the best. The martini is a very personal drink. Everybody has their own ideal. If a customer orders a martini and they don't specify anything, then you've got to ask, gin or vodka? Stirred or shaken? Dirty or not dirty? Dry? Olives or twist? Or make it a gibson? So as a bartender, in my opinion, everybody should have their killer martini, and this is mine."

George's martini monologue was inspiring and for some reason made me think of brisket. Probably because we were in Texas? But a smoked brisket is much like a martini: it's incredibly simple, there are very few ingredients that go into it, yet there's this process that requires skill, practice, and time—and George has obviously done that.

It should be noted that George, despite the slight Japanese accent, is a native Texan. He was born in Dallas, but then grew up in Japan. After graduating high school there when he was 18 he returned to the US and attended college. I wondered how his Japanese background influences his bartending.

"I never worked at a bar in Japan because I came here at 18," he said, "but when I got into being a bartender, my resources were Japanese. The martini, for example, is a classic cocktail. It's been around for like 200 years. So, when I wanted to learn how to make the best martini, I learn from Japanese. Because bartenders in Japan were traditionally not as innovative, not as creative, and they stuck to the classics. Today is pretty different—in Tokyo especially—but if it's something like a martini, they will take a martini and they will try to perfect it. There's an 80-year-old bartender in Tokyo. His name

is Takao Mori. I've been to his bar [Mori Bar]. And he is famous for making the best martini in the world. Of course I want to try it, and then make it myself, taste it, and then evaluate. So yes, my Japanese background, I use it in learning the classics."

"I've never been to Japan," I said, "but I'm fascinated with the culture, and it seems that—especially with food—there's a reverence for quality ingredients, and for simplicity, and that every step is done properly and with care. I would imagine that translates into cocktails as well?"

"Yes," George replied, "Japanese food in general is ingredient driven and it's like a less-is-more kind of thing. If you can serve it as is, like raw, serve it as is, raw. If you need to do one thing, just do one thing and serve. It's minimal, simplest."

"Is there anything on the Jettison menu, or anything about Jettison in general, that you think is exemplary of Japanese culture or that you feel comes from your Japanese background?" I asked.

"Because it's a tiny bar," George said, "I can see what everybody's doing, so service is one thing I try to focus on. Everybody gets attention. Everybody gets a water. Everybody gets proper service. I'm not saying I'm perfect by any means, but that's one thing. Then procedure. This is a very personal thing. As a customer coming up, you probably won't see it, but the procedure of building, making the drinks, proper techniques, is important. Another small thing is if you order something, and you're staying at the bar, I will try my best to make it in front of you. Or bring the bottles in front of you so you're looking at it. And then I'll make it, give it to you, and I'll take away the bottles. That's something that in Dallas I don't really see."

"No, that's not very common," I said, "but it reminds me of a good sushi restaurant where the chef wants you to see what he's making for you."

"One thing that Sean [the owner] and I have in mind here," George continued, "is to have the least amount of things as possible on the bar counter. So usually if you go to a bar there'll be shakers, or mixing glasses, or garnishes, or bitter bottles—there are things on the bar, lots of things. We try our best to put everything away and pack it under. So then there are the least possible things between you and the customer—make everything clean."





Jettison is indeed a very neat and tidy space. While there's a neon sign in the corner, there's a lot of muted tones, wood surfaces, and natural elements and it feels very much like a sushi bar in some ways. That meticulous environment is continued in George's dapper attire.

"Well you should lose the ascot then," I said, "because that ascot is an extra thing between you and I."

"Well you got to pay extra for that," George joked dryly.

"Do you wear an ascot every night?"

"I try to."

"Do you own a lot of them? Do you have an ascot collection?"

"Like five or six, yeah," George said. "I used to work at a five-star Japanese restaurant downtown called Tei-An. The owner—he's been doing this for like 20 years—he's the one that originally was like, 'You. I brought you an ascot. You wear this.' So it was kind of forced on me and at first I was like, what the hell is this? But you get used to it."

"I like it. I think it looks very natural on you."

"But, as a bartender," George continued, "it's about selling yourself, too. And so you want something that people memorize about you. So if you're a big guy that's one thing, if you're beautiful, blonde, whatever, that's a thing. But if you don't really have any identifiers like that, then you need to build that in. It's like branding yourself. The owner of the restaurant I worked at, he saw that. The bartender has to be The Guy With The Glasses, or, The Guy With The Beard, or—"

"The Guy With The Ascot."

"So I'm The Guy With The Ascot," George said proudly.

I'm very fond of the name of the bar—Jettison—and the font they used is lovely. It's perfect. As I was sipping my martini, Sean explained that it was an original font created by a designer friend named, John Schubert. The font treatment just fits the word "jettison" so perfectly. And the little star is, dare I say, adorable. But while I got the background behind the font, I didn't get the story of why they named the bar Jettison?

"So there's a short story and a long story," George began. "The short story is that there was a bar in Austin—that is no longer—that Sean used to go to. It was the bar that inspired Sean and got him interested in cocktails. There was one bartender and he had a tattoo that said 'Jettison.' So that's the short story. Long story: Jettison means to throw, toss something, or throw away something in order for you to keep going. It can be a Navy term or a spaceship term—jettison away the fuel tank. So this is a semi-hidden bar and it's not in a prime neighborhood, and it's pretty quiet. So Sean wants people to jettison away their problems, issues, work, whatever, when they come here. Just sit, enjoy the moment that you're here, enjoy the cocktails and music, maybe conversation, maybe meet new people. And then when you leave, it'll keep you going."

I had a lot to keep me going when I left Jettison: a belly full of gas station tacos and a couple of the best martinis I've ever had—stirred 50 times, you'll remember—made by a talented Japanese man wearing an ascot in a bar behind a coffee shop in Dallas, Texas. It's a memory I won't soon forget—or should I say, "Won't soon jettison?"



THE COUNTRY BOY

AN INTERVIEW WITH ELIAS POPE

Elias Pope is one of the best-known and most respected members of the Dallas food and beverage scene. Founder of 80/20 Hospitality and owner of the hugely successful HG SPLY CO., Pope has set his sights on his biggest project yet: Hero. When we arrived at the massive space it hadn't even officially opened yet and was a beehive of construction, training, and prep.

I also happen to be old friends with Elias, so we thought it might be fun if I conducted the interview. I, however, am neither a writer nor a journalist and have never conducted an interview before. That's probably why it felt so peculiar to begin the interview asking awkward questions that I already knew the answers to:

Emily Arseneau: What's your name?

Elias Pope: Elias Pope.

Where you from?

Greenville, Texas.

Where's that?

East of here.

Our readers are not going to know what that means.

It's 45 minutes east of Dallas.

Okay. Cool.

I think so.

We had this illuminating conversation in Hero's VIP "Players Club" located on the second floor of the 25,000 square-foot venue. Hero may as well be called "The Eighth Wonder Of The World" because it is an enormous space designed to accommodate fans attending events at the adjacent American Airlines Center, downtown Dallas' major concert venue as well as home to the Dallas Spurs and Dallas Stars. Inside Hero, you'll find (or try to find) six bars, multiple viewing rooms, a VIP lounge, an arcade, a commissary, indoor/outdoor seating that seamlessly weaves in and out of each other—I think it even has its own microclimate?—and it's all bathed in a warm, but funky, 70s design aesthetic. It is unabashedly Texan: bigger, better, and oh-so assertive.

Why take on such a massive challenge?

I don't know why I'm doing this. [Pause.] Actually I know why I'm doing this. I have been coming to Victory Park [site of the AA Center] since it was built and it has, unfortunately, never evolved into the space of revelry and excitement as originally intended. Half of it has been vacant and disappointing for so long. I never would have thought to put a shop in this location until I was approached by Tristan Simon. When Tristan calls you up to hang out, you go hang out. He was like, "Let's go see this 25,000-square-foot thing with Brooke Humphries [fellow Dallas restaurateur]." We walked it and the one thing that I like to do when we walk spaces, is visualize context of flow—how you walk through it, and why they built it that way. When we walked through this space, you could easily see how to conjoin the two spaces to make it super fun. And you could also see all of the bad choices made in the original design. It was never created to serve people like me who were coming to catch a game or enjoy a concert. We don't have a downtown sporting events place in Dallas except for American Airlines Center. We don't have that baseball team downtown. We don't have the football. Everything's out in Arlington and that's a really far drive for us to go to watch a game and then come all the way back. This is our spot to come hang out all day long, have some fun, have some drinks, see something cool. So as we walked through, I knew exactly how I wanted to connect the spaces and open up all of the outside walls to the Plaza. Then Tristan says, "Hey, I need you to do a 25,000 square foot restaurant and bar in a super challenging location, sign a huge lease, spend all of the money you have, and make it happen." I was like, "Well, man, that sounds super fun." So I signed it and then I threw up.

You said, you could "see" around three times. You're walking the space, you could see this, and you could see that, but I don't think most people can see that. How do you make the first tangible step when you see something no one else does?

That's a good question.

That's right.

Yes. And you're the best interviewer I've ever been interviewed by.

Yeah, right.

Elias goes on to explain that he initially struggles to see the end product. He said, "There is no awareness of the vision until it comes to fruition," which I hardly believe after all of his successful restaurants, but sure.

Elias often refers to himself as a "country boy," but I'm not convinced the archetype does him justice. True, he grew up in the country, on a ranch, where he rode horses, milked cows before football practice, and all that.

"My dad was a builder," Elias explained. "If something broke on the ranch, he would take scrap metal and build a fix. When I was a kid I helped him out as much as I could. I was always surrounded by a father with the capacity to take raw material and create something that was usable and defined with intent. I didn't know then how much of an impact he made on my creative side. He worked constantly, teaching me the value of hard work. When we hung out, it was working on something. His passion for hard work has always been inspiring. He taught me how to creatively build things that solved problems, and I was taught how to be a man by my mom and grandma."

So, country boy, sure, but a deeply curious and ambitious one. This particular country boy loves to admit how much he still doesn't know and loves to try new things (unless it's spicy food). He tells me stories about his relatives who were pastors, his road trips as a kid with his mom, aunts, grandma—how his grandma got kicked out of SMU for being a badass (she snuck out with a bunch of dudes to go ice skating in 1942), and how she was a pianist for the Dallas Symphony Orchestra.

You do seem to collect powerful women in your life. You have tons of women in leadership at all of your units. I guess your grandma is part of the reason? I'll thank her next time I see her. You should. My grandmother was by far one of the most influential people that you could ever meet. She's passionate and outgoing. When you talk about living a life of self-awareness, that's her. She said what she thought, she did what she wanted, and she's just a great lady. Women are powerful. You can't be surrounded by a group of men and come to the same conclusion without having the opposite sex vernacular within the conversation. I don't think it's fair for a bunch of dudes to make decisions that affect both sexes in any format. My mom and grandma taught me the power of femininity and how to be a responsible male leader. Their strength and genuine care continue to inspire me daily.



Elias is my only close friend that has any kind of faith. We talk about it every once in a while, but finding out that he has relatives that were pastors, etc. on both sides of his family really informs his, shall we say, evangelical way of leading. He has an ability to rally people behind an idea or a vision in a way we should all be very jealous of. But he points out that, while his upbringing was traditional, his parents always placed an emphasis on figuring out things your own way.

"They would say, 'Go figure it out. Challenge the modern religious thought process and find your faith because faith is hard.' They always encouraged me to listen and learn from all cultures and religions, never judging others, always finding common ground. This helped to solidify my faith. Plus, when Dr. Dre's *Chronic 2* dropped, my mom thought it was dope and listened to it with me, no judgment. That was a big deal for a kid in a private Christian school."

Elias' mom thinks Dr. Dre is dope.

Okay, some context: I met Elias in 2012 when I was working at this restaurant called The Porch on Henderson Ave. in Dallas, TX. It was that awkward time between lunch and dinner service and this guy comes in and starts drinking white wine while very clearly working feverishly on something on his laptop. I couldn't help but ask in between cleaning bottles something like, "What's up? What are you working on?"

Boom. Floodgates open.

He had just quit his big-time corporate job the day before to go start his own business and he was ready to tell me all about it. So he runs me

through the whole concept of what would ultimately be his first of many properties, HG SPLY CO: it's energizing food, it will have a massive rooftop with a view of the Dallas skyline, upscale casual, the design will be inspired by a bar in Portland called Spirit Of 77—

"Wait. WHAT?" I said. "No way. I just moved here from Portland and that's the job I left to move here. I bartended at Spirit."

The universe was sending us a message and Elias is big on signs and I'm big on coincidences (tomato, tomahto). Point being, it seems like we were destined to be pals. I ultimately ended up consulting with Elias to set up his first beverage program and cocktail menu (and mine), which was a thrilling experience. We have worked together over the years and ended up on different, but complementary, sides of hospitality: he in development and operations, I in Supplier Land. And here we are seven years later in Hero, his largest project to date. It's clear this place will be a success, invigorating people to gather, revel, and cheer.

There was, however, a deeply pivotal, yet unfortunate, event in Elias' history that bears mention. Towards the end of Elias' corporate career, before we met, before HG, before Hero, before all of it, Elias' wife Amy had a major stroke. They were both 27 at the time and had a small child. As he explains it, "You know, we got married, we had our first kid, I was restaurant manager, I was working my way up, I was living the normal American life, and then tragedy happens: ICU for a month, lived at Baylor [University Medical Center] downtown. My story is not complete without the reality of that changing my life because it was the first time I had to be a man."

The next eighteen months were an amalgamation of life and death decisions, surgeries, and of course, debt. Lots of it. Thankfully, his wife Amy has since recovered, but it was a frightening and trying period for a young family. A few years after the incident, the company Elias worked for noticed he had stopped believing in the vision, making him a bad employee.

"I needed to get out of their way," Elias realized, "so one of my mentors, who had taken over as my boss, took me to Starbucks, sat me down, gave me a 45-day notice, and said, 'In 45 days, if you don't figure out how to buy in, then I have to demote you and you're going to go be the assistant general manager in South Arlington.' I said, 'You know I'm not going to do that. I'll gladly do whatever to take care of my family, but, man, it's time. Let's just call this my 45-day notice.' He graciously agreed and allowed me 45 days to figure it out."

Day 1: Starts business plan for a burger joint.

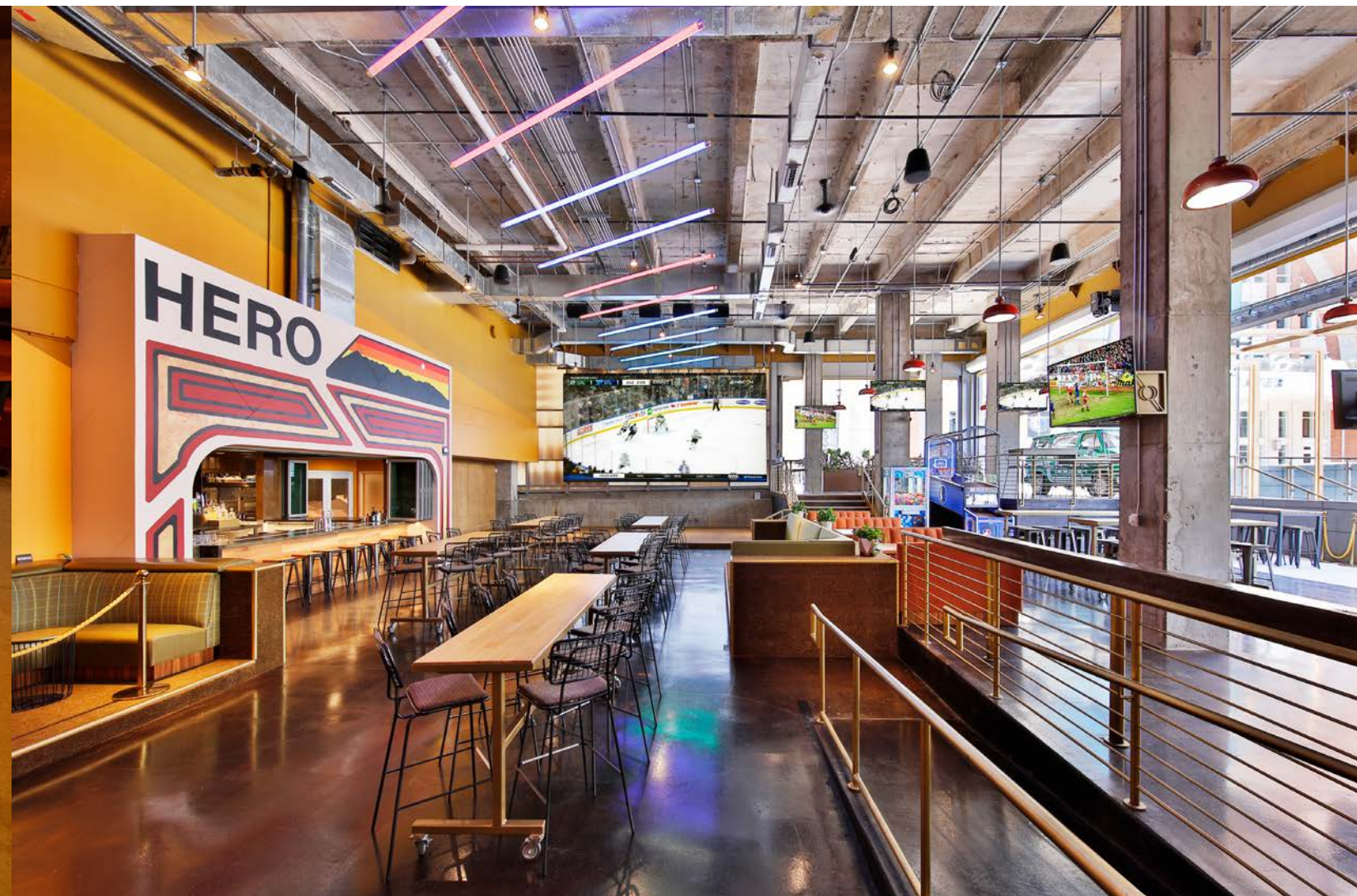
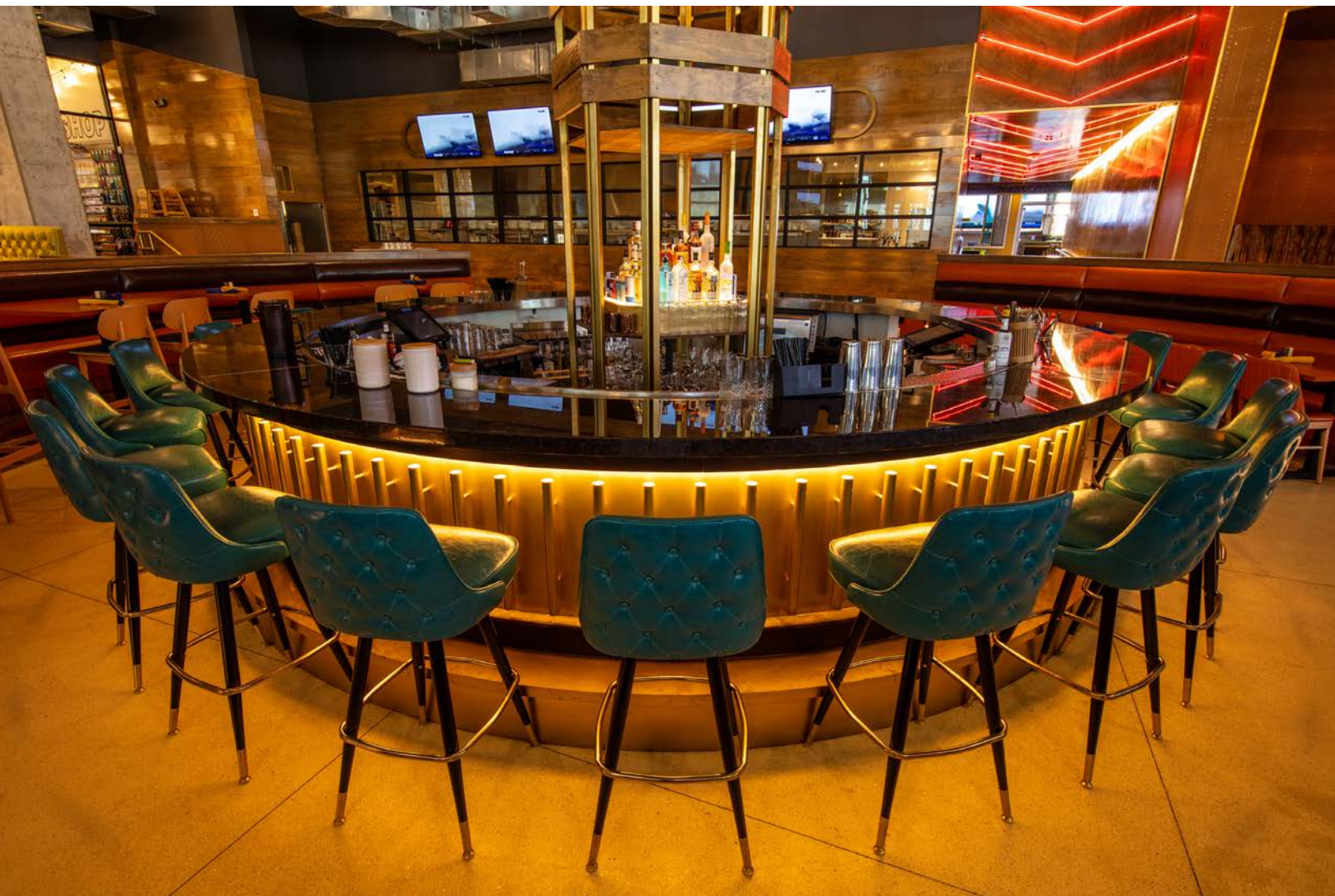
Day 16: Presents business plan. Plan is rejected.

Day 17: Begins new plan.

Day 45: Picks up keys to what would become HG SPLY CO.

Day 46: Sits at bar and is served white wine by bartender (me).

**MY STORY IS NOT COMPLETE
WITHOUT THE REALITY OF
THAT CHANGING MY LIFE
BECAUSE IT WAS THE FIRST
TIME I HAD TO BE A MAN.**





Six restaurants, one venue, five kids, and many moons later, it's safe to say Elias is providing for his family, not to mention a small army of employees. And now here we are at Hero, which I imagine looks like the inside of Michael Jordan's house. There is even a private tunnel from the American Airlines Center straight to Hero's "Player's Room," a sanctuary for professional athletes to enjoy some postgame food and drinks with zero hassle.

What do they drink?

They drink Remy.

Yes. My man. I did see the billboard.

No, they drink Remy.

Well, we can't save the world* without it, so...

As with many things, Elias' success has had a ripple effect on people's lives, including my own. He brought me with him and, in the process, convinced me I was an expert and believed in my future greatness. Which, yes, is so cliché it makes me laugh, but when someone like Elias has that kind of faith in you, you can't help but let a little part of yourself believe. He makes me, and others, feel certain that if you set goals, constantly repeat them to yourself, they become your truth, and you find yourself making decisions accordingly. He is proud to be Texan, proud to be from rural Texas, and proud to have been a major part of revitalizing Dallas' Lower Greenville neighborhood. And I am proud to have a friend like that.

* "Saving the world" is when one finds oneself in a very deep conversation about a complex topic that you may or may not know anything about, but still have LOTS of opinions on. I am excellent at these types of conversations.

QUEEN MARGARITA

LEANN BERRY



WORDS - DAVID ROSS || PHOTOS - SHANNON FAULK

Leann Berry, also known as Queen Margarita in Dallas, has a reputation for being a vivacious, effervescent bartender with a seemingly bottomless supply of positive energy. After sitting down and chatting with her at the Joule Hotel, I can say her reputation is not undeserved, but Leann did spout off a little about one of my favorite subjects: bartender pet peeves.

You seem like someone who was born to be a bartender.

My mom used to tease me because when I was little I would be in the bathtub with all these little cups and I would mix stuff, the shampoos and stuff, and she said, "You started this as a child, the mixing things. You wouldn't get out of the tub!"

So you were born to be a bartender. How did you become Queen Margarita?

At Ciudad, I started playing with lots of different herbs, and different flavors of fruits, and started making margaritas, and that's where I got my name. The first one that I did there was called, The Nectar Of The Gods. It was kind of the big one there—they did a thing back then, they called us "bar chefs." Remember that time they did that? That soon went away.

Mixologist. Liquid chef. I've heard a bunch of them.

Yeah, and so that was one of my first star awards. So, I kind of became known as the tequila person. I like to do other spirits as well, but that stuck with me.

What inspired you in the beginning to start using herbs and infusions and all this?

I was inspired by my chef at the time, Joanne Bondy, and she was the chef at Ciudad. She now owns Stocks & Bondy here in Dallas. She's an amazing lady. We would just talk about the food and I started designing drinks that would go with the food because that's where I first started doing dinners. They weren't really being done that much then, where we'd do a dinner and I would design the drink that would pair with it. That's the first time ever—this was in 2002—that I worked with a mezcal and that was rarely around then. People were like, "Eh. I don't know about that?" But it turned out really well. It was a very interesting challenge, but now I love playing with mezcals.

Who doesn't love playing with mezcals?

Oh my gosh, I think I saw god that night with all the mezcal we drank. But yeah, so that's kind of where I started honing in on that. Then we opened Komali. Misty [Couch] was with me. My first month she said, "Enter the Cointreau contest. Dale Degroff is one of the judges." I'm like, okay. I mean, I hadn't been at a place in three years, but I entered and freaking won it with the prickly pear margarita—that was during our first month at Komali.

Congratulations, that put you on the map. So tell me about Canvas.

I got a phone call from Canvas and they said, "Can we talk to you? We miss your face down here in south side." I thought they were just going to want me to bartend or something, but they wanted me to run the program and everything. And I was like, I've never been in a hotel. They said, "Just do what you do, that's what we want." So I put three drinks on the menu immediately. Then I waited a little bit, and I put six more drinks upstairs and changed it all up upstairs. I was worried about whether they could execute it because these bartenders were turn and burn—green tea shots, [cinnamon whiskey], all that—but, they're doing great. I made it where it's fresh ingredients, but not a million of them, so they can be executed quickly. So, that's how that started.

Are you behind the bar?

Yes. I said, people want to see me behind a bar and I want to be behind a bar. So I'm behind a bar at least four times a week. And other times I'm back and forth behind all of them.

I notice some bartenders move more than others. You seem

like a mover?

Yeah, I move a lot. People tease me, like, "You're always moving." I'm like, yep, that's how I am. I'm always looking. You've always got to be looking out of both your eyes all the time. And this is another thing that makes me crazy because we'll be busy upstairs on a weekend night and [the bartenders] are like this: [imitates bartender with head down]. I'm like, just raise your head and say, "Hey guys, I'll be right with you." And that makes the people who are five-people-deep okay with it then, because they see you saying hi to them. That's all it takes. It really is.

What other bartending pet peeves do you have?

One of my biggest pet peeves—and they all know this, but somebody keeps changing it up just to make me mad—I want all my spouts to look uniform and go the same way. I just hate walking into a restaurant or bar and the spouts are everywhere. Oh my gosh, that makes me crazy.

Do they have to point a particular direction or just all the same?

To the left. And I'm a lefty, so I'm giving them that. I've got this new girl, and I'm seriously like, oh my god, who keeps doing this? And she goes, "Oh, I guess that's me?" I said what do you not get about going to the left? It's not that hard.

She's just messing with you.

She probably is. She better watch it.

If I knew that about you, I'd put them to the right.

Oh yeah, people do that to me because they know that. And I'll come in and I'll spot it immediately. Yeah, that's my one pet peeve. I also hate it when a bartender's just like, "What can I getcha?" I need somebody with a little personality.

What can I get you?

[Assumes gruff voice] "Waddya need? Hey!"

Oh. Right. My father is the customer version of that. He always says, "Yeah, gimme a..." Gimme a? No "please" or anything. Total jerk.

Y'all are perfect together.

Speaking of stupid men, we should talk about women's issues. Women are finally starting to not only be accepted, but are experiencing some success. How does that issue play out from your perspective?

Well, back when I first started out, there was me, and maybe a couple more [women], and it was very rare. The first time I ever saw anybody in a competition besides me was Emily [Arseneau]. I went up to her immediately and I said, "Hi, welcome." But I'm asked this in interviews a lot: was I treated badly? I really never was. Never by the people around my age. The younger kids that came in? They wanted to be cocky, but they were cocky anyway, and that usually works itself out. But I think now we're seeing more ladies that are coming in, and grooving, and doing well, and it makes me really happy. I think we're feeling more empowered and doing our thing. But I think it does still surprise people sometimes when they're like, "So, you're running the bar?" Yep. That's me. They'll watch you for a little bit and then be like, "Okay, now I get it."

Well, I hope more people start "getting it," and I hope they get to experience what you're doing because you're excellent. We're so happy to have you in the mag, thank you.

Aw, you're so sweet. Thank you.

SHAKE, RATTLE, AND...



ROSEY SULLIVAN

WORDS - BRER WYANT || PHOTOS - KATHY TRAN

Upon reflection, some of us know how we ended up the way we are. Others of us, like the ever affable Rosey Sullivan, General Manager of Armoury DE in the wildly popular Deep Ellum neighborhood of Dallas, just do things, end up places, and accomplish awesome things on a bit of a rambling path. While figuring out dodgy audio wiring, double checking orders, and finding time to re-stain the patio furniture herself, she also created and hosted the all-women bartending competition, The Shake Up, in February 2019.

Rosey grew up in Florida and studied history and Irish language at NYU before moving to Dallas four years ago. In spite of her academic accomplishments—with turns in teaching, working in hospitality, and even renting jet skis to tourists—Rosey knew she could move anywhere and make money as a bartender. Her background in speed bartending in Miami and Gainesville didn't prepare her for the finer nuances of craft and she didn't know if that was necessarily her calling. Looking for a bit of extra money while working at another bar in the city, she interviewed at Armoury and was immediately smitten with the indefinable bonhomie of the space. Once hired, the owners exposed her to a wide range of spirits and, without a soda gun at hand, she soon grew comfortable diving into the heady world of spirits.

"At first, it was just learning the basic classic templates," she says. Her large framed glasses and tussle of brown curls are as recognizable around town as her flaming red scooter. "Once I had that down, I moved into the smaller details surrounding cocktails. Now, I'm really getting into different spirit groups and learning more about them. There are infinite things to learn. I'm working on my olfactory knowledge now. My lead bartender and I went to a bartending intensive and Dave Wondrich was there. He talked about the lesser known bartenders who aren't in all the books and that was really interesting."

Toward the end of 2018, Rosey was invited to be part of a bartending competition spanning three months at a Dallas bar known for raucous theme parties and superb cocktails.

"I felt honored to be part of it. I'm not a well-known bartender, per se—or I wasn't at the time."

She soon realized, however, that there were just two women on the bill with twelve male bartenders considered the best in the city. This meant only one woman would advance to the next round.

"I wasn't mad or angry. I had a great time, but there was a little ding in my head. You can look at it two ways. The optimist sees this as a guarantee that a woman will advance to the next round. The other side, though, is that this guarantees there aren't two women moving on in the competition. It portrayed the idea that two women have to compete against each other because they won't win against a man," Rosey said, serious yet comfortable and ever-relaxed. "This made me see the absence of representation of capable women in our industry. These competitions help bartenders showcase their talents and become known, but women are under represented, if represented at all. I realized that I was in the position to be the person to showcase women. I'm the General Manager of a well regarded bar, my bar manager is an amazing bartender, I have a great floor manager, and we're all women."

"I'm not the type of person to put on a cocktail competition. I'm

not one to be in the limelight, I like running things behind the scenes. But... if anyone could do it, it was me. It wasn't about 'poor us.' It was about creating something that showcases talented women that are scattered all over the area that don't have a community."

Rosey reached out to some brand friends, including Amy Florez of Remy-Cointreau, and established women bartenders in Dallas, requesting suggestions for new and unrecognized women bartenders that might be interested in competing. Within months, Rosey created the scoring rubric, designed the marketing collateral, introduced teammates, and had a schedule for the competition that started in February 2019, every Monday night for five weeks. The competition started off with a daiquiri blind tasting from each team followed by speed and knowledge rounds. The nights were jovial with all the industry heavy hitters cheering on the women. While the contestants were awarded cash prizes, proceeds from the event were donated to various women's charities in Texas including, the Texas Women's Foundation, one of the largest women's foundations in the world. Cocktail standouts included daiquiris based on Mount Gay Rum, one featuring apricot liqueur and the other spiced hibiscus syrup; as well as the cleverly named, What Women Want... To Drink, made with The Botanist gin, mango puree, and banana-pineapple liqueur; and A Few Good (Wo)men, a Bruichladdich cocktail fragrant with grapefruit, honey, and ginger.

The next Shake Up is slated for late summer 2019. Rosey is considering a website that she wants to make available to bartenders within the Dallas-Forth Worth community.

"I would like The Shake Up to continue," she said. "I think it's good and it's positive. It taps into a sentiment that women have now. It's timely. But I don't feel possessive of it. If I decide to leave Dallas, I'm not going to travel around promoting the concept. I just did this because we needed it. It wasn't about me selling the concept to other areas. I like doing things, I like being active, and I want it to be perfect. I wanted a competition that is inclusive and community-driven, bringing new and old blood together. My regret with the first one is I couldn't include everyone that wanted to be involved. With the upcoming one, I still can't include everyone, but I'm also happy to let go of this when I'm ready and let someone else run with it however they want."

I promised not to quote Rosey on something. It's not salacious. It's not bad. It's not about anyone else. It's not particularly interesting in itself. A sort of off-handed comment that only means something after it's said and taken out of context. Instead, I'll ask: how much do you know about rambling roses? Of the various rose types, the rambling sort grows easily and spreads as it likes, up trees, over trellises, even across the ground as a beautiful flowerbed. It's not as finicky as other roses to grow, it has a dazzling display of blooms, and beautiful rose hips after the petals are gone. The stems are strong, and, while random and easily adaptive to whatever they cover, they provide great support to other roses and climbing flora—strong, adaptable, supportive, a little random, beautiful. Sitting in afternoon sunlight on an early spring day, drinking water, Rosey starts talking about her amazing lead bartender, how her drinks are technically perfect, and how she's a true inspiration for The Shake Up.

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BLACK SWAN SALOON



WITH GABE SANCHEZ

WORDS - DAVID ROSS || PHOTOS - SHANNON FAULK

The Deep Ellum neighborhood was originally the black suburb of Dallas with origins dating back to the 1870s. The legendary blues guitar player, Blind Lemon Jefferson, used to walk these streets. Back then there were no seeing-eye dogs, no sticks, no echolocation, and so the poor fellow had some problems getting around. He'd fall over. He couldn't get from A to B. He was a mess. So he struck a deal with some local kids who would escort him around the neighborhood and help him do his old man errands, then in return he would sit down and teach the kids how to play blues chords. This was the beginning of the Texas blues. And so he passed this style down to people

like Lead Belly, Bessie Smith, on to Freddie King, and then the Vaughn Brothers (who were actually from the other side of Dallas).

The neighborhood has experienced its ups and downs ever since. In the 70s and 80s it disappeared altogether. Slowly but surely, though, the artists and musicians started creeping back in and breathing new life into the area. In 2009, a young man named, Gabe Sanchez, decided to take a chance in the rundown old neighborhood and leased out a former refrigerator repair shop in the middle of Elm. He dubbed it, Black Swan Saloon, and opened in 2010—to little or no fanfare.

What was it like here when you opened? Which is another way of asking, what were you thinking?

Kind of a funny story: I went to school in Vegas at UNLV and went back to see one of my marketing professors. I was like, hey man, I opened my first bar. And he's like, "Oh, that's rad, dude. Tell me about it. How's the real estate?" Well, yeah it's D-minus, probably. And he's like, "Well, on the street, how's your signage? How are you getting people to know you're there?" No sign. He's like, "Okay. Well, how are you advertising? What are you doing to put your name out there?" And I was like, oh, there's no advertising.

And this is your former marketing professor you're talking to?

Marketing professor, yeah. For four years, every class he taught, I took. And he's like, "Okay. You didn't spend any money for that. What about your staff? What are they doing to be out in the general population with people?" And I was like, there's no staff. It's just me. And he was like, "Okay. Well, how much money do you have in reserve to get you through some of these decisions that you've made for the first six months?" I was like, money's gone, dude. All the money that I had is in the bar. He's like, "Alright. So you have no money. You have bad real estate. No advertising. No staff." Yep. He was like, "Alright. Well, good luck." That was 2010, around August. I was trying to do something different, you know? So I sat here doing my little different thing by myself for a while. Then, finally in 2012, the tide turned. People were doing some really cool stuff and people started to take notice of it.

So you were one of the first people to be part of the cocktail renaissance here, but at the same time, you opened when there was nothing else around.

Nothing. Maybe a couple more people [indicates the empty bar] and this would be a Friday night. You could walk backwards down this street—it's a one-way street—and you wouldn't get hit. There was nothing out here.

I mean, you obviously gambled and won because you're doing quite well now, but were you expecting this kind of success?

I had hoped so. I knew that this neighborhood kind of fosters a little bit more of an outsider outlook on life. You kind of do what you want to do and people will appreciate it here—or if they don't appreciate it, they'll at least tolerate it. But you kind of do what you want to do. And slowly, slowly, it started to turn. Took a couple years, but yeah, it turned.

This space is beautiful. Is it all original? And I can't help but ask whenever I'm in an old building like this: is it haunted?

No! F--k, man [Gabe becomes visibly upset by the question]. So, the building's from 1923 and everything in here's original. The bar isn't, but all of the bones are. So there's a guy that came in—and this was when I first opened—and he's like, "Hey man, can I talk to you?" I'm like, yeah dude, what's up? He's like, "I just want to let you know that there's a drain back there." And I'm like, all right. And he's like, "Yeah, I think there's a soul trapped in there." I was like, you motherf--ker! Get out, dude! The last scary movie I saw was *Friday The 13th*, like the first one, as a kid. So, yeah it freaked me out. But to say that there are things popping around that you can't see in this neighborhood, I would say 100%.

Your personal history is very interesting. Can you talk about what you did before in Vegas?

Basically I was a host in Vegas. Glorified babysitter. If you had a lot of money, or if you were an entertainer, or athlete, one of those types of things, I would make sure you had a good time. So the kind of style of service that I was used to giving is a lot different than the normal: "Hey, can I have a jack and coke?" Sure. "Here's six bucks." And on you went. But the kind of style of service that I was accustomed to giving people was much more about getting to know you—like, completely know you. As opposed to a transactional type of relationship. That background helped this because I was used to having ongoing relationships with people. And in this setting, like when I opened, people weren't used to that. If I reached over and said, "Hey, how you doing? My name's Gabe," people would look at me like I was nuts. Like, "Why would you want to know my name, and why would I want to know your name?" Where now it's not as scary to people to introduce themselves. It kind of got people out of that going-to-the-bank type of thing. Like, "May I have this?" "Yes you can." "Now get out of my face."

I know you do a lot of infusions and tinctures and whatnot. Is there one that you're known for?

You know, it changes seasonally. I do vodkas and bourbons, and then in the summer some more tequila and gins as the weather gets nicer and those kind of lend to that type of stuff. I first did it because I was by myself, I didn't have any support staff, so it made my life easier, it helped it out a lot, and then it kind of stuck. But if somebody's not used to coming into places like this—it's like when you go to a steakhouse and they say, "Do you want some wine?" You go, "Yeah." And they hand you a wine list, but if you don't know all about it, all of a sudden you're like, "Maybe I'm not so smart? Maybe I'm not so cool?" So what I try to do is use these [infusions] to kind of slowly bring people into trying different things. You know, if you like that, then maybe you'll like this? And next thing you know you're trying something that you would never try. And the cool thing with people that have been here a couple times, when a new person comes down they basically will guide them through the whole thing. They'll say, "Hey, you should try this. And if you like that..." So it's kind of been cool the way that people have taken more ownership of this place than they might take in a normal bar.

I know that when anyone starts getting involved in making cocktails like this, you start going on ingredient hunts—especially with a lot of the classic Tiki drinks. Do you have any ingredient adventure stories?

Oh, there's been some stuff like that. There were these Chinese teas that we were trying to find forever. We'd make a list, then we would go up to the Chinatown area in Dallas, but we don't speak Chinese, so we didn't know what we were looking for—just hoping for the best. I mean we went out there over and over and over again. The little lady that would help us, she was awesome, she was like, "Yeah, you want to try this?" Sure, we'll try that. But until we were able to speak back and forth, we were just grabbing stuff. Finally, one time we went back, and she was like, "Oh, yeah. You wanted this the whole time." But, you know, that's the fun part of this whole thing: being able to go explore and get into a different culture—even if it's as silly as looking for teas.

So when you do get an ingredient like that, how do you test it? I'm not a bartender, but I've been given to understand that vodka is a good base spirit for testing new ingredients?

Totally, yeah. I don't drink, so it makes it even more difficult because I have to bring other people in and make them try it. Most of them are honest and they'll be like, "Yeah dude, this sucks," or, "This is okay," you know? But when you're making stuff, they can only last so long. Once you get on a roll and it's been like 45 minutes, an hour, two hours, you're making stuff the whole time, and they're trying it—it's made for some long nights.

You're a bartender and don't drink? Interesting. Is that a new thing?

No. It's been like seven years.

So you drank when you opened the bar?

Yeah. I slowly stopped. You know, I was here by myself, I have to do everything, and so it made the day longer. Say I hadn't seen you in awhile? I'd have a drink with you, have a shot, whatever. Then I haven't seen him in awhile, so I'll have another shot, you know? And this happens five or six times in a night. And then it's Tuesday. You have to do it again Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday—I can't keep this lifestyle up and think this is going to work. Whether it was getting a little older and more mature, I just slowed down and finally stopped.

Why did you call it Black Swan?

Okay, so there's a financial theory book about it called *The Black Swan*.

Oh! How exciting. I'm glad I asked this question.

It has to deal with outliers. If you read a [typical] history book it goes in order: zero, one, two, three, four, five, six, whatever, right? It's a very linear thing. Where in reality history is pretty much static, and then something happens—whether good or bad, up or down—then there's a big jump and things change. The author, Nassim Nicholas Taleb, called these events "black swans." As we get further away from every big, jarring event, people look back at it and try to rationalize it with hindsight. "Well, okay, this is why this happened." And the guy who wrote the book, Taleb, his people around him saw what was going to happen with the real estate market. And that would have been considered a black swan, right? Either up or down. President Obama getting elected would be a black swan. President Trump: black swan. So when I opened this I was like, well, that kind of fits in with what I'm trying to do. Down here [Deep Ellum] nobody had tried this before. I wasn't trying to be a speakeasy. I wasn't trying to hide. Wasn't trying to be cool. I was just like: this is what it is. If it works, it works.

That's a great name. Really glad there's a good story behind it.

And it kind of looks cool on a T-shirt, so I was like, f--k it, you know?

It does indeed. Throughout this interview you've said things like, "What I'm doing," or, "What this is"—what is this, how would you describe what you're doing?

Sure. You know, my background is the high-end service of Las Vegas—stuff that people aren't used to in a setting like this. This is a neighborhood bar that is trying to do cool creative stuff, as well as having really nice booze. But also having stuff—not that there's anything wrong with it—like [corporate brewery light beer], [corporate brewery lite beer], [corporate brewery lager], vodka sodas, you can have whatever you want. If you want to come in here dressed like me and you want to drink [corporate brewery lite beer] and watch football, you're cool. If you want to go on a date and you come in in a suit and your girl is in a nice dress and you want to drink nice scotch, you'll feel at home as well. I tried to make this kind of a little hub for that type of stuff. And I've been lucky, dude. People took to it. It took a little while, but people took to it.

Tell me about the Clint Eastwood mosaic on the back patio.

So a buddy of mine is an art teacher and he's like "Hey, can we do something big out back?" I'm like, sure, as long as it goes with everything else, I don't care. And so he did this community project where he had fifteen people and he gave them all 12x12 inch blank sheets of paper. And then, next to each one was just a bunch of designs they had to copy. They just thought they were learning how to do mosaic tiling. None of them have any art background, or anything like that. All they did was trace some lines, or whatever. So they did that and they broke up all the tiles, but it was all mixed up so nobody knew what they were making. They're just making mosaic tiles. Then when it was done, he puzzled it back together, and he was like: this is what we did [a portrait of Clint Eastwood].

So it was a surprise even to the students? That's so cool.

Yeah. And so it's like 12x12 feet and 2,000 pounds, but we got it up on the wall. Two weeks after that the guy who owned the building came over. He was like, "Hey, is that mosaic tile on my wall?" I said, yeah, you know I probably should've asked, but it was an art project, and it's a community thing, but if you want me to take it down, I understand. He was like, "You mother... Dude! Why?" I'm sorry? But Clint [Eastwood] signed it—his wife got him to sign it for me—and that's why it stayed.

Ha. Awesome. Well I hope Clint and Black Swan both stay here for a very long time. Thanks, Gabe.

Yeah, thanks.



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THE ROOSEVELT ROOM

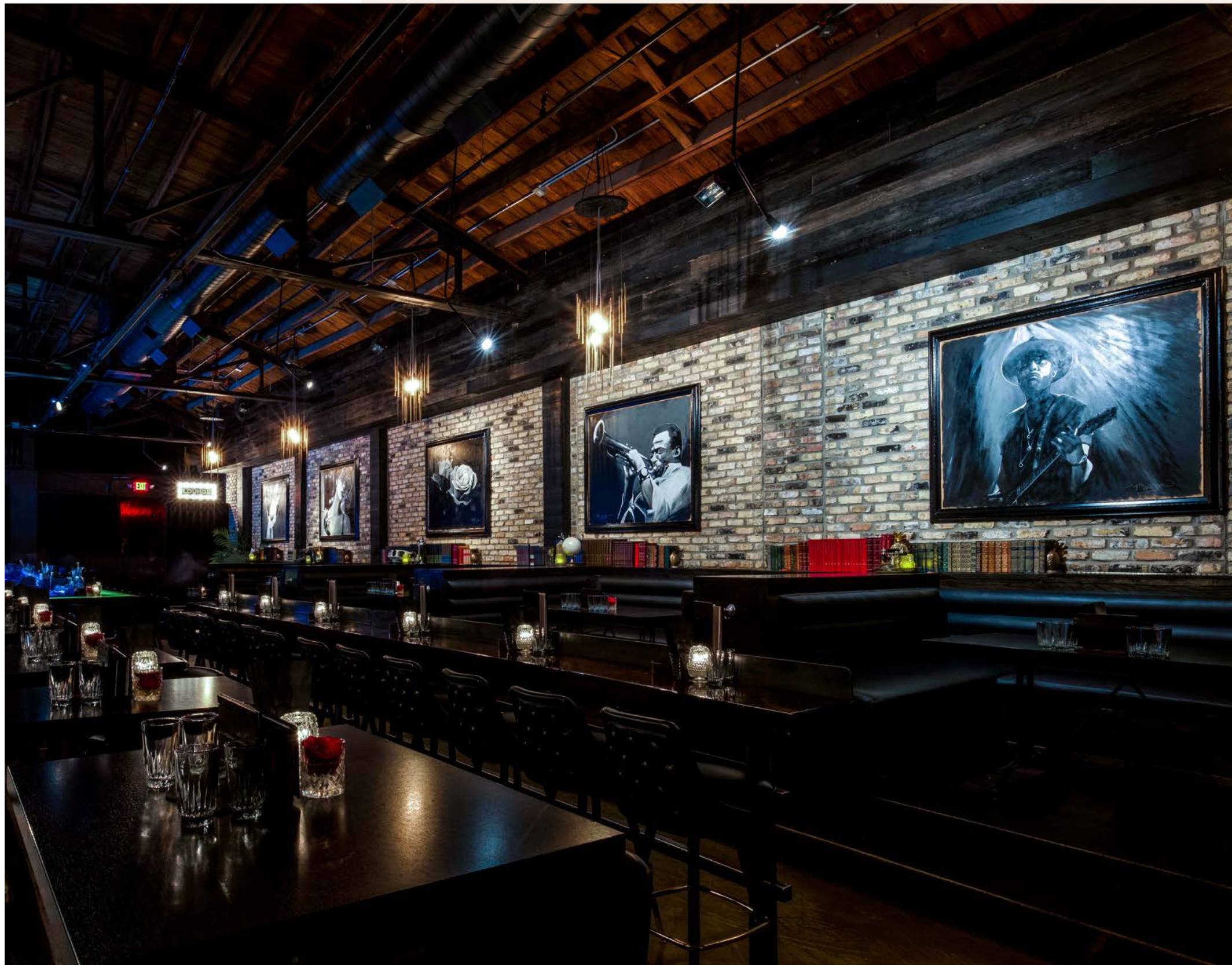
WITH
JUSTIN LAVENUE
AND DENNIS GOBIS

Austin is a city of old and new. Its history, tied to pioneer settlements along the Colorado River and politics as the state's capital, has given way to a place known for its music, academics, technology, and, as its unofficial motto indicates, weirdness. It's also now becoming known for its cocktail culture, emerging from the shadows of Houston.

At The Roosevelt Room, situated on the ground floor of an industrial warehouse built in 1929, owners Justin Lavenue and Dennis Gobis meld the past and the present, giving the bar a unique identity among Austin's burgeoning cocktail scene. The bar is flanked by two large portraits of both President Roosevelts, FDR on one side and Teddy on the other.

WORDS - SHANNA FARRELL || PHOTOS - ROBERT LERMA





"The name just seemed to fit the space because it was built in 1929 between both Franklin and Teddy's presidencies," explains Lavenue.

The menu, which features over eighty cocktails, has a section devoted to The Roosevelt Room classics, which are historic recipes tweaked for balance and the modern palate. The service, which is one of the most important aspects of the bar, is precise, their bartenders armed with deep knowledge of cocktail history with Danny Meyer-level hospitality.

And yet, as exacting as The Roosevelt Room is, it almost never was. When Lavenue and Gobis met, back in 2013 at Tales Of The Cocktail, they had originally intended to form a bar tool company. Though Lavenue was born in Austin, he grew up in Boulder, Colorado, where he began bartending in college. Gobis moved to Austin from Cleveland, Ohio in 2011, after working as a dishwasher, brewer, Cicerone, bartender, real estate agent, and attending college for pre-med. They hit it off immediately, bonding over their vision to improve the Hawthorne and fine strainers. When Lavenue moved to Austin a few months later, they immediately decided to become business partners and put their plan in motion.

"We were designing more sanitary and ergonomic bar and kitchen equipment," Gobis says. "We very quickly realized that the patent process is a complete nightmare. We were going for a couple industrial patents and our conversations with patent attorneys were draining our souls."

On the heels of this tedium, just as they realized that their tool company might not come to fruition, the space that became The Roosevelt Room fell into their lap. It had been operating as a club for college kids and the owner wanted out of the business. They decided to lease the building, spending every dime they had, and enlisted Lavenue's father as their third partner.

"The day we signed the paperwork and got the keys, we had 7,000 square feet and only a thousand dollars left in the bank. It was an 'oh sh-t' moment—like, all right, let's do this," recalls Lavenue.

Fortunately, it was a turnkey situation. The rundown club, in the neighboring space that was part of their lease, which later became The Eleanor, was booked for a party that night and their bank account essentially doubled on their first day as owners. From there, Lavenue and Gobis went into planning mode.

"Phase one was to acquire the space and keep it open while we tried to write a business plan, secure investments, and draw up plans for the larger concept for phase two," Lavenue says.

They continued to run the club for five months to maintain a steady income and keep its staff employed while they decided the future of the space. They opened The Roosevelt Room as a temporary way to bring in cash, operating just three days a week. The cocktail menu was expansive, boasting an ambitious seventy-two drinks.

Two months in, Lavenue won the prestigious Most Imaginative Bartender Competition with his Poet's Muse cocktail, a mix of gin, a house made pistachio cordial, citrus blend, and umami tincture, served up. Word of his win spread like wildfire through Austin and within two weeks they were packed every night they were open. He and Gobis, and their small staff of three others, were going full-tilt, cranking out drinks by night and working on their business plan by day.

"We were just happy to have people in the door," remembers Lavenue, "and then almost overnight the bar was three deep."

Though this model worked financially, it wasn't what the duo had originally intended. They wanted a more civilized experience, one with a hospitality-centered approach. This was a departure from many Austin bars that were more like clubs where people crowded around the bar to bark drink orders at the bartender.

"We had only one server and tables were getting awful service," Lavenue says. "We had a staff meeting and said, obviously it's good that we're busy, but we have a decision to make: we can either continue with what we're doing now, but probably won't be busy for much longer because people aren't getting drinks as fast as we would like, or we can scrap this model."

With the blessing of their staff, they made adjustments. First, they decided to seat guests like they would at a restaurant.

"At the time we were one of two bars in Austin that did that. It was Midnight Cowboy and us," says Gobis.

They started taking reservations, which allowed them to control the pace of guests so bartenders could focus on hospitality. Lastly, they increased their hours of operation to seven nights a week. It took a little while for guests to get used to these changes.

"The first couple months were really tough. The hosts had to keep telling guests that had been coming in under the prior model that we were full, which made for difficult conversations," says Lavenue. Eventually, guests embraced the changes. "It honestly has helped us immensely in the long term, as we've been able to focus on giving guests great service."

The Roosevelt Room revamp allowed Lavenue and Gobis to devote more time to developing both the drink menu and their training program. They tinkered with classics and created house originals that married the old and the new, further solidifying the bar's identity as a place rooted in the past and the present. As they were designing these drinks, they realized they needed to train their other bartenders to follow their steps of service. And down the rabbit hole they went, embarking on a two-year journey

of writing a training manual while each bartending a five to six shift a week.

"We were working on perfecting our process. We spent about fourteen hours each day testing and conceptualizing," explains Gobis.

Their efforts resulted in a 60-page handbook with The Roosevelt Room's 30 steps of service (which builds from the late Sasha Petraske's 19 steps); key reads like *Imbibe*, *Setting the Table*, *Meehan's Bartender Manual*, and *The Cocktail Codex*; and menu specifications including ingredients, history of the drink; glassware (they utilize 55 types), garnishes, ice and straw-type (seven types); and order of operations for building a round of drinks.

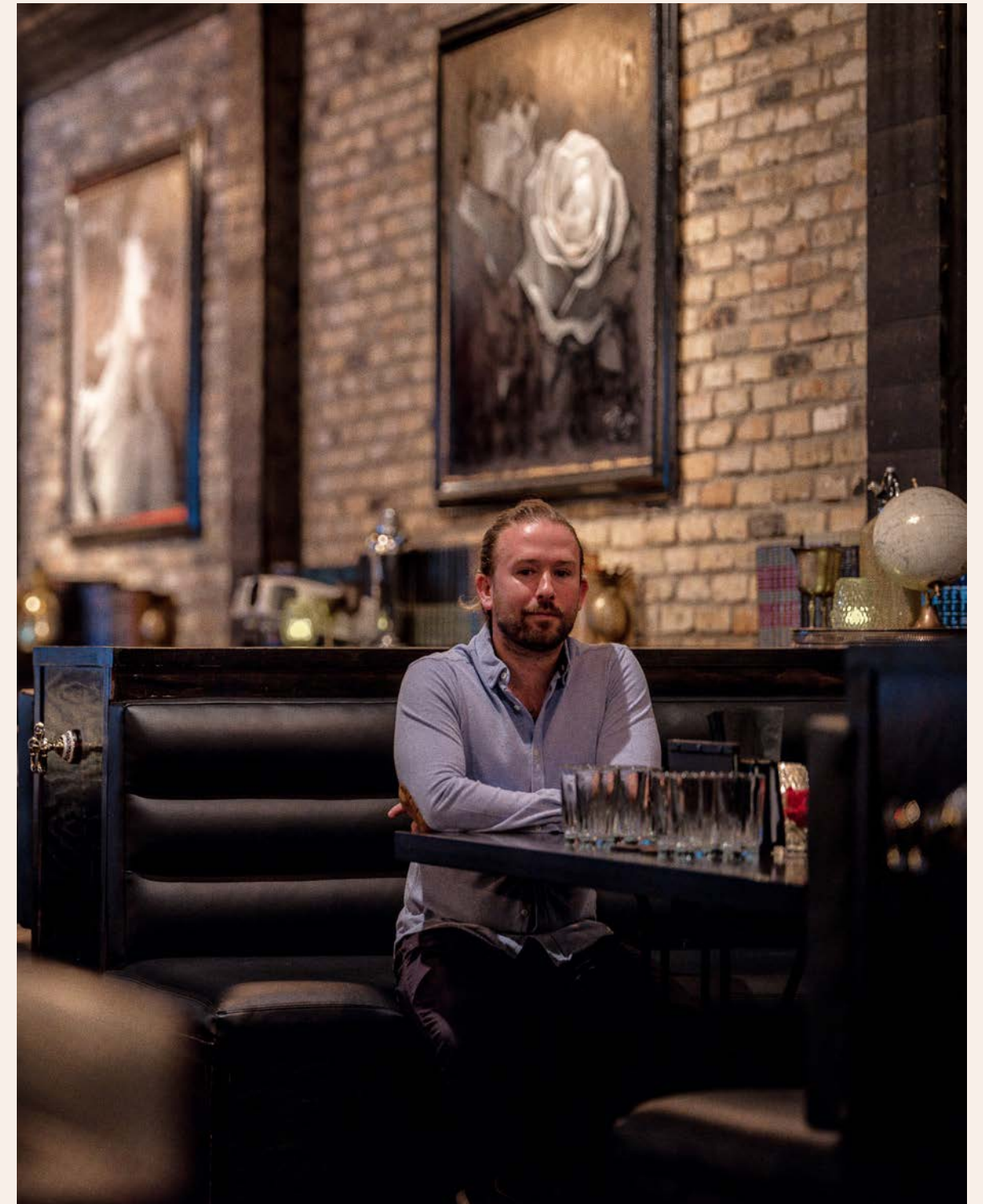
"We do a reverse waterfall build—first you put the bitters in, then citrus to syrups, then fortified or aromatized spirits, finishing with your base spirit. It's the meat and potatoes of our manual, which is about three pages," say Gobis. (It's also meant to minimize touches on the drinks, geared toward reducing the amount of times a jigger needs to be rinsed.)

A bartender must pass a comprehensive test on the handbook before they can work behind the bar.

"Only one person has passed on their first try," Gobis says. "Each question has five or six parts and usually takes about four hours to complete."

In fact, he estimates that it usually takes bartenders eight months to a year to learn the material well enough to pass the test. Sharon Yeung, their head bartender, had been working in the industry for ten years before joining the bar team. She decided to take a step back and barback while she studied.

THE NAME JUST SEEMED TO FIT THE SPACE BECAUSE IT WAS BUILT IN 1929 BETWEEN BOTH FRANKLIN AND TEDDY'S PRESIDENCIES.





THE FIRST COUPLE MONTHS WERE REALLY TOUGH. THE HOSTS HAD TO KEEP TELLING GUESTS THAT HAD BEEN COMING IN UNDER THE PRIOR MODEL THAT WE WERE FULL, WHICH MADE FOR DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS.

"I had no problem taking a step back to learn all the ins and outs of their program," Yeung says. "The first time I stepped into The Roosevelt Room, I was completely entranced. I was impressed with their menu, ambiance, program, and hospitality. I became curious about craft cocktails and I was hungry to learn more. Learning from the ground up was extremely challenging, and humbling. They take their continued education very seriously and invest so much into their employees. We blind taste spirits as a group, build timed rounds, take written exams on technique, recipes, and history. I've grown so much in the past 3 years working here and I'm fortunate to pass on my knowledge with the staff that are training to be our next generation of bartenders."

All of these risks, all of these steps, and all of these challenges have created one of the country's most respected bar programs. In 2015, Lavenue won Eater Austin's Bartender Of The Year and graced the cover of GQ as one of their Men Of The Year. In 2018, The Roosevelt Room was nominated for Best American High Volume

Cocktail Bar of the year by Tales Of The Cocktail. The same year, they launched an ambitious new menu—aided by their bar team—with over eighty drinks. They host a Miracle pop-up at The Eleanor for Christmas, which became the top-selling Miracle location in the world, hosting over 30,000 people. They opened a commissary for prep, and are scouting their next location for a Tulum, Mexico-themed bar as an homage to Gobis and his wife. They've grown their staff from five to almost thirty, including seven salaried managers.

With all of this growth, these awards, and their ambition, Lavenue and Gobis remain committed to creating a community in Austin, among their staff and guests alike. They've learned to be flexible, allowing them to adapt as Austin changes, constantly assessing what's old and new, but always making sure the service is hospitable and the drinks are balanced.

"We want to create a space where people can make lasting memories and connect with one another," Lavenue says. "We want them to feel like they are a part of the place."



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'TOBER FEST

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AN INTERVIEW WITH
NICKEL CITY'S
TRAVIS TOBER

—◆◆—

Most cities have an ethnic district or two, like a Chinatown, a Little Tokyo, a Little Havana, that sort of thing, but have you ever been to a city that has a Lil Buffalo? As in, Buffalo, NY? Well, thanks to Travis Tober, Austin has a Lil Buffalo at the corner of E. 11th and Lydia Street and it's called Nickel City.

WORDS - DAVID ROSS || PHOTOS - ROBERT LERMA



So you're from Buffalo, but I didn't know this until just now: "Nickel City" is Buffalo's nickname?

Yeah, from Buffalo, and Nickel City is the nickname of Buffalo, New York, yeah. But to get deeper into the name, there was actually a diner in Buffalo, it was called Nickel City, and it was just right off the freeway out there. Last call in Buffalo is four, so all the bartenders downtown, we wouldn't get out 'til 5:30, and we would all convene at this Nickel City diner, grab breakfast, dinner, whatever. The waitress was like a Flo-type person. She would never care, so we would all just bring in flasks of whiskey and drink at the diner. She was like, "Yeah, I don't give a sh-t. You guys drink enough." So, that's actually the inspiration behind it, but I've always loved the name as well.

Ah, I can see how that translates here: casual, warm, welcoming. Do your friends make Oktoberfest puns on your name?

Yeah, right? There is a local brewery here called Friends And Allies and they want to do a 'Toberfest beer. I'm friends with all the brewers and we sell a lot of their stuff. There's also a couple of bartenders that have my last name tattooed on their asses. It says: "F--ktober." So, yeah, whenever October comes around, everyone is always like, "F--k October," "F--ktober." It's kind of funny.

Emily mentioned that your story about moving here from Vegas is kind of amusing. You couldn't get a job or something, what happened?

Yeah, it was pretty crazy. When I moved here from Las Vegas I was probably already part-time [bartending] for 15 years. We moved to Austin, Texas and didn't really know anybody, but I had multiple interviews set up, right? And I went in to this first interview—and all these places will remain nameless—and I was nailing every interview question. But he ended up hiring somebody that was completely not even ready for it. Two days later, I have another interview, and the guy kept going on about, "Okay, well, you know we do long shifts?" I go, yeah, I know, I'm from Buffalo. I'm from Las Vegas. we do 12-hour shifts out there no problem. And he's like, "Yeah, but if I hired you, you'd be behind the curve." I did the cocktail program for all of Mandalay Bay and you guys do like maybe \$20,000 a week? We did \$100,000 an hour. I don't know how I'm behind the curve? And then another job, the guy was like, "Oh man, we got your resume, looks great." Then I interviewed and had a great interview. They were telling me how their new GM was a waitress before. I was like, cool, she's a GM, moving her up. But then they said, "Yeah, so we could probably

offer like a bar back position." And I was just like, what? I ran cocktail bar programs and was a national trainer for Ruth's Chris Steakhouse, and you want me to bar back? I'm not opposed to working my way up, but at this point I'm 32 years old and I'm past the bar back stage of my life. Two years later that same company offered me a spirit director's job. I was like, you guys know you tried to hire me as a bar back, but now you're offering me \$100K? Thanks, I'm good.

Weird. I wouldn't expect that sort of snobbery in Austin.

Actually, it's funny, I came to Austin to open a bar, and my whole thing was: I never wanted to open a bar until I learned the community. There is definitely a real tightness about somebody moving from Las Vegas. I've hired a few people from out of town because I want to be that welcoming person, you know? We really want you here. We do have a few rules, though. Like the saying, "Love Austin and Austin will love you back?" It took me a little while to learn that. But yeah, man, once you love Austin, it loves you back. This has been the best city for me. Amazing. I'm here for the rest of my life. I love it.

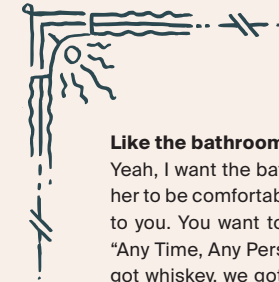
It seems like this city has to be more protective than ever now, just because it seems like the infrastructure can't handle the population.

It can't. Not at all. And it's funny because this is the only place that I know of where a Chili's has gone out of business. You never see a Chili's go out of business. Nobody goes to any kind of chain situation around here. We don't have Chipotles, we have Freebirds—same exact concept, same exact shape. We don't have Chick-Fil-A, we got Flyrite. We don't have In-N-Out, we have P. Terry's. It's exactly the same, it's just done in Austin.

I found a lot of the reviews and descriptions of Nickel City to be really funny. I wanted to read some of them back to you and get your reaction. First one called it, "The Disney World Of Dive-Bars."

Yeah, I've definitely used that term as well. I always wanted to be the Disney World Of—not dive bars—but neighborhood bars. Because you can't just be a dive bar. And dive bars don't have cocktail lists. So it's a neighborhood bar that kind of has that mystique of a dive bar. We get called that all the time, though. It's fine. But dive bars are notorious for angry people, stuff like that. I just want to be the friendliest in town. Everybody loves dive bars, but there are certain things you don't like about dive bars.





Like the bathrooms.

Yeah, I want the bathrooms to be clean. I want to bring a date and for her to be comfortable. You got to feel safe. You want people being nice to you. You want to have a good selection. We call [Nickel City] the "Any Time, Any Person Place." We got solid wine, we got cocktails, we got whiskey, we got whatever you need. You can come and have four beers and four shots for \$20, or you can drink a \$60 one-ounce pour of really awesome whiskey.

Today, it doesn't seem like it's that difficult to marry this concept of a neighborhood bar/dive bar, whatever you want to call it, with a quality cocktail program. When you first opened, did you encounter any issues with your concept?

Yeah, I mean, we're really blessed because, right off the bat, we've been really popular, really successful. It's gone from successful to crazy busy. Our year-over-year numbers are up by 25-30%. It has a lot to do with the *Esquire* article—*Esquire* named us one of the best bars in America. And *Garden & Gun*—people always laugh about it—*Garden & Gun* magazine named us one of the best bars in the south. Which, believe it or not, is a huge thing down in Texas, Virginia, South Carolina region.

Never heard of it, but, yeah, that's a fabulous magazine title.

I was sitting out here one day when a Mercedes pulled up and an elderly couple got out. They were very wealthy. And I watched them take a picture in front of Nickel City. I was like: thank you, *Garden & Gun*. But we've had that kind of luck. It was the right time, right place. Honestly, [the concept] kind of came from me traveling a lot and hanging out with bartenders. What do we always want to do? We want to just go to a bar and have a beer and a shot. But then we always got four or five friends who are like, "Oh, I want some cocktails." Well, why can't you do both? We'll never be able to make everybody happy, but we try to get as close as we can to everybody being happy—maybe not vegetarians. Our food truck has some fries, but that's about it.

So this next one was one of my favorite quotes and I wondered if there was some sort of hidden message in this. Someone wrote

a review that read, "The red and green checkered floors even include intentionally randomly placed black tiles."

So, everybody thinks that the floor is really old. They always ask me how old the floor is. And I'm like, oh, no, that's brand new. I picked out the floor. We put it in. In Buffalo there's this bar that I would call my grandpa's bar and every time one of the tiles would break they didn't have the same color so they'd replace it with some random colored tile. So, everybody always thinks it's just old tile, but no, we did that on purpose.

I feel like you should make up some sort of weird *Da Vinci Code* story about the tiles forming an ancient occult shape, or secret code. Speaking of visuals, I love your graphic style. Amid everything on your menu I read, "Ask us about our whiskey." So I want to ask you about your whiskey—how would I ask that? "What is your whiskey?"

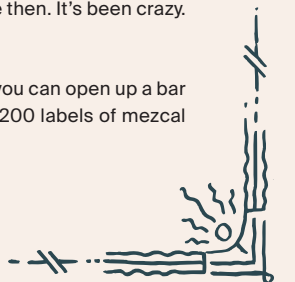
So our whiskey selection right now—I want to say 280 different whiskeys? We have the largest single barrel whiskey program in Texas. I think we have as much as between 10 or 15 single barrels. The cool thing about that is no matter what the bottle cost me, I sell one ounce for \$6 and two ounces for \$11. We did scotch month in February where we featured a different scotch everyday at exactly what it costs per ounce. So, some of our scotches were \$1.15 for one ounce and everybody can get one. Some were \$17 for an ounce. We had a \$600 bottle of scotch back there that we sold at cost, just that day. It was done.

A different scotch a day, that's a pretty cool idea.

Yeah, it was fun. I love scotch, but Austin doesn't really embrace it as much. So I was like, well, what if we made it so cheap that you just had to try it? Most people I know will risk \$3 on something, right? And, believe it or not, scotch sales have gone up since then. It's been crazy.

What does Austin embrace?

Bourbon and tequila, all day, every day. I feel like you can open up a bar with just bourbon and tequila here. There's over 200 labels of mezcal that are available in Austin alone.





You also claim to have the largest brandy selection in the state?

Yeah. At one point we had 12, but I think right now we have seven. I love cognac, I love brandy, I love grain based spirits, so it's always been a passion of mine.

Do you have a guilty pleasure? Any delightful fruit flavored macro brews you enjoy?

Oh man, dude, I do. So it used to be yogurt flavored [Dutch liqueur]. I actually have a signed bottle—the whole bar team signed it and put it in the trophy case. I don't know why, but in my head I think, "This stuff is delicious." It got discontinued. I also unapologetically like [German herbal digestif]. It's great. Everybody's freaking out on drinking amaros and all that stuff. I'm like, [German herbal digestif] is the original digestif, you know what I mean?

Do you find cocktail competitions kind of odd? They remind me of skateboard contests in that they don't accurately reflect skateboarding. Bartending, like skateboarding, isn't a sport, so putting it into a sport context seems like it would turn it into something that it's not. Is that how it is with cocktail competitions?

I mean, especially now. I competed in them and kind of got a name for myself with winning a Hand Shaken Daiquiri contest at Tales Of The Cocktail in 2012. But some of these other ones—which is awesome, I'm glad they're doing it, I'm glad people are into it, but I wouldn't even come close to the finals now. It's just like people spraying perfume stuff around. And I'm just like, what is this? I'm an older dude, and I've been at it for a while—it's fun, you know what I mean?—but at the end of the day, man, just pour me a whiskey and give me a cold beer, goddammit. I like to tell everybody who's into cocktail bartending: just don't forget that at the end of the day it's service. It's warm food and cold beer. Everybody get over themselves, you know? That's why I think we've been successful because my bartenders have taken that to heart. High fives and handshakes.

"High fives and handshakes," isn't that your thing?

That's my mantra. You come into my bar, we want you to get a high five, a handshake, a smile, and have a good time. You'll leave a little bit happier.

Your bar qualifies as, what I call, "a proper bar." You don't open at 6 a.m. like a PROPER proper bar, but noon is still pretty early for most bars.

Yeah, it is. And we have an open door policy. The door's unlocked at 10 a.m., so if you wander in before we open, if you want a beer or whiskey, we'll pour it for you. The hardest thing to do is make people walk through that door and you already did it. So we're like, hey, if you don't mind us setting up, and you want beer or whiskey, we got you covered. Cocktails come a little bit later at noon. I mean, we did some crazy analysis of the amount of sales we did in a year before we technically opened and it was something like \$60,000. So we're just like, yeah, come on in everybody. We're getting ready, the music ain't what we usually play, but if you're down with Tom Petty on the radio while I'm setting up and not paying a ton of attention to you, you can drink away and we're fine. And everybody, 100% of the time, always says, yes. So that's the name of the game.

Well you're playing a beautiful game, Mr. Tober. Thanks so much.

Cool, man. Appreciate it. Thank you.



DRINK.WELL.



WITH JESSICA SANDERS

WORDS - DAVID ROSS || PHOTOS - ROBERT LERMA

While researching Drink.Well., I enjoyed the usual cocktail reviews and interviews with the owner, Jessica Sanders: it's a neighborhood gastropub in Austin's North Flute Corridor; it has kind of old vintage vibes; it's been described as a chef-driven neighborhood cocktail lounge; etc.. "This place seems cool," I thought. It all sounded very lovely until I saw a link in my search list that said something about "assault allegations."

[Insert record screeching noise.]

Whoa.

I read the stories and learned as much as I needed to know about the situation (which occurred two years ago) and decided that while no one was "fine" from it, it seemed that life had moved on and somehow the bar remained open. My first thought was, how?

Jessica graciously took the time to meet with us at Hillside Farmacy and, after sitting down and chatting with her, I can now say I know how Drink.Well. survived the scandal: it survived because of Jessica Sanders. Drink.Well., as well as a lot of other things and people got broken, but that lady fixed it. The woman is an amazing, inspiring, intelligent human being and you feel like you can accomplish anything after talking to her.

Jessica shared some of her thoughts on that unfortunate period with us here, but most of this interview is about happy fun times: her life, her career, and why she insists that Drink.Well. has to have two damn periods in it.

The food at Drink.Well. sounds like it's a bigger part of the experience than I assumed it was?

Yeah, we kind of look at ourselves as a cocktail bar that has great food, as opposed to a restaurant that has great drinks. The food is very much a part of the experience. Everything is made from scratch. We have a very chef-driven kitchen. It's seasonal, fresh ingredients. The food menu changes as regularly as the drinks menu does, so there's always something new to try. The idea is that it's a 360 degree experience—a lot of times cocktail bars maybe slack a little on the beer, slack a little on the wine, or the food maybe isn't as great—but I want every little piece of what Drink.Well. does to be excellent. There's a lot of depth, where there might not be a lot of breadth—if that makes sense.

That's the second time I've heard the word "breadth" today. Strange word. Speaking of words, what's with the periods in the name?

So, the name came from when the mission statement for the bar was being written. We had several other cocktail bar names that we were considering, but nothing was really resonating. And so we said, okay, let's write down what it is that we really want the experience to be like. And what it came down to was: we want people to drink. Period. Well. Period. And then it just visually sort of resonated. I think there are a lot of bars where you can go to just drink, but where can you drink well? And then it became this plan where how do we get people to elevate their drinking experience beyond just let's drink well? And then that sort of stuck. The first couple of years with the name were very difficult. From an editorial perspective, we didn't realize that a lot of food writers and beverage journalists were loathe to write about us because the double periods screw with some sort of editorial rules.

That's actually why I asked.

So increasingly what happened was people would leave off the second period. It would be Drink (period) Well (no period). And if you look at a lot of lists that we're on, it's Drink, (period), Well, and they omit the second period because it messes with some sort of, like, *Robert's Rules Of Order*?

I subscribe to the *Chicago Manual Of Style*. [ed note: *Robert's*

***Rules Of Order* is a manual for parliamentary procedure—strange to use for journalism].**

Yes, it's one of those things, but I didn't know that going into it. And then I just became stubborn about it. I would always push back and say, um, you left off the second period. Now it's just a conversation starter and a talking piece. It's just kind of a quirk in the bar's personality, right?

So you want me, when I write this, to put a period after "Drink" and "Well?"

Yes. I'll tell you kind of a funny story. There's a very notable person in the bar industry, whose opinion I respect a lot now, but when Drink.Well. opened this person was like a god. Still is a god in the bar world. Anyway, he reached out to a mutual friend and he's like, "Hey, I heard about these people in Austin that are trying to open this bar, sounds really cool, but you have to get them to change the name. The name is terrible. No one is going to go to this bar. No one's going to write about this bar because the name is so weird and it just doesn't make sense." Now, I didn't find out about this story until recently, right? But joke's on them because the bar still does well, people still write about it, and if someone leaves off the period, it's not the end of the world, right? And it doesn't make the drinks taste any less delicious. You know, it's like all press is good press, sort of thing. Although that is definitely not true.

Well, yeah, you would know that side of it, wouldn't you? We'll get to that, but first I wanted to go back a bit. You're from New York?

Originally from San Diego, then I lived in New York for eight years, and I've been in Austin for nine years.

So how did you come into bartending?

When I was in my 20s and I was living in New York I worked in publishing. I worked for a magazine and I was in the media world for a long time. And we were getting to be at an age where we were like, all right—we're looking at our bosses, right?—and we're like, okay, do I want to be this person in 10 years? Is that the career trajectory that I want to be on? And the further along in my publishing career I got, I realized: not really. I don't want to be this person in five or 10 years.



It's hard to imagine you having a boss.

I had more of an entrepreneurial spirit and really gravitated towards the hospitality industry because I think that people that work in this industry—we're empaths, right? We're natural caregivers. So how do you find a job that allows that part of your personality to come through, but also is creative? It's different than being a nurse, or a teacher, or other types of caregiver-type occupations. I liked the idea of working in a space where it was about entertaining other people. And here's the thing: no one goes to a bar to have a bad time. Everyone walks through the front door with the expectation of having something joyful, and fun, and exciting happen to them, and that part of it really was appealing. And so it became a matter of, all right, let's quit our jobs and do this.

That's a big decision.

Looking back on it, I think the idea was: all right, we're going to move to Austin, we're going to open this bar—but in my mind I thought, okay, this is almost like a quarter-life-crisis thing: we're going to do this, we're going to spend three or four years at it, it's going to be fun, it's going to be an adventure, and then we're going to come back to New York and go back to the real world, right? I didn't understand at the time that it was a permanent life decision. This was going to become linked into my identity and my life story—once you get in it, there's no going back. So we moved here in 2010, bought the Drink.Well. building in 2011, and opened Drink.Well. in 2012, and here we are.

Why Austin?

Well, there's two answers to that. One is, my ex-husband at the time was from Texas so he had some roots here. Then if you think about where Austin was at that time, it was sort of like right at that tipping point of being a food city. And there weren't that many cocktail bars here at the time. Everything that was cocktail-oriented was kind of rooted in downtown Austin, or in the burgeoning East Side district. So at that time you had Pêche, The Goodnight, the East Side Showroom—those were kind of the cocktail places in Austin. There was nothing that was neighborhood driven, right? And North Loop was really starting to come into its own. Foreign & Domestic, which is a very farm-to-table, nose-to-tail, sort of eccentric food concept had just opened on North Loop. The Tigress, which is another small cocktail bar, had just opened. And so we saw this opportunity. Like, okay, we can really help be a part of a new entertainment district in the city in a neighborhood where people didn't have to park. They could walk there, they could ride their bikes there, it was going to be unpretentious and uncomplicated—there wasn't going to be suspenders

and little wax mustaches—because that's where the cocktail culture was at the time.

We just learned the term "bartender cosplay" earlier.

Yes. And I think that everyone at that time—like, 2010, 2012—everyone was sort of riding the coattails of what was going on in New York, so that's what people perceived cocktail bars to be. So we were like, how do we have high concept drinks in a space that feels like a neighborhood bar? I always tell people, nothing on paper ever would indicate that Drink.Well. would be successful. Everything about it is wrong: the name was wrong, it's a weird size—it's only 40 seats, so it's bigger than a speakeasy, but it's smaller than a night club—it's a weird service model, and we had no experience whatsoever in doing it. Everything about it should have failed and I don't take that for granted at all.

From my perspective it seems like the most natural thing in the world to be a comfortable neighborhood bar, while also providing an exciting cocktail program. What kind of difficulties did you face?

I think the difficult part initially was price point. Because when people hear "neighborhood bar" they think "dive bar." And "dive bar" has the connotation of price point and also literacy of the guest, right? And that's something that we really walk a fine line with: of wanting to make it approachable, but also wanting to differentiate ourselves from the Average Joe dive bar. What I think is interesting is that within the last couple of years, "cocktail bar" all of a sudden has a negative connotation to it. If anything we should be at a place where it's the opposite. We should have been making this more approachable for people, but now everyone has a cocktail menu. There's the petty part of me that's like, first they laugh at you and then they copy you. But I really feel that way because for so long people were very resistant to this idea that you could be a very high concept cocktail bar with fresh ingredients and really interesting spirits and a really culinary approach to making cocktails, but you could also be in a neighborhood space, like with bartenders that wear t-shirts and torn jeans, and it is still going to feel like you are getting the same level of hospitality and service that you would get at any fine dining restaurant driven bar. The challenge is how do you do that at a price point that is accessible for a neighborhood audience? And also, how do you do it in a way that's authentic, and real, and not telling your guest what they should be drinking and that you're just creating something that's attractive to them.





I DON'T NEED TO BE AN INFLUENCER TO HAVE INFLUENCE.

Let's fast forward to now. What's going on at Drink.Well. today?

Well, we're working on a project right now for our seven year anniversary. I had this epiphany about a year ago where I was working service one night and I was looking around the room. We have a set of regulars at Drink. Well.. Some of these people have been coming to the bar since the day that we opened and they've stayed with us and grown with us over the course of seven years. There's a 70-year-old computer science professor from UT; and then you've got these 24-year-old kids that come in and drink [Texas beer] and shots of tequila; and then you have a lot of first dates working through awkward conversations over dirty martinis; and I thought, none of these people go together. If you walk into certain bars all of the guests sort of look like they belong, right?—I get why this group of people is in this bar—but if you come to Drink. Well. none of these people go together. And so I started thinking, okay, what is it about this space where all of these people feel comfortable being here at the same time? What is it that we're doing that makes them feel like this is a space of inclusivity? And so I said, okay we're going to find out. So we've been doing this interview series where we bring them into the bar and we talk about them—think of *Humans Of New York*, that sort of vibe. What's your life story? How did you come to find Drink.Well.? What do you drink while you're here?

Oh cool, so you turned the camera on the audience, I like that.

Yeah, a lot of video series that I've seen about bars are about the bar, and about the bartenders, and a lot of the footage is like, "Here's us making our signature cocktails, and this is why we're so great!" So we wanted to turn that around and do a series about our guests. It's really about the people that make Drink.Well. what it is.

When you have been doing those interviews with your customers, are there any themes, or cocktails, that are recurring?

With cocktail bars there's sort of two approaches. There are those bars that only deal in classics: they don't attempt anything that is seasonal or signature. There's a lot of validity to that approach because it's rooted in history and there's the foundational aspect of that style of drinking. Then you have the other side of things where it's all house made drinks, all signatures, and they change all the time. Drink.Well. sort of splits the balance between the two. So we have kind of a whole list of classics that we do well and there's a few of them, like our house gimlet, where no one's doing that drink in a very traditional way in Austin. But our customers also know that every time they come in there's going to be something new for them to try. But I got to the point in my career where I was honestly tired of coming up with new drinks because it felt like an

exercise in futility. There's nothing original. I'm just spinning my wheels trying to come up with the next bensonhurst, or whatever, and it's just not working. So I said, well, I've been creating drinks for seven years, why is it so terrible to go back and look at some of those drinks that were excellent and bring them back? And so we've really been lucky that in talking to our regulars, and asking, "What's that drink that you wish we still had?" And they're like, "Oh man, you had a drink like four years ago that had gin in it, and hibiscus—would you please bring that drink back?" I think there's this idea that you constantly have to be innovating, but sometimes innovation means going back and looking at what you did well in the first place and improving on that. Like, let's put a better gin in it. Now we know more about our technique so how can we improve the technique of the cocktail? Or apply a new culinary approach that we didn't know four years ago? The drink is still the same drink, but we're breathing new life into it without having to create a whole new cocktail. So now we're going to have this legacy section of our menu that will feature five or six cocktails from our seven year history that either have a spirit that wasn't available to us at the time—like The Botanist wasn't a thing in Austin when we opened seven years ago, but now we can bring in some of those gin cocktails from 2012, layer the Botanist into it, and it takes the drink to another level.

Oh that's cool. Sort of like the evolution of the cocktail. Let's talk about women in the industry. Obviously, women's issues are something that's pervasive throughout culture in all industries, but how does it look from your perspective?

What I think is really exciting is when Drink.Well. opened there were very few prominent women in the industry in this city, but within a few years it was only prominent women. I remember a few years ago talking about how when Drink.Well. opened you could maybe name four or five prominent females in the bar community in Austin. By 2015, I would be hard pressed to limit my answer to only five, and that happened within a few years. Then what happened, and I think where we're at now, is women are smart and we have amplified our voice. Now we have agency to get out from behind the bar and all of those amazing women have incredible brand jobs, are owning bars, are running bars, so it's almost like they are steering the ship in a less visible way, but they're really the force behind it. I think that is a huge game changer: we're really running the show, it's just you may not realize that.

That could be said of history in general, I suppose.

Yeah true. But initially the whole push was like, we need more women behind bars being the face of the industry—it's almost like the sizzle versus the steak, right?—and I think we have found more empowerment being the steak and letting the guys be the sizzle.

You said, “We need more women behind bars.”
We all need to go to jail? “Lock her up?”

Yeah, exactly. Sorry, I couldn’t help myself.

So I think that’s what’s been interesting of say 2012 to 2016, and then 2016 to now, is that I think that we just realized, oh, I can be a powerful force in this industry even if my name isn’t splashed all over. I don’t need to be an influencer to have influence.

This next question is, of course, of a sensitive nature—and we don’t need to talk about this if you don’t want to—but you survived a major scandal and your bar is still open. What do you attribute that to? How did you make it through that? I ask because it seems that amid that tragedy, there must be an empowering message or uplifting story in there somewhere?

Emotional question to answer. There’s obviously a lot that I can’t talk about, but I also recognize that by not talking about it I do a disservice to the story. Because I think the whole message is to speak out, right? I think what I’ll say is: no, it’s not an uplifting story. There was a lot of pain in that situation for every single person involved. If there’s a positive to take from it, it is: when you know better you do better. And there was a lot that wasn’t known, now that it is known, every single person involved, myself included, has done better and is doing better. I can say that the hardest part of that situation was knowing

that every decision I made, whichever direction I moved in, I was doing right for someone by doing wrong for someone else. And that was difficult. I did the very best I could and that’s all anyone can do with any situation, right? And I think that when you talk about surviving something like that, and from a marketing perspective or, kind of the PR scandal of it, I didn’t really worry about what strangers thought of the situation. My focus was on my people—my staff, my family, and what was the right decision for them and for myself. Because people that are on the outside and that are strangers, they have an opinion and their opinion may be valid, but they don’t know. And so, it’s a complicated question to answer but—

You’re handling it like a champion, by the way. You’re making me kind of teary eyed.

No, I think that, you know, you take care of the people that are closest to you and you do your best to make good decisions, and sometimes your best isn’t good enough, right? I look back and I say now, I did the best job that I could, and some situations, my best was not good enough for some people. And also, there are some situations where whatever you do will be viewed as incomplete or insufficient to somebody somewhere. And then you live with that. And like I said, then you do better next time.

Well congratulations for still being open for seven years.



I’m very fortunate in that I had a community of people that supported me. And that was staff that stayed with me, or guests that continued to come—I mean, you want to talk about a tear jerker situation in talking about the periods in the name? During the time that Drink.Well. was closed, one of the regulars, the 70-year-old computer scientist and his wife, left a card in the mailbox at the bar and it said, “Drink. Well. Get. Well.” I still have it on my fridge. Because people understood that that staff, my ex, they are my family—they are still my family—and sometimes your family does things that you think are f--ked up, but they’re still your family and you still want to see them be better. The guest recognizes that too. The guests saw that family atmosphere and they saw what Drink.Well. was—independent of me, independent of Michael, independent of the people that work there—it was a place where they felt like it was their home and they wanted to see their home protected. And that is why Drink.Well. survived. I guess that’s the first time I’ve ever been able to articulate that in that way, but that’s what it is.

Wow. You are incredibly inspiring and it’s no wonder you’re still here.

Well, it’s funny because, like I said, I was only supposed to be here for a few years and, like in that movie *Clerks*, I have started my day with that sentence for the last six years: “I’m not even supposed to be here today!” And it’s even more amplified when I travel. I’ve had the opportunity to travel to so many incredible places. That’s the one part of this that makes me in no way regretful that I quit my job and moved here and did this. If I were still pushing paper behind a desk at *Forbes* magazine, I would never have been able to travel to the places that I’ve been. But then I come back to Austin and it’s like, I’m not even supposed to be here today. I’ve now lived longer in Austin than I lived in New York. I think I’ll always be here in some form or fashion, but I would love to see Drink.Well. be that place that’s just here and doesn’t have to be dependent on me as an individual. I had a conversation with a friend recently and she’s like, “You know you have a successful bar when it outlives you.”



PÉCHÉ

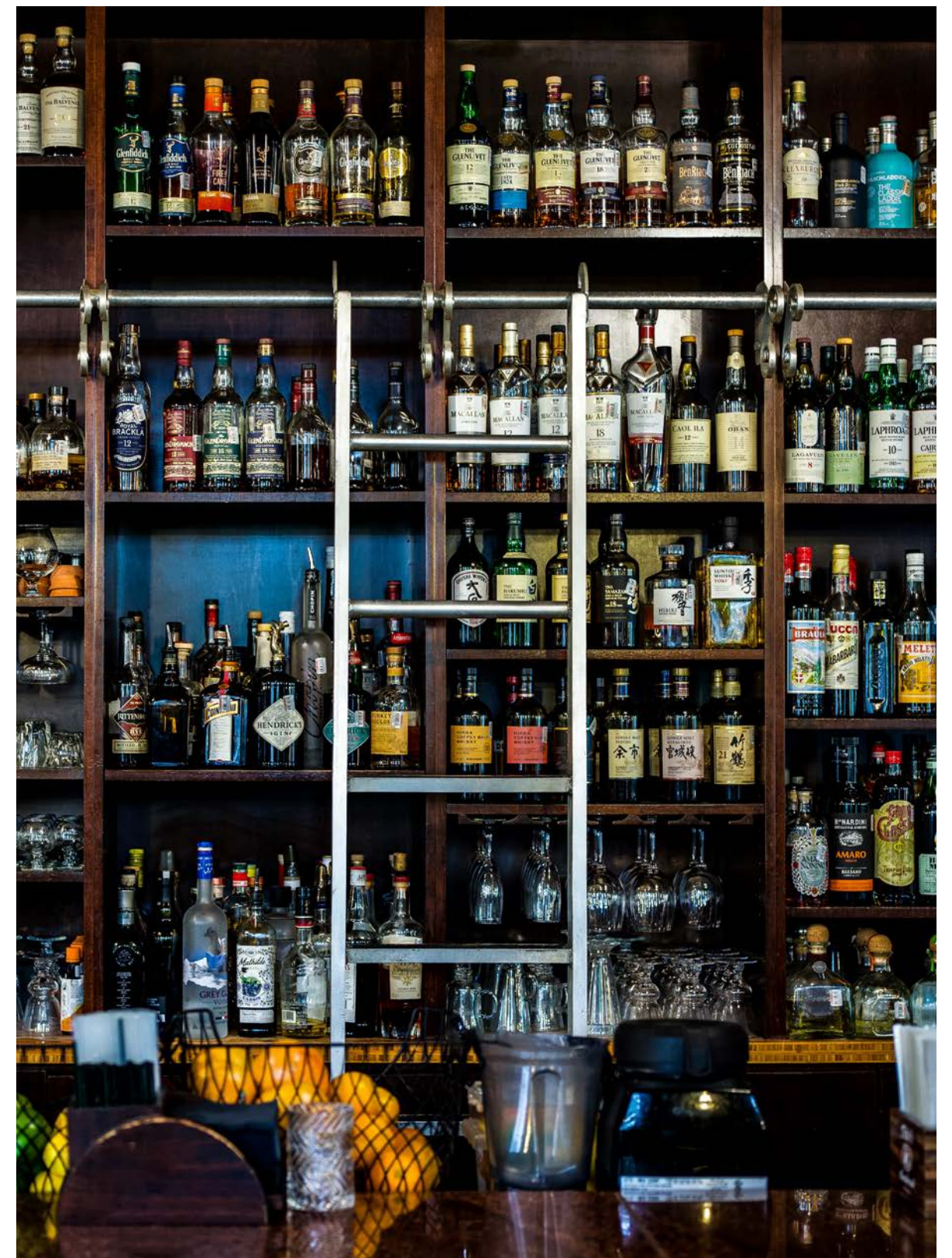
A SINFUL STORY IN THREE ACTS

Péché, Péché, Péché. The name came up over and over again during our visit to Austin—and for good reason, we soon learned. The legendary French bistro that features a pre-Prohibition bar was Austin's first cocktail bar before the cocktail renaissance arrived in Texas. Even more impressively and perhaps evidence of its greatness and surely its influence, nearly every bartender in Austin, to this day, can be connected

to Péché by probably a maximum of two degrees of separation—if they didn't work there directly, their manager probably did. In Austin, everything seems to be connected to Péché.

We spoke with owner Rob Pate, as well as three former employees (Justin Elliott, Robert Bjorn Taylor, and Anup Mistri) about why Péché has had such a lasting influence on the Austin scene.

WORDS - DAVID ROSS || PHOTOS - ROBERT LERMA



ACT 1: ROB PATE



Everyone says that Pêche was one of the first and most influential bars in the city and helped introduce the cocktail renaissance here, what do you attribute that to?

We were fortunate to open when we did because there were not that many people that knew enough to see the mistakes we were making—and we made a lot. The few that did were kind enough to educate us and we got better and better every single day—we still do, I hope. The more you learn, the more you know. You need to learn, it never stops. I hope that Pêche gets better and better every single day.

I know Pêche is famous for its absinthe program. My wife and I went on an absinthe kick in the early 2000s ordering bottles from Europe. We came to the conclusion that wormwood is not a hallucinogenic and that all the tales of madness were due to people drinking absinthe that was essentially bathtub gin/moonshine. Is that accurate?

You and your wife were probable drinking a bohemian style of absinthe that is usually a high-proof neutral spirit with artificial titrations, whereas a true macerated absinthe is made with natural herbs that are incorporated into the spirit.

Then again, have you ever hallucinated on absinthe?

Thujone, which is a bi-product of wormwood, is an opiate, but there is never enough in it to cause hallucinations. The alcohol content of absinthe will, though.

How would you describe the cocktail scene in Austin?

I think the cocktail scene is strong in Austin. It has evolved quickly and strongly. The kids who are bartending now are thirsty for knowledge and their skills are strong.

What and who were your inspirations to open a cocktail bar?

Dale DeGroff's *The Craft Of The Cocktail* was the first book that I said, damn, that is what we should all be doing. A good bartender with knowledge is now a great bartender.

I've gathered from former employees that you have an excellent training program. What sets it apart?

I hire people who want to learn and are happy to relate with others. I think people who want to learn, and are smart enough to know they need to learn, they don't think they know it all. Entitlement does not work at Pêche.

Do you have any guilty pleasures that you enjoy drinking when no one is looking?

Limeaid with a couple of shots of gin.

What are some of your "favorite" bartender pet peeves?

Tunnel vision. Keep your head up and see the whole picture.

I assume you have a lot of antique absinthe tools, gewgaws, and whatnot, like maybe those dripper fountain things? That stuff ever break?

We use heavy duty as much as possible, there a lot of gorillas behind the bar. I have also done this long enough that I can usually find replacement parts for most things. If not, I know how to use a welder.

Do you have any prized possessions or collectibles worth mentioning?

Collectibles all stay at the house. I find that most of my prized collectibles I drink.

I want to give you an opportunity to talk about the food and I think maybe the best way to get into that is to just ask: French food in Texas?

French food works anywhere. The secret is to find the best ingredients you can and never cut a corner. Shortcuts take longer than doing the right thing because you always have to redo a shortcut.

I guess it doesn't hurt to bring up current events in France: what were you experiencing when you saw Notre Dame burn?

It is never easy to see history destroyed, no matter what it is.

Do you keep in touch with your former employees? Are there any you're particularly proud of?

I don't always express my feelings. My shrink says that is something that needs lot of work, but I have been fortunate to have the high caliber of people who have worked for me. And there is no better feeling to see the success they have had down the road. I think we have built a great family.



ACT 2: JUSTIN ELLIOTT

David Ross: Hello Justin. Why don't we start with what you do now and when did you work at Pêche?

Justin Elliott: I'm the state director of mixology for Texas for Southern Glazer's Wine And Spirits. I worked at Pêche from, I think, this exact week [late March] in 2011 until October of 2011. I got the job right after moving back to Austin after being away for almost ten years. So, it was kind of a perfect vantage point to take in what had become of the scene that honestly did not exist when I left in 2002.

So, Pêche wasn't your first bartending gig?

No, it was my first fancy mustache bartending gig though.

Emily Arseneau: Was that your first time managing people? Because you managed a lot of the people that we are interviewing, right?

Managing people at that scale, yes. I had run a bar in Queens for eight years, but often times there was only one other employee other than me. And my management was to just write the schedule and we worked the same days every week. So, yeah, managing Pêche was bigger.

Was that your title there?

I was Assistant Bar Manager at Pêche. I got hired as a bartender. I think I got an "oops! job" actually. I think something happened during South By [SXSW]. It's a great way to get hired in Austin: show up in Austin right as South By is wrapping up and just see who went through the crucible at some establishment and was just like, "Not for me." There's generally a grand shuffling every season.

Last night, Bjorn called Pêche "the Hogwarts of bartending school." Would you agree with that?

Yeah, I mean I knew a good handful of classics, but I didn't come out of the Sasha Petraske school, by any means. But, I knew how to make a sazerac, I knew how to make a ramos gin fizz, I knew a handful of classics, I'd been tending bar for almost ten years at that point. But, even knowing some stuff, at that time in Austin, Pêche was the only cocktail bar with anything approaching that breadth of offerings and operating at that volume. The cocktail menu at Pêche at that time, and I think it's pretty similar still, had to be 40 drinks deep. It was intense.

Emily Arseneau: I got kicked out of Pêche once.

Oh you did, for what?

For over enthusiasm, basically. I came to town and I heard about Pêche.

It wasn't me was it?

No, it wasn't, it was Larry.

Larry actually took my job when I left Pêche.

There you go. See, it's all connected. No, I'd heard about it from Dallas and so I had to go. I was so excited I ordered five drinks right off the menu. I wasn't drinking, I wasn't drunk, I just wanted to try. And they were like, "Ma'am, we can't serve you five drinks." I wasn't asked to leave, but I was told to slow down.

You don't have to leave, but you also can't have anything.

You can't have the things you asked for and also I wish you wouldn't stay here. I think that's the story of my life: slow down lady.

What is it about Pêche that makes it a springboard for so much success, because so many people that worked there have been so successful?

I wish I had a really good academic answer for that. Maybe it has to do with the volume, but at a lot of places you do cocktails and are busy. I would say that it definitely had a certain lightning-in-a-bottle quality just

because of when and where it was in Austin. If you came into Austin, and you wanted to do this type of bartending, you necessarily had to pass through Pêche. There were only a couple of other places and they didn't have staffs that large. So, statistically speaking, you were probably going to wind up getting hired on at Pêche. Also, of the bars at that time that were doing cocktails, like East Side Showroom—although that was a much smaller place—they were the ones that were operating within that classic, gilded age idiom. I got the job because I wear a mustache and I walked in there with a vest on that day. Rob was probably like, "This guy looks the part. What's the worst thing that could happen? Who dresses like this and doesn't know how to make a sazerac?"

You guys sort of embodied that mustache and the suspenders look?

A little, yeah. It wasn't full-on classic cocktail cosplay, but—

You LARP'd at Pêche for six months!

Jerry Thomas LARPing. It definitely celebrated that more than I think a lot of the other spots in town.

Sounded like there was sort of a camaraderie in the staff because at that time you guys were sort of a different breed of bartender. It was more about artistry than run-and-gun.

Sure, it's really easy to sit here in 2019 and look around and think that it was always this way, but in 2011 there were only three cocktail bars in Austin. Two years before that there were none.

What about that experience informs what you do now?

I spent most of my career before that not really worried about volume and largely not worried about the craft side. I was always suspicious of sour mix, or whatever, but I also wasn't thumbing through hundred-year-old cocktail recipes. I think a lot of it was the weird alignment of where a lot of us just kind of happened to be at in our careers, like knowing there was something more, and finding a point of entry to what that something more could be in this space that had this big staff that was volume driven. It formed my perspective a lot in terms of how to streamline programs. It's not just the mechanics of how quickly can you make these six drinks on this ticket, but also how do we make sure that our inventory's running smooth, like are we ordering the right amount? Is the well set up in a way where we're using reciprocal ingredients in a sensible way? A lot of those broader, infrastructural mechanics I think I really learned in that space because that space is a beast. I only ever wanted to work point. I was like, if we're going to do this, I want to be on the hardest well in the space. If we're going to do volume, and we're going to get knocked around, let's really learn something from it. Because, like I said, I was running a little neighborhood dive in Queens for like eight years with one other employee and a cook. We'd do like 15 covers a day and those guys, all 15 of them, drank their fair share.

When you mention the well, what were some of your pet peeves?

Well, I wouldn't say it was a pet peeve, but the biggest challenge of the space at that time was, we would run four bartender sets and we only had three wells. So the two face bartenders that took care of the actual guests at the bar top would work out of that central well. This is probably also why I wanted to work point all the time so I could get the well to myself. But, when you would work face it was really kind of cool because you really had to learn to dance. That's definitely something that was really useful, getting super good at dancing. I wouldn't say it's a pet peeve, but it sucked to learn. It's just a challenge. Bjorn and I did a lot of dancing. There was definitely a lot of dosey-doe'ing back there.

That's funny, it's all connected. Did you work with Bjorn at Pêche?

Yeah, I trained him. He worked for me for, I mean, not long. And it was pretty close to my time out, but I think he left right before I left, too.



BJORN CALLED PÉCHÉ "THE HOGWARTS OF BARTENDING SCHOOL."



ACT 3: ROBERT BJORN TAYLOR & ANUP MISTRİ



David Ross: When did you guys work at Péché?

Bjorn: I moved to Austin in 2011 and, well, first job I had in Austin was at Péché in the fall of 2011.

Anup: I worked at Péché—I'll have to do the math on that. Probably like 2009, 2010?

What does Péché mean to bartenders? Everyone who has come out of there seems to have gone on to bigger and better things.

I always refer to it as the Hogwarts of bartending schools. I feel like a lot of people in the industry that I know now, who are doing great things in the city—as far as bartending, craft cocktails, and restaurant work—more than likely went through Péché. It was one of the first cocktail bars.

Why were you guys attracted to that place?

I think for a lot of us Péché was the first real cocktail bar that we worked at. I had worked at different bars before that were not cocktail bars. Péché was the first bar that—kind of piggy backing on Bjorn's bartending school comment—it was probably the first cocktail bar that anyone ever said they worked at.

The back bar for certain was the largest assortment of spirits I had ever seen in my life. Stuff that I'd never seen when I worked in Houston. Of course I had major spirits: all the whiskeys, scotches, gins you can think of, but when you come to Péché, it was literally every amaro you can think of. It was labeled at the time too as an absinthe bar when the resurgence of absinthe was coming back into the American cocktail scene. So I mean it had the largest selection of spirits in the city.

I mean it's that back shelf of Péché. I would challenge anybody that even works over there now to tell me what's in a random bottle I point at.

Explain the absinthe thing to me.

Prior to working there, all I knew were all the tall tales about hallucinating and it being this fairy thing, and illegal, and whatnot. But I learned a totally different story when I got to Péché. And I learned how rich in history absinthe and pastis are in French culture. And then also how important it was to the cocktail scene itself—wormwood itself, right?

Yeah, wormwood. You just have to appreciate flavors of fennel and anise, that's the main thing really.

My opinion is that those dudes way back when, like Van Gogh, were basically drinking bathtub gin.

Yeah, it was moonshine-ish. That's why it made people go crazy. It was backwoods stuff.

So did you guys do the whole thing with the sugar cubes and the drip, drip, drip stuff?

They actually purchased a whole bunch of classic wares for it, like those large water fountains.

The big ones. They were all antiques, really. When I was working over there, someone broke one of the gold ones.

Oh geez. Rob must have got pissed.

I don't think that anybody mentioned who broke it? I think we were all like, "I don't know. I didn't touch a thing."

There were a lot of things I learned from there. Because I came from high volume, turn-and-burn bulls--t cocktails in Houston—just like lemon drops and chocolate martinis—and when I came to Péché I learned about steps, right? It was the first time I had to actually build a cocktail the right way. Starting with bitters or additives, and then modifier, and then spirit. And it was really drilled into us. That was the first regimented bar I have actually worked at where it was like: this is how you do it, this is how it needs to be.

IT WASN'T FULL-ON CLASSIC COCKTAIL COSPLAY, BUT—



Who drilled that into you?

Well, Rob [Pate] paid my managers: at the time it was Dwayne Clark and Justin Elliott.

And I think it's just good to have bar managing skills. Every manager adds to the whole management, right? Every manager does their part. Every bartender does their part. But it's the first bar that I worked at where the ticket would print out on the service well and it would go: "classic cocktail, modification on the classic cocktail, bartender's choice whiskey sour, bartender's choice gin, silly drink, beer, wine." And you'd be like, "Okay, let's go."

Rock it out. The service well killed me.

It's just whenever those ice cream brandy alexander tickets would print out.

Oh, the alexanders and the grasshoppers. I hated that so much.

Because the freezer would freeze things real well. So the ticket would print out, but you couldn't get to any of the other drinks because you were trying so hard to scoop this f--king ice cream.

You are just like, "Oh my God, I'm in the weeds and I have to go through this?" Hell, I used to get pissed at having to make ice balls sometimes.

Oh you had those ice ball presses?

Yep, one of those copper presses.

You had to wait for it

I visit the Carthay Circle bar at Disneyland's California Adventure and they have one of those. People bring their children in to see the bartenders make the ice balls. I always decline the ice ball because I can see how much they pain the bartender. I'm like, I don't need the show, dude.

Well, speaking of the show, in 2010 it was literally about the show back then. And I think it's because Texas was really young in the cocktail scene and so it was really important that people saw you make it.

It was the only cocktail bar downtown, so it got all the people like, "Cocktail bar, what? Let's go there."

Yeah, we had to make old fashioned the way old fashioned were made, you know what I'm saying? You had to muddle the sugar cube down. Which, again, was new to me. You had to make everything scratch. You are building this. There was no cutting corners.

As far as the old fashioned with sugar, there are pros

and cons to everything, right? And it was like, "All right, here I am muddling this sugar cube in there," and it's not dissolving any time soon, but I need it to dissolve because I got tickets behind this thing.

There was no pre-prepping. There are a lot of bars that pull that now—which I have nothing against.

My bar right now, I was like, f--k muddling a sugar cube in the middle of a Friday night. I'm making a 2-to-1 dem' syrup with a bar spoon in there and it's better than the sugar cube that you're trying to muddle over there. Because this thing is already dissolved.

It was literally for the show. We did this for the show. "But this is how it was done in the 1920s! It's, like, cool! Here is a dollar for your efforts." Appreciate that.

Yes, actually that happened a lot. Here is a dollar for all that you just did for ten minutes.

That's a weird thing: people would really tip you for a hand crafted cocktail the same amount as if you gave them a bottle of beer?

I think it's a different era now. It's like all these bars that never did craft cocktails before now have to do cocktails. They're having to train their bartenders that if somebody comes in asking for a negroni, you need to make a negroni.

And honestly that was a benefit of being a part of that staff. We got exposed to that real early. So I can appreciate having dem' syrup now or having things being pre-made and being able to knock out stuff consistently. It's really about the consistency and making sure that these cocktails are going out the intended way at whatever bar you work for, right? But yeah, man, it was a benefit to us to go through that.

So where are you guys at right now?

I am the general manager of Red Headed Stepchild on 5th right now.

I actually just accepted an AGM position at an up-and-coming bar and restaurant here on the East Side: Lefty's Brick Bar at the Arrive Hotel. But definitely, the knowledge behind spirits is what I take away from my time at Pêche. And also the camaraderie that I had there with bartenders because every bartender that I worked with I am still close with in this city. They are all people that are heavily influencing the cocktail and food industry in Austin.

I think everybody that I worked with at Pêche at that time is now running a program somewhere.



GRAND PRIZE

WITH LINDSAY RAE BURLESON

Lindsay Rae Burleson came up in the Houston scene bartending at the legendary Poison Girl bar. She is currently the General Manager at Grand Prize—a bar they playfully refer to as, “Your Slippery Slope.” When I met Lindsay in the upstairs space at Grand Prize, she immediately started chattering about a banana costume, or something. I missed the banana costume story because I couldn’t get the recorder out of my bag fast enough, but I wasn’t worried—any interview that begins in a banana costume is going places.



Lindsay Rae: I started bartending when I was 18 at nightclubs wearing stilettos and a butterfly costume.

David Ross: Wait, you were talking about banana costumes?

Yeah. I have a theatre background, so my whole life is full of costumes. I used to write at a theatre company up until last year.

But why a butterfly costume at a bar?

Every night was a different theme: I was a referee one night, one night was butterfly costume, another night we had to do nurse's outfits. I mean, I came off the street and put in an application. I was just like, can I bartend here? This was downtown [Houston], probably 17 years ago. It was a downtown club—as in, after-hours hip-hop club. I mean, I'd be there until 6.30 a.m., serving juices and water because we didn't close until the last person left.

You were just a little punk rock, hip-hop girl that was like, "I wanna work here?"

No, it was the only place on this one street that was hiring and I didn't know how to get a bartending job. I was bartending out of restaurants and decided I never wanted to work with food and booze, that just wasn't my jam. Then I got a job at a dive bar. I also was a [cigarette company] rep and that job got me better bartending jobs. I definitely didn't go the path that most people go. When I was younger, I mean, it pretty much was just what was going to pay the bills. I was putting myself through school and then, trying to figure out, okay, what's a job I can work at night? Do my lighting design class at nine a.m., make it to rehearsals, make it to history class, and then, what's a night time option? Nobody's

paying my bills, so that was an option. When I look back now, would I ever take that job, or suggest to someone to take one of those jobs? Absolutely not. It was a terrible place for a woman to work in, but it kind of leads to the environment I like to create now. I'm not mad about it, I'm not upset, I don't regret any of it, I think I learned what I never want to do, and I think that's the more valuable lesson.

Funny because so many bartenders I've interviewed have these corporate service backgrounds, but you didn't have that? You learned on the fly?

Very much learning on the fly and figuring out what works and what doesn't work and kind of bonking your head and making mistakes. Luckily we have an amazing community of people in the United States, and also in Texas, in Houston, that I can reach out to and ask, "What are these? What is this? What are the proper steps of service?" But, I think, having that background makes me a perfect fit for here and where I'm at now because Grand Prize is kind of where I'd love to see bars going in the future: you can get a really lovely sazerac, you could get a really lovely mai tai with our house made orgeat, but we can also get a shot of [cinnamon whiskey] or a beer and I'm not going to shame you.

Have you been here since the beginning?

No, I started working the door, probably the second or third year they were open. Just ran with picking up shifts. I'd been working at Poison Girl, which is another bar in town, for 13 years, on and off. Here, I first started off as the beverage manager and then I've been the general manager for three years—and I will be leaving in three months.



WE MIGHT NOT HAVE THE BEST PAINT JOB, BUT WE DAMN SURE GOT THE BEST FAMILY VALUES.

Oh. Where are you going?

One of the other bartenders that's been here since the beginning, Billy Blade, we're starting our own project: we are opening up a place with a rock 'n' roll/metal/cocktail/honky-tonk vibe, called Two-Headed Dog.

Sounds interesting. Is that a reference to Cerberus, or is Cerberus a three-headed dog?

Yeah, it's a three-headed dog. We're referencing the Roky Erickson song "Two-Headed Dog," where they were doing all those crazy experiments in the Kremlin.

Really? I don't think I've heard this one?

During World War II they were trying to create the ultimate beast. So I feel like creating this bar is the ultimate beast. But I'll still be on here, helping to consult and train. We've brought two people on to take over and kind of split those duties, but this will always be my home. Ryan Rouse and Brad Moore, they took a chance on me. I had little to no cocktail background when I came, I was just winning cocktail competitions.

How do you feel about the term "dive bar," by the way? I know some bartenders don't like that term.

I think it's just fine. For me, the vernacular people use, as descriptors, let them. I'm too busy to worry about somebody's verbiage they're using when describing me. They either like me or they don't. They like the experience or they don't. They had a good time or they didn't.

So, you don't care if someone labels you a mixologist or a liquid chef?

Here's the thing: if you're going to dare call me that, go right ahead, I'll take it. Will you give me a little badge that I can put on my vest? Do I get a sticker? I don't know, I just show up to work. I mean, I was an elementary school teacher for five years and I bartended every weekend. It's the same: being a bartender is very much like being a kindergarten teacher and trying to transition from recess, potty breaks, into a lesson, it's the same as the transition from mid/high party, from midnight, to getting them out the door by 2:15, and then cleaning up your classroom, and shutting the lights. It's all about de-escalation and repetitive motions.

I was also a teacher for a minute. I had never understood the term "herding cats" until then.

Feral cats.

And so you think bartending is sort of like that?

It can be, it just depends what time of day? When do you amp it up? When do you start bringing it down? It's orchestrating this kind of artistic movement. It's kind of the same thing with Doom Tiki, it's something that I do and I travel with and—

Wait. What is Doom-Tiki? Whatever it is, I want it.

So, I saw a lot of pop-ups and things going on and my favorite thing was seeing a bunch of punker kids drinking giant tiki drinks and having a good time. So for me, I use it as—how can I put this? When I say this, sometimes I get too caught up in the jargon, but the idea

of relational aesthetics: you go to people to kind of slowly change a mind and get them to experience something different. So it's this mixed hybrid of a cocktail/dive bar, with my love of metal music and tiki cocktails. You put everybody in this weird environment and you get them in one space. When it started out maybe five people would show up to these. But now, the last one, I mean, it looked like a Saturday night on a Sunday at 11 p.m. and you get to see the lawyer talking to the punk rock kid with these giant bowls of lovely, over-the-top cocktails. For me, that's what I think Houston is: we're a demographic with so many different walks of life, and if you can put them in a bar together, and they're having a good time, and you've got people out til 1:30 on a Sunday night, and they can forget about the world a little bit, and jam some Midnight, I'm into that.

Ah! You like Midnight.

Yeah. And I love people coming up to me, like, "What is that?" I'm like, "Oh, that's Sleep." When you can play Sleep in a bar and people are jamming out to it, I love it.

That's rad. I also know that you're very involved in elevating women's issues and LGBTQ issues, but how do you think we change peoples' perspectives in that regard?

You provide an environment where people are existing right next to each other. You give people that room to experience each other at events where they can say, oh, we're both experiencing this thing together. Then they have a talk, they learn something about each other, they see each other again and they see each other in these environments, so they're like, "Oh, okay, you're a person." I think it's relating to people as people and seeing those things. It's speaking up in those ways. It's not screaming at culture, it's having a conversation with culture. And I think creating the environment for people to safely have those conversations and slowly integrate instead of just throwing things at people, if that makes sense? I think that is how you see social changes over the course of time. It doesn't happen in a day. So we provide environments that are welcoming to all. We might have a night like the "Under the Sea" night: we had some very well known bartenders come out, craft people came out, and a lot of people came out over the top—we had a mermaid drag-queen come out, but Mikey doesn't leave at the end of it. Mikey stays and drinks and hangs out with everybody.

Mikey is a mermaid drag-queen?

Yeah, Miss Mikey. She does parties, she does everything. She'll be Miss Mikey for a while, but then she'll go change and she'll come out as Mikey and hangs out. It's not this breaking of an illusion, if that makes sense? She's not something to be touted around to entertain you, she's your friend. Just like the bartender entertains you, but when you see him in public, you say, "Hi Ron." And I think those things are important. I don't know if it works, it's just my vibe on it. We're really big here on using this upstairs space. We have so many community meetings. We did the Sisterhood Project here. We've done a few sustainability classes with Tin Roof—we invite everybody, even when we have people come taste test. Please come in, we're a big family here, and we want the rest of the community to be a part of it. We might not have the best paint job, but we damn sure got the best family values.



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A CONVERSATION WITH SARAH TROXELL OF NOBIE'S

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“Sarah Troxell is the Michael Jordan of competition bartending...”
I just wanted to see what that sentence looked like “out loud.” Because it’s not exactly true. Yet. It may be true soon and that’s why I’m doing some beta testing on the moniker. (Is that the right term, beta testing?)
Sarah is a rising star in the bartending scene and she’s placing high, if not outright winning, the competitions she’s been entering, but perhaps it’s a little early to be comparing her to Jordan. Although I do enjoy the visual of a white girl with purple hair dunking on the great Michael Jordan. Let’s just say that Sarah is really, really, really good at what she does. (That’s three realllys.)
I met her at her bar at Nobie’s and we talked about the sport of bartending and her upcoming tiki project.



You seem like an interesting person to me, like, you're into other weird interesting things? Or do you devote yourself entirely to bartending?

Yeah. Definitely. I think I will die in a restaurant somewhere, or a bar. I'm actually a trained chef so I've moved from cooking in the back into front of house. I have been working in restaurants since I was sixteen. So, almost half my life. I'm 30 now. I did a lot of hostessing, serving, and bartending through college. Ended up dropping out of UT to go to culinary school. Graduated from the Art Institute, worked as a chef for many years. I was in between jobs, and my friend talked me into working at Coltivare, which is a pretty prominent restaurant in town with a really awesome craft bar. I had never worked a craft bar before, but I knew how to mix a drink, or whatever. She was like, "I'll teach you everything you need to know about craft bartending. You're a chef, you can work efficiently, you know how to be fast and clean." She was right.

I can't not talk to you about bartender competitions since you have so much of that going on right now. Do you feel like you're an athlete?

Yeah, kinda. Especially with Speed Rack, for sure. During Speed Rack practices I do twelve rounds in about three hours. In a normal Speed Rack competition the most rounds you'll do in one day is four. So by the end of that twelfth round, there are still people willing to buy more cocktails, but I'm too tired. I've maxed out on how many cocktails I can make as fast as possible while bartending at one of the busiest restaurants in Houston on a Friday night—it's cardio.

I can't imagine a bartender standing still, but I feel like there's some who shake their booty more than others. Are you a mover-and-shaker?

Oh yeah, for sure. I mean, obviously, I'm going to kind of stand still in my well, but here [at Noble's] I have to flip the records, I'm also the manager, so I'm

helping servers do stuff, I'm making sure that all the guests are taken care of with food service, so it's not so stationary, for sure. And it's a show, right? People want to see you with your really fun shake, and see you flip the tins, and watch you make six cocktails at one time. I'm not so much into flair because I'm too clumsy for that, but I can flip the tin into my hand and catch it and not look like a total moron.

Have you tried to do it before? You can get fake bottles to practice with.

No. I think even with fake bottles I would still break something.

So where are you right now in competition? I know you just won something, and you're about to go to Chicago, right?

This is my third year competing in the Speed Rack competition. The regional for this area was actually in Houston this year, which was awesome because hometown advantage is real. I get to go to the national finals in Chicago in about a month. I'm super excited. It's during Drink Chicago Style, which is a really awesome cocktail conference of sorts, similar to Tales [Of The Cocktail], but their slogan is: "Equal parts think and drink." They do a lot of seminars focused more on the social aspects of bars. So many things related to the LGBTQ community not having as much of a voice as some other bartenders. Even women don't necessarily have as much of a voice as other bartenders. Social aspects: how to diffuse situations when some bros get into a fight in your bar—all sorts of things. It's not so brand-driven. It's more about the problems we actually face as bartenders. As opposed to like, "Here, taste this thing that we make, and we're going to tell you why you should stock it in your bar." Not that that's a bad thing, but we have a social responsibility as bartenders to be able to push the industry forward and they're helping do that by starting conversations that are important to have.

Sounds cool. I remember reading about these competitions and thinking: there must be certain cocktails that make you groan?

Egg white cocktails are tricky—like a whiskey sour, or a morning glory fizz—because in the moment, when you're nervous and you try to crack an egg and do the egg white thing, it's very easy to mess that up. And you also have to shake it a lot longer than other cocktails. But I've practiced so many egg white cocktails. Then another one that's challenging to execute are swizzles. It's a tiki drink, but it's built in the glass with crushed ice, and you use a swizzle stick, and you kind of have to tilt it and emulsify everything. Those are easy to knock over. You have to pay attention to it because if it doesn't look beautiful, they're going to dock you for it. It's supposed to have bitters on top, and mint, and a straw, and it's very easy to rush through it and just serve something kind of sloppily put together. That was actually a cocktail that was called on my first round in Houston and I was like, I've got this. I made a beautiful queen's park swizzle. But those are definitely challenging technique-wise.

I think I also read you had problems with free pouring, or you didn't like free pouring?

Yes. So the first year I competed I made the top eight and I actually went on to finish in the top four. I didn't win, but for a first year competitor it was a pretty big deal. I practiced my bum off for last year's competition, which was in New Orleans, but there's a preliminary round where the judging is slightly different than it is on stage. First year, I jiggered prelim round, made top eight, no problem. I thought I was better and cleaner than I was last year, so I thought, oh, I don't need to change my method just for this for one round. I made perfect drinks in 1:16 and everyone else made drinks—probably less perfect—in less than a minute. You can accurately free pour, but they weren't

judging on balance, and what they looked like, and wash line—like how full the glass is—it was pass/fail on whether you got the ingredients in the cocktail and didn't have anything extra.

How many drinks did you make in 1:16?

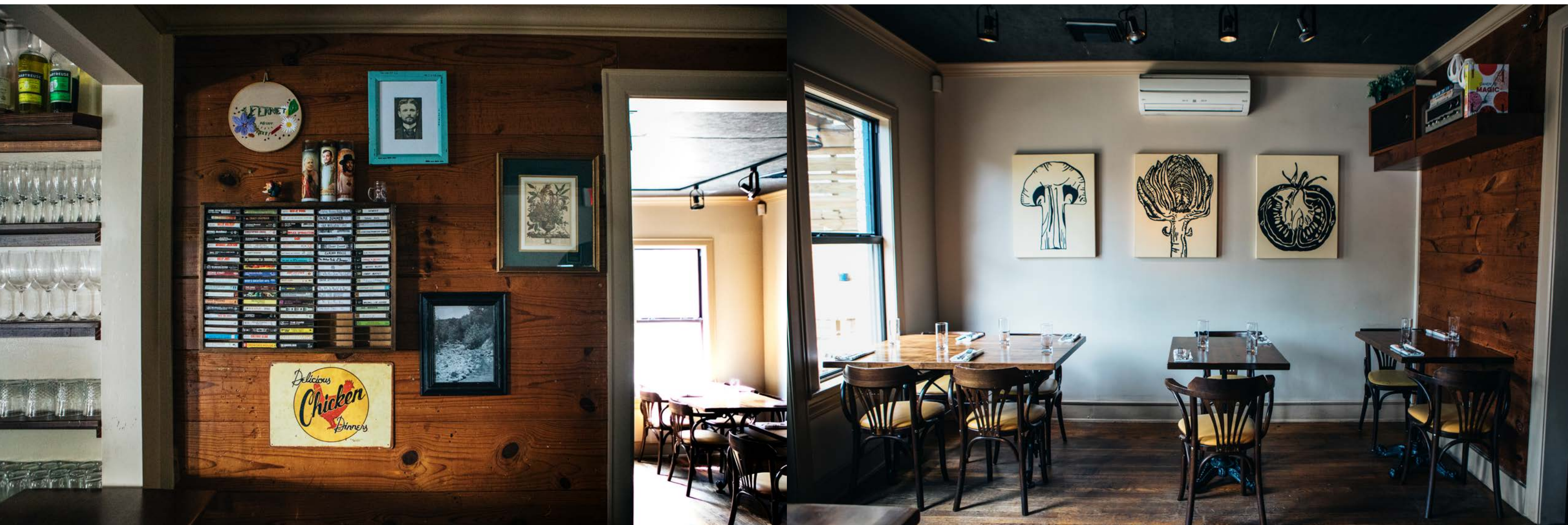
Four.

Four? Wow.

So they changed the rules a little bit this year for preliminary rounds and I think I might have been one person who pushed for that change. I don't think it happened to only me, but I think they figured out that judging on speed only that they weren't actually getting necessarily the best eight bartenders, they were just getting the people who practiced the prelim rounds the most. It wasn't my year. It was a very hard lesson to learn, it was humbling. But this year I practiced free pouring forever. You have to retrain your brain because I'm used to picking up one thing at time and putting it into a jigger and measuring it, but now I'm trying to manage two things, maybe not in the same cocktail, and how to build your well, and stack your bottles, and to be the most efficient. It definitely makes my brain work in different way, but I practiced a lot and I finished second in prelims this year.

When you said "efficient," I thought: do you have any bar pet peeves?

For me, I hate a messy bar top, so I'm constantly wiping my area. As far as personal pet peeves, I'm just very OCD about putting stuff back where I got it. So if somebody makes a cocktail in my well, and maybe they didn't put my spoon back where it belongs, or the lime juice back where it belongs, I'm like, what is going on here? I'm very meticulous about muscle memory, so I want everything to be in exactly the same place.



I'M NOT SO MUCH INTO FLAIR BECAUSE I'M TOO CLUMSY FOR THAT, BUT I CAN FLIP THE TIN INTO MY HAND AND CATCH IT AND NOT LOOK LIKE A TOTAL MORON.

Do you have any ingredient adventure stories? I know especially with some of those old timey tiki recipes there are some weird ingredients.

Oh yeah, and weird ratios. I am definitely trying to bring a balanced cocktail to the tiki bar. I think there are lots of tiki bars doing really fun stuff, but they're not necessarily making the most balanced cocktails, especially the more old-school ones, because they want to lean on those recipes, and I get that, but that's not necessarily what the modern palette is interested in drinking. When I do a lot of "Dealer's Choice" here [at Nobie's] the one thing that people say to me is, "Just not too sweet." Not too sweet, not too sweet, not too sweet. Tiki has a reputation of being sugary—and there's definitely going to be some sugary piña coladas—but they're going to be balanced with lime juice and stuff like that. So I'm trying to bring a balanced, rounded menu to the table in Houston.

And so what is this tiki project that's coming up?

So we're opening a bar/restaurant called The Toasted Coconut. It's actually not too far from here in Montrose. We're super excited. It's something that Martin, Sarah, and I, the owners of this restaurant, have been talking about since before this restaurant [Nobie's] was even open. Martin told me, "Oh, I'm ready to start looking at spaces for the next project." And I was like, you're crazy, you're not going to open another restaurant, you're out of your mind. Then he was like, "We're going to go look at this space on Richmond," and I was like, that trash hole? The only good thing about it is that it has a giant palapa covering the patio. And he was like, "Yeah, exactly." Whatever. We all went in there very skeptical, and we walked into this space with the real estate agent, and we all were kind of like, "We're going to put a tiki bar here." It's perfect: it's big, it has a big private room, a decent-sized kitchen, and the giant palapa-covered patio was definitely one of the biggest selling points on this space for us. Plus, the investment group that owns it really wanted us to do something there. The last tenant was called Texas Shrimp Shack and I don't think they did very well. So they were really looking for somebody with a solid reputation in Houston to take over that space. They're super supportive of us. So are our neighbors, Pennywhistle Pub, super cool Irish bar, and then there's a sports bar on the other side.

Oh, so you can go to Ireland, or Hawaii. One of my favorite things about the tiki culture is that it doesn't really exist anywhere. It's this fiction that's part Polynesian, part South Pacific, part nowhere...

And that's what's cool about our food menu. Martin has deemed that anything is fair game between the 20th parallel on either side of the equator. So that's South American food, Asian food, Singapore,

Thailand—so the menu's going to be a broad spectrum of those kinds of flavors, and so will the cocktails.

How deep are you in tiki culture? Do you collect mugs? You definitely have an aloha shirt on.

Oh yeah, and I actually reined it in. I have enough real Hawaiian shirts to wear for a month with no repeats. I think I'm into the forties, but I haven't counted in a while. Instagram thrift stores have changed my life. My favorite ones that I own are made in Hawaii. I have some really dope vintage stuff, too.

So do you guys actually hope to be a tiki destination? Because tiki culture—I mean, those people travel, right?

And that's something I'm sort of afraid of because they're super serious. Somebody posted an Eater article that was like, "They're going to be tiki-inspired and tropical." Then somebody posted in the Texas Tiki Files group, "If you're going to do it, you should do it, not just half-ass it." And I was like, whoa, that is not what I want to do. But we are trying to be like a light, bright, tropical, airy space. It's not necessarily going to be the things that you're used to seeing with places like Smuggler's Cove or Three Dots And A Dash. I love those places, but we're trying to bring something bright and fun to the table. Do I know everything there is to know about tiki culture in the 50s and all the cocktails? Absolutely not, but I am so hungry for knowledge that I am going to get there. I'm constantly reading books, looking at recipes, figuring out what we're going to do on the menu. I take my cocktails seriously. It's definitely intimidating, though.

I interviewed Martin Cate actually, and it was a great interview. I love interviewing bartenders because it's sort of a nerd-driven profession. There's a lot of research. Do you read? Do you collect cookbooks and that sort of thing?

Oh yeah, cocktail books are more now my focus. As someone who's a bar manager, if I want to learn things, I have to teach them to myself. And so that's one of my best resources: the *Smuggler's Cove* book, Don The Beachcomber's book, Beach Bum Berry in New Orleans, Latitude 29 owner, and even Russell at Lei Low is such a wealth of knowledge. Lei Low, the tiki bar that exists in this town, is my favorite bar in the city. I go there all the time. And when he sees me, he's like, "You can't open a crappy tiki bar, Sarah!" And I'm like, I know! But he's also super open to helping me and answering my questions. Him and Martin Cate, they've been in it a lot longer than me. I am definitely young, especially in the tiki world, but it's something I'm super excited about and passionate about. But do I have a storage unit full of dope-ass vintage tiki stuff? Not yet, but...

•+•+•

TONGUE CUT SPARROW

WITH ALEX NEGRANZA

Alex Negranza was born in Modesto, CA and moved to Seattle when he was 18 and there began his career as a barista, of all things. He got really into coffee. And, presumably, coffee got really into him. He moved up quickly in the coffee world and became such an authority that he was asked to judge other baristas on their skills. But, in his quest to be the best barista he could be, Alex soon found himself on a related, but different path.





I LIKE TO TELL PEOPLE I STOPPED MAKING COFFEE AND I STARTED MAKING MONEY.

"The thing was," Alex remembers, "I was calling myself a professional barista—this was in 2009 when the idea of being a professional in coffee was barely a discussion—and so I was like, 'Well, what is a professional barista?' I remember going onto Wikipedia and it read, 'Someone who serves hot and cold alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks.' And I was like, 'Well, wait a minute, how can I call myself a professional barista if I don't know what a Manhattan is?'"

Alex began visiting bars around Seattle asking about cocktails. The bartenders would break down the drinks and explain what vermouth is, and bitters, and the difference between rye and bourbon. He found people were excited to share this information because there wasn't, at that time, an outlet for people to nerd out on cocktails. He fell in love with the cocktail scene and the idea that it was a "counterculture to coffee."

"Not to get too deep into it," Alex said, "but there's this weird idea that always kind of messed with my head that coffee and alcohol are exactly the same thing. They're social lubricants, right? You wake up in the morning and you need that coffee to get you ready for your workday. Then when you leave work you need that thing before you go home because you had a bad day at work, right? They are these things that help us transition from our normal lives into our work lives, or our work lives into our social lives. But why is it that coffee isn't as respected as cocktails? Why is it that people are more likely to tip \$5 on a \$20 tab to a bartender, but not to a barista? What if bartenders were like, 'Hey, dirty martini on the bar for Alex?' And you could just grab it and take it out. What would this culture look like?"

"Well it would look very weird," I said, "if someone were walking down the street with a martini glass and their name written on the side of it."

"Someone's misspelled name," Alex said laughing. "So these cultures are very, very similar, but the way society treats them is very different. So I took this sabbatical to learn about bartending and I ended up staying at that bar—Liberty Bar in Seattle—for three and a half years. I went from bar back, to bartender, to bar manager, to general manager. And I've been in cocktails now for almost ten years. I like to tell people I stopped making coffee and I started making money."

Alex still bartends on occasion, although he prefers these days to take a back seat and leave those responsibilities to the capable staff he has at the three locations he directs. He also sees himself in more of a mentor position now because Alex has done quite well and has become a popular fixture in the Houston scene.

"I'm ready to teach other bartenders how to do that," he said, "because I don't think that there's anything I do that's super special except that I pay attention, and I listen, and I observe, and then give people the service that they need. [My staff] is just as talented, but maybe they just don't smile the same way that I do? Or maybe I just put more product in my hair?"

"It's probably because you're cute as hell," I said.

"It's an unfair advantage, I guess," Alex admitted, "but it's one of those things where I can teach other people how to do that. And then I would rather get the satisfaction of watching those bartenders grow and watch them step into their own than for me to step behind the bar and steal that spotlight, I guess."

I enjoy interviewing bartenders because one aspect of their job is to essentially interview people, and be interviewed, all day long. Craft bartenders come with the added nerd factor so they're especially interesting to talk to. I've been given to understand that they could be making more money in a turn-and-burn situation, just pouring beers and whipping out shots, but they don't because it's not as fulfilling.

"Am I right in suggesting that bartenders in the craft cocktail scene have a desire to do something better? That it's more artistic?" I asked.

"No, you're totally right," Alex said. "I mean, as a responsible employer, when you're interviewing people, you have to talk to them about money: it's our job to tell you how much money you will be guaranteed to make so you can make the right decision for your life, right? So when we talk to people about stuff like that, one of the things that we sometimes will touch on is: you can go and work at other places and make a lot more money. I could go work at a club right now, work three days a week, spend four days a week traveling the world, and make just as much, if not more, as I'm making right now. But that wouldn't be something that I am fulfilled by. And I think a lot of people in—for lack of better words—the craft bartending community, they love the craft. They love the process. For them it's an art—we don't really actively talk about it as an art because when you go down that path then you start to get into this mixology world of turning your nose up, and there are mixologists who are like, 'You're here for my show! Welcome! I'm going to make you a cocktail now!' Good bartenders are present, and they listen, and they give back to people, and they're able to curate this experience based on the type of feedback they're getting. That's an art and that's a craft and we love that process, but you don't get that in places like turn-and-burn clubs."



It's funny that the mixologist with the curly mustache, who was hip and cool only just a few years ago, is almost extinct at this point. Where is the cocktail scene now because it seems to be in an unusual place? It's still here, strong as ever, but maybe the sheen has worn off a little bit since everyone has a craft cocktail menu now?

"I think there's a lot of discussion—a lot of murmurs about the cocktail bubble," Alex said in response. "Like, when does it pop? We've seen the cocktail community grow so fast. People who are not veterans, who have only been bartending for four or five years, they dedicate themselves to one bar, they learn how to bartend there, then they become a bar manager, they start getting accolades and awards and stuff, and people are like, 'Hey, we want to invest in you. Let's open a bar.' And then you have these 26-year-old bartenders opening up bars and I'm like, whoa, you've only been doing this for four years. That worked for the first and second generation of real, true bartenders. It's not going to work for these eighth and ninth generation bartenders. I see these kids—I say kids, I'm only 30—but I interview these people who are like, 22, 23, and they're like, 'Yeah, I want to open a bar in a few years.' And I'm like, because you studied some cocktail recipes? You don't have any experience breaking up bar fights, you don't have any of those rough edges, you haven't seen the full spectrum of what it means to really be a bartender."

"Have you ever broken up a bar fight?" I asked.

"Oh, all the time," Alex said proudly. "I mean, bar fights happen. I remember the first time it happened, I was like, whoa. I work out more than ever in my life now, but six years ago I was 130 pounds, 5'10", I probably had dreadlocks at the time, and facial piercings, and acne, and I was trying to break up this bar fight? I was just a little queer kid. That's not going to work."

"I think that's kind of why I asked."

"So," Alex began, "my claim to fame occurred in Seattle at this bar called Montana. It was like, THE industry dive bar. I remember walking in one day and I'm watching these two guys trying to order, and one cut the other guy off, or something like that, and they start arguing. I'm watching it escalate and I'm just like, I swear to god, if this fight happens. So they start pushing each other and then I wedge myself in between them and split them up. I'm like, 'Yo, come on, I'm trying to order a drink here, can you girls take this outside if you're going to do this?' And they kind of looked at me like, 'Excuse me?' And I remember just being like, 'Look, we're all trying to have a good time here and order drinks. We could have all had drinks in our hands and be sitting out with our friends, but you guys decided to argue.' So the first guy in line pays and leaves with his girlfriend. And then it's just me and this other guy. I remember he kept looking back at me. And he's like, 'What's your name?' And I'm like, 'My name's Alex.' And he was just looking at me and he said, 'Wanna take a shot with me?' And I was like, 'Okay.' So I take a shot with him, but then he leans in and he tells me to go meet him in the bathroom."

"Whoa! What?" I said.

"And I was just like, what just happened? He was clearly a

straight guy. But I had somehow triggered this thing in this guy. And it wasn't even a joke. He was genuinely turned on by me breaking up this fight between him and this other guy. So I said, 'Hey, man, I'm here with a friend. Sorry.' It just made him even more aggravated because I turned him down."

More disbelief escaped from me. Gasp.

"He leaves," Alex continued, "and I remember I walked up to the bartender to order and she was just like, 'I don't— How did you— What?' She watched the whole thing happen and she was just like, 'Your drinks are all on me. What do you want?' It was just one of those moments where I was like, I guess this is what I do now: I break up bar fights."

"Wow, that's a good one," I said. "It also seems indicative of your success. That little microcosmic event sort of informs how you approach the big picture of what you're doing: don't fight, let's have some drinks. You just seem like you have a really good grasp of the way humans interact."

"I think that a lot of that has to come with just observing people," Alex said. "I mean, my two studies in college—and I quite literally mean my two studies in college: I only took psychology classes and music classes. I studied music in college."

"Really? What did you play?"

"I played trombone, actually."

"That's a weird instrument," I said. "You're just an all around weirdo, huh?"

"Yeah, I am," Alex said laughing. "Thank you. I love it. I actually have been thinking about it recently, to pick it up."

I'm constantly amazed by bartenders: the amount of work the profession demands, the hours, the knowledge, having to interact with people? Hosting a party night after night has to take a toll on anyone's health and I always wonder how they do it. Because I like to party, but I also like to stop partying.

"I know you're a big proponent of bartender health," I said. "Tell me about what you've been doing in that space?"

"Well, just to kind of backtrack to the party thing," Alex began, "I think that something that's really neglected a lot in this industry is: it's okay to have a bad day. Even though we tell bartenders: leave your personal stuff at home. You're having a bad day? Guess what, you know who doesn't give a s--t? Every single person that walks into the bar to pay you money to do your job. And I think that a ton of that is true, but it is also a little bit desensitizing and almost dehumanizes people. At the end of the day, we're in the business of being humans and interacting with other humans and I think that the most important thing that anyone can offer any guest is to be authentic. You just have to be you. But I think that we put a lot of pressure on bartenders to burn themselves out because they feel like they constantly have to be this perfect host. And although that is true, I will tell everyone on my staff that you should be able to do this perfectly every single time, I think that it's unhealthy for us, as an industry, to not acknowledge the fact that doing this job for 50 hours a week and constantly having to give everyone your all is exhausting and can be a lot to demand of people."

I GUESS THIS IS WHAT I DO NOW: I BREAK UP BAR FIGHTS.

"I'm getting tired just thinking about it," I said.

"And so fitness became a really important thing for me," Alex continued. "I'm an Operations Director of three bars and I'm going to be the partner for our next concept. There is constantly something that someone needs from me—a bartender, a new hire, an old hire, someone I've fired, purveyors, accountants, bosses, other managers, customers—everyone constantly needs me. And that's exhausting. And so I fell in love with SoulCycle because for 45 minutes every single day that I took a class my phone was in a locker. I was in my workout clothes. I sweated. I was present. In SoulCycle they refer to it a lot as 'moving meditation.' Meditation doesn't have to be standing still. So I fell in love with SoulCycle because no one could bother me, but I also had this community of people, which I'd never had, who didn't want to talk about alcohol, who didn't know me as a bartender, they only knew me as the guy on bike 14."

"I totally get it," I said laughing. "I had a job in LA a few years ago where I actually couldn't wait to go sit in traffic for the same reason: no one could bother me. But you don't just take classes, you lead classes too, right?"

"One of the interesting things that happened," Alex said, "is that brands have started stepping up wanting to do SoulCycle classes. Like, 'Hey, we want to give you eight bikes for people to go and work out with you.' And I thought that was really interesting because if I have to go to another gin and tonic tasting sponsored by a gin brand, I'll flip out. I don't need to drink another gin and tonic. In fact, I would rather you just give me a high five and take a picture of me at that gin and tonic event than for me to actually have to drink that gin and tonic. I don't need to drink more alcohol. And the people who've been in this industry for 15 years, they're not going to go to another gin brand event either. So how do you get brands to invest in their community and the sustainability of those bartenders who are just too old to go to those events? I was like: health and wellness. That's the answer. You tell them that they matter. Teach them how to manage their finances better. Teach them how to workout better. That backache they have? It's probably because they're not shaking the right way and they need to shake a different way. But no one's doing that type of programming and nobody's doing that type of education."

"But you are. You're trying to make change. You should be proud," I said.

"It's funny because so many people ask me about it, and they're like, 'You're doing this thing!' And I'm like, 'No, I'm just doing me and trying to share it with people.'"

Since we were on the subject of fitness, and I was envying how fit Alex was, I noticed that he had really big calves. "You have really big calves," I said out loud.

"I do," he said proudly. "I used to be a competitive jump roper, actually."

"A competitive jump roper?" I said surprised. "What is that?"

Alex went on to explain that he started out at a very young age on his school's jump rope team, the Jazzy Jumpers, and he got really into it. He went to jump rope camp, his team performed at halftime during a Laker game, they traveled to other schools doing demos, and he ended up becoming a certified instructor for the USA Jump Rope Federation.

"Yeah, so anyways, I have big calves, yes," Alex said. And then, while I was looking at my notes, Alex suggested we talk about being gay.

"Let's talk about being gay," he said rather suddenly. "Or we can talk about me being gay. I don't want to make any presumptions."

"Okay," I said. "So, how do I ask you a gay question?"

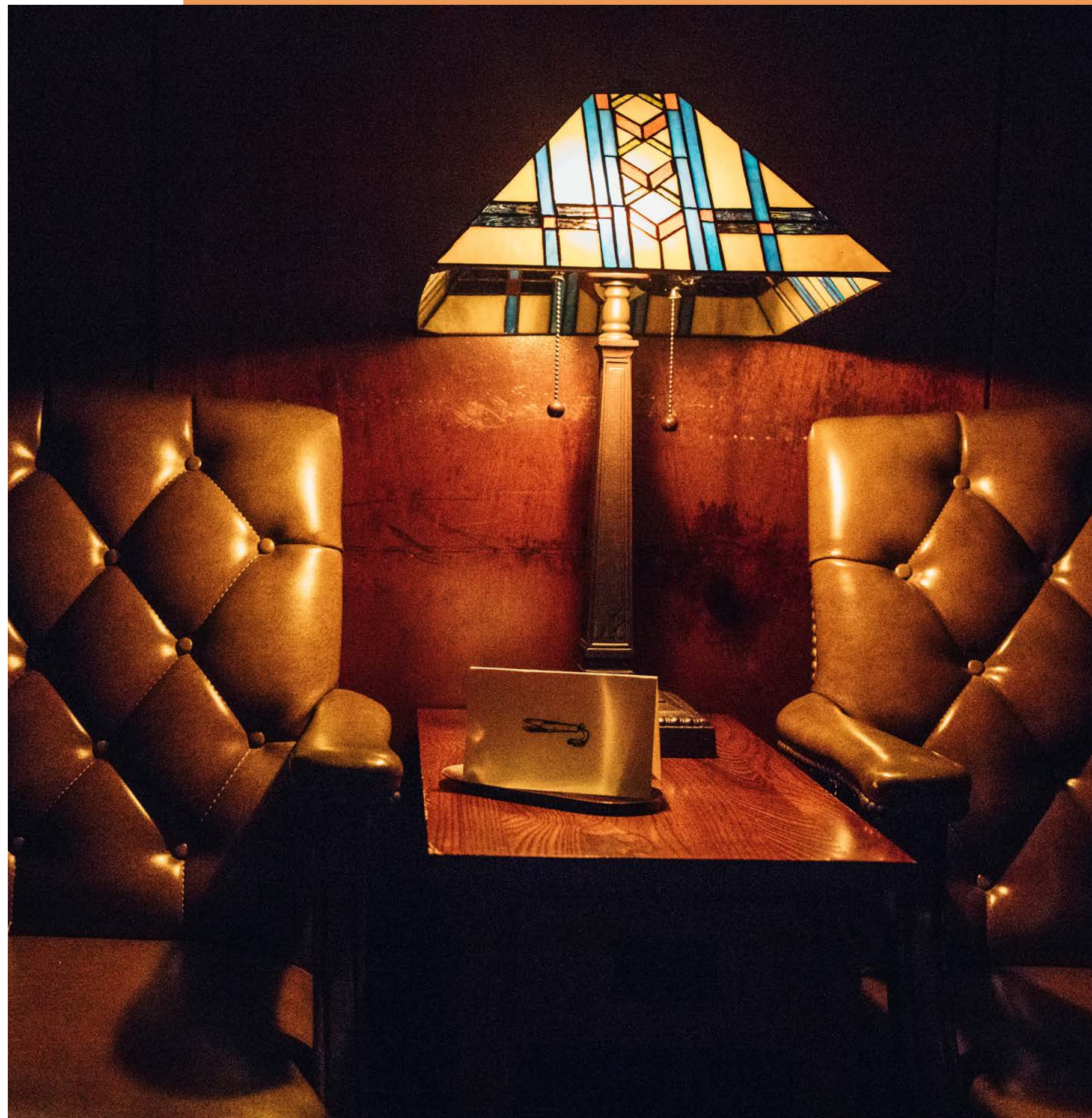
"You can ask whatever you want," he said. Noticing I was still at a loss, he continued. "Let me ask you this, because these are the kind of questions I ask myself a lot: what is a gay bar?"

Apparently I had suddenly lost control of the interview because now he was interviewing me. I was totally fine with this.

"What's funny is I was going to ask you that exact question," I said. "But since you asked it first, I'll respond first: I think all bars are gay bars."

"I have so much to say about gay bars," Alex said. "So, gay bars, outside of Stonewall, and outside of historically what gay bars have been, they have always been a safe space. That is why gay bars were created: they were supposed to be a safe space for gay men. There's nothing about any bar that says, 'We are a straight cocktail bar,' unless you literally put up a sign that says, 'We are a straight bar,' which will never happen, right. Bars are supposed to be safe spaces for everyone. And especially in this day and age, you put a woman behind the bar, you put any type of minority behind the bar, right, and then those are safe spaces for those people. The industry is, by and large, a heterosexual, white, male-dominated culture. And there's not a lot of talk about the gay people in this industry. There's a lot of conversation about women, but nobody's having that conversation about the struggles of being a gay man."

"I feel we need more representation and more acceptance of all people in this world in general, in all aspects of culture, and in every industry. But how do we do this?" I asked feebly.





SO I TAKE A SHOT WITH HIM, BUT THEN HE LEANS IN AND HE TELLS ME TO GO MEET HIM IN THE BATHROOM.

"One thing—and this kind of offends some people," Alex said, "is I make it a point to make sure that any people who are, like, minorities, or who are homosexual, I might go above and beyond to make sure that they feel comfortable. Because Courtney and Kathy at the end of the bar—who are these blonde white ladies—they can walk in anywhere they want because no one cares, right? But when someone is the only black person in the bar, when people are the only gay couple in the bar, regardless if people are looking at you, you feel isolated and you feel like you're on an island. And people don't like to feel that way. All they want is people to recognize them as people. And so I think that's super important, especially for me as a gay man, to be like, 'Hey, how are you guys? What's going on?' Maybe I might go a little over the top about it, but it's so important that those people feel like they're welcome in any bar."

"Well, that's a start," I said, "maybe more people will follow your example."

"Whenever people talk to me about being gay in this industry," Alex continued, "and I talk about minorities, or I talk about women behind the bar, and I talk about these things, they always say, 'Well what do you want? What's the solution?' And I'm like, 'Look, I don't have the answer for it and I'm not the guy who's going to give the world the answer. I'm one guy. I'm a gay bartender in Houston.'"

I would add that Alex is also one of the best and most endearing bartenders, not just in Houston, but in the world. And while Alex and I did not figure out how to make the world a more tolerant place where everyone is treated equally, and everyone feels welcome, we did have a grand time talking about the subject well into the evening. I learned, for instance, that a hallmark of a stereotypical gay bar is flavored vodka. Every flavored vodka, apparently. I also learned that flavored vodka makes Alex very upset. So if you visit one of Alex's bars I would recommend ordering a flavored vodka. You might be treated to one of the most eloquent rants you've ever heard.



TONGUE CUT SPARROW

The name of the bar comes from a traditional Japanese fairy tale known as Shita-kiri Suzume (literally, Tongue-Cut Sparrow). The story goes like this:

Once upon a time, there was a poor old woodcutter. He was honest and kind, but his wife was arrogant and greedy. One day the woodcutter found an injured sparrow. He brought it home and nursed it back to health. His greedy wife hated to see him waste their precious food on the stupid bird.

When the man returned to the mountains to work, he left the sparrow in the woman's care. She did not feed the sparrow. Hungry, the sparrow got into some starch and ate the whole bin. So the woman cut out the sparrow's tongue and threw the bird out the window.

The old woodcutter went searching for the bird and found him in a bamboo grove being cared for by other sparrows. The sparrows brought him food and sang and danced for him.

As the woodcutter was leaving, the sparrows presented him with a gift of either a small basket or a large basket. The old man chose the small basket figuring it would be easier to carry. When he got home he discovered a large treasure in the small basket.

His greedy wife, learning that there was an even larger basket, ran to the sparrow's grove and demanded the large treasure. The sparrows gave it to her, but warned her not to open it until she got home.

But the woman was so impatient that she opened it as soon as she was out of the grove. To her surprise, the basket was filled with deadly snakes and other monsters. She was so startled that she fell down the mountain and died. The End.



|||EXE|||

BOHANAN'S

STEAKHOUSES ARE A DIME A DOZEN IN TEXAS, BUT NONE OF THEM SPARKED A LOCAL COCKTAIL REVOLUTION THE WAY BOHANAN'S PRIME STEAKS AND SEAFOOD IN SAN ANTONIO DID.

After moving to Alamo City from Galveston, Chef Mark Bohanan opened his namesake restaurant in 2002 in an 1800s-era building on East Houston Street. The structure previously cycled through various lives as a shoe store, architecture firm, and a gentleman's haberdashery before Bohanan brought his vision of a tried-and-true steakhouse to its doors. Mere blocks from the River Walk, the restaurant brought an elevated swank to the center of downtown with its prime cuts of meat and good quality drinks.

"What I wanted to provide was a feeling of upscale exclusivity, but open to the everyday working individual," Bohanan says of the original vision. "No one in San Antonio was doing what I was doing. We're a [AAA] Four Diamond restaurant, but you don't have to have a membership or pay dues."

When the first floor of the building became available in 2008, Bohanan jumped at the opportunity to create an upscale bar and lounge that would match the regal atmosphere of the restaurant. From the polished mirrors, rosewood bar top, and brass accents, all the iconic elements of a good steakhouse bar were implemented to create an Old World feel like the best steakhouses of New York or Chicago, but with a quintessentially Texas feel.

"There's an air of refinement and cleanliness—we wear suits," says bar manager Jordan Corney, who worked his way up from bartender after arriving at the bar seven years ago. "The people who come here are expecting a level of professionalism that they can't get anywhere else."

|||EXE|||

WORDS - EMMA JANZEN || PHOTOS - ROBERT LERMA



|||EXE|||

WE HAD SOME COCKTAILS, BUT NOTHING WORTH REMEMBERING, UNTIL I HIRED SASHA TO COME HELP. HE WAS LIKE ME, A PERFECTIONIST, BUT ONE WHO DIDN'T WANT ANY DRAMA OR NOTORIETY THAT CAME WITH IT.

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To inject a dose of sophistication into the drinks program, Bohanan hired the late New York bartender, Sasha Petraske, to consult on the cocktails in 2010.

"We had some cocktails, but nothing worth remembering," Bohanan recalls, "until I hired Sasha to come help. He was like me, a perfectionist, but one who didn't want any drama or notoriety that came with it. He came and helped us recreate what he was doing in New York."

Petraske was the spark that lifted Bohanan's from a dining staple into a destination for great cocktails. Later, it would be recognized as ground zero for San Antonio's cocktail movement, which is no surprise considering Petraske's influence on the cocktail world at large. His bar Milk & Honey is often cited as one of the foundations for the modern cocktail movement as a whole, and other bars he had a hand in like Little Branch, Dutch Kills, The Varnish, Everleigh, and Half Step gave birth to many new generations of savvy bartenders who have carried on his legacy around the world. At Bohanan's, Petraske trained an eager group of mostly green bartenders, many of whom would similarly go on to open their own spots with the philosophy and technique imparted by the New York impresario.

Instead of a singular cocktail menu, Petraske instilled the sharp techniques and warm hospitality needed to set the program apart.

"We have a rolodex of maybe 300 classic pre-Prohibition cocktails and the menu has been rotating through those and modern takes on contemporary classics since Sasha came, but the menu was never really our focal point," Corney says. "It was more about learning a lot of recipes and talking to our guests and finding what cocktail would suit their needs. You don't just learn a menu, you learn everything beyond that—the spirits, the processes, everything else."

To this day, the cocktails at Bohanan's remain reliably straightforward. You won't find "nitrogen-this or eye-catching-that" at the bar, Bohanan says, which makes sense if you think about it within the larger context of what a steakhouse should offer.

"Steak is a dining staple and it has been for forever, so it makes sense that you'd come in here and expect the best steak you've ever had. But you should also get the best manhattan or old fashioned, too. That dedication to simplicity and consistency

and always using the best ingredients trumps something that's exciting based on what's new and trendy," Corney adds.

Eager to give back to the community, Bohanan looked at the robust cocktail program and considered what kind of a larger impact it could make outside of the walls of Bohanan's. He started the non-profit, Houston Street Charities, to be the charity arm of the program and in 2012 Petraske and Bohanan launched the first San Antonio Cocktail Conference.

"We were people who had more energy than sense and we didn't have anything to offer but drinks. I just wanted to give back. I never knew SACC would grow into what is has—it was just a way to get a charity started," Bohanan says.

What initially seemed like just one more addition to the national cocktail festival circuit ended up becoming a San Antonio institution. Over the past 8 years, the conference has grown from 2,000 tickets sold to over 10,000. It takes place over six days at bars across the city and welcomes talent from around the world. Now widely considered to be one of the country's mainstay cocktail events, the organization also has perhaps an even more impressive feather in its cap: Houston Street Charities has donated over \$600,000 to local children's charities like ChildSafe, HeartGift San Antonio, and Transplants For Children since SACC's inception.

"I'm more than happy and proud of the good that we've done," Bohanan says of the festival's legacy. "It took a lot of people to get things where they are, and I'm thankful for that."

Despite its impressive impact on the local and national cocktail worlds, Bohanan's remains polished, classy, and refined—humble in their approach to drink making and always working to stay fresh without sacrificing their roots. Walk in and order a stiff martini and you'll be greeted by a dapper bartender suited up with all the right questions: gin or vodka? Stirred or shaken? Vermouth? Twist or olive?

"They never really compromised anything," Corney reflects. "They wanted to do their best and give the public they're best. I think we'll be remembered as a place that gave something back and hopefully made a positive impact on the culture of the city."

Like the world's best steakhouses, the years wind on, trends come and go, but if the steadfast quality of the last decade is any indication, Bohanan's should remain reliable down to the last drop.

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ESQUIRE



SAN ANTONIO MIGHT BE THE FASTEST GROWING CITY IN TEXAS, BUT IT'LL ALWAYS BE ONE OF THOSE PLACES WHERE THE GHOSTS OF THE PAST REMAIN ALIVE AND WELL.

Originally established as part of the Spanish Empire, and then later a key battleground in the annexation of Texas from Mexico into the United States, today San Antonio spills over with landmarks that hearken back to its rich history. Thanks to the respectful preservation of icons like the Alamo and the Spanish Missions, plus annual cultural gatherings like Fiesta (an event that began as a remembrance of the battles of San Jacinto and the Alamo), millions of tourists flock to the city every year to discover the beating heart of Texas history.

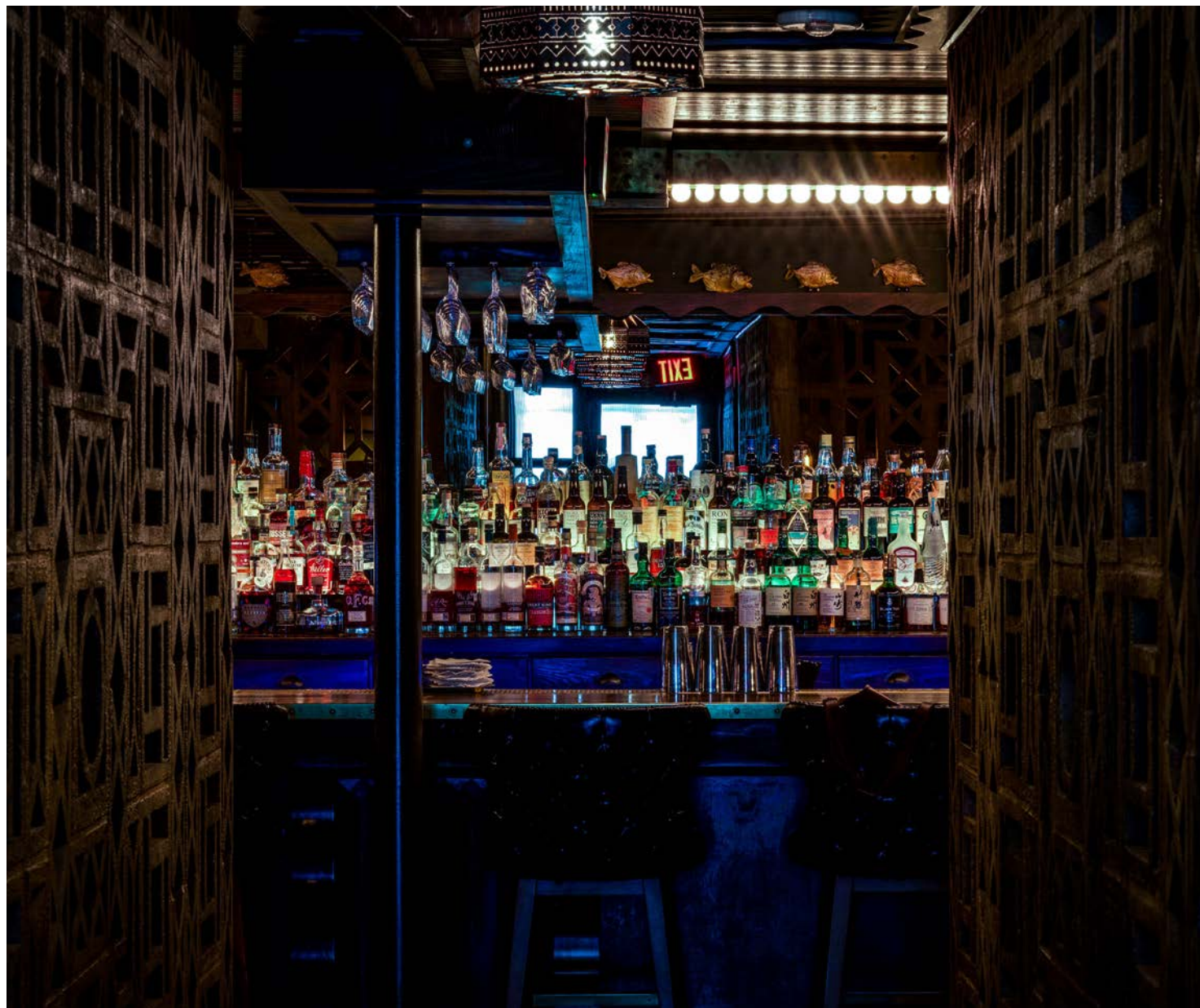
With 64% of the local population identifying as Latino or Hispanic, San Antonio remains a multicultural mixing pot for both Texas and Latino culture. Evidence of this can clearly be found throughout the city's historic architecture and on the culinary side, too, with the clients of mom-and-pop taquerías and fancy steakhouses often finding common ground over ice-cold margaritas. Yet go in search of a bar that has clearly preserved San Antonio's long, complex history and soul, one that caters to thirsty cocktail tourists and celebrates the diverse makeup of its modern population with grace and style, and there's just one place that will suffice: The Esquire Tavern.

For 86 years, the gritty saloon has stood at the corner of Commerce and St. Mary's in a multistory building that dates back to the 1840s (former residents included JC Penny and a bookseller). From the street level, a nondescript exterior with the bar's name played across the front in scrolling neon gives away no secrets about the Wild West-style tavern that sleeps inside. But walk through its broad glass doors and the scene quickly comes alive: the smell of fresh herbs and citrus peels quicken the pulse; a gallop of ice cubes clipping the insides of shaker tins echoes through the bar; a boisterous roar of laughter floats upwards from the vintage booths that flank the main room, no doubt coming from the mustachioed fella in a cowboy hat (there's always one). Midway down the bar, a badger sits atop an Art-O-Mat machine (a cigarette machine refurbished to sell art), preserved forever bearing a wry smile and guarding his domain with no concern for how quickly the days and nights meld into one. As long as the cocktail shakers continue to rattle and warm bodies fill seats, he remains at his post.



WORDS - EMMA JANZEN || PHOTOS - ROBERT LERMA





Esquire Tavern is a beacon of substance and vitality floating amidst the sea of tacky tourist traps that defines the River Walk. It's a place whose walls speak volumes about where it's been and where it aims to go. Uniquely Texan in both appearance and demeanor, the barkeeps have seen their fair share of bar fights, yet still welcome every thirsty traveler with a leather-studded barstool, a tip of the hat, and all the warm Southern gentility a smile can muster. It's the story of a modern cocktail joint that offers drinks rooted in the region's indigenous flavors, one that's drawn admirers from around the world to soak up its very specific sense of place.

The culture and showmanship that defines today's Esquire is really just a modern version of its past. The notorious tavern opened with a bang the day after Prohibition ended in December of 1933, waving

goodbye to the Temperance movement left quivering in its wake. Thanks to the relatively steady stream of liquor that traveled back and forth across the border with Mexico during the dry years, they likely had plenty of fuel to light the opening night flame. Not too long after opening, the River Walk in its modern iteration came to fruition, creating a new flow of foot traffic and positioning the bar fruitfully within the bustling downtown scene.

Over the years, Esquire gathered its fair share of tall tales as any great bar does, from the harrowing violence that arrived in tow with 1930s gunslingers, to members of the Mexican Mafia conducting dubious deals in the bar's "VIP" room in the 70s and 80s. The staff has always been quick to explain how the basement is haunted. In 1988, the long oak bar was featured on *Ripley's Believe It Or Not* where it was

called "the longest in Texas." A weathered newspaper clipping from the day details how the 77-foot behemoth (that now stretches over 100 feet after modern renovations) could "hold over 4,000 bottles of beer at one time." [Actual number = 5,973 bottles.] A remarkable feat, indeed.

By the time the mid-2000s rolled around, the bar had become a shell of its former glory, a disheveled dive with an increasingly unsavory clientele. Esquire closed in 2006 and remained shuttered until architect and developer, Chris Hill, took over in 2008. For the next few years, Hill and his team worked to restore the bar's charm and character.

"What we wanted to do is to keep the best of the Esquire and improve on the worst," Hill said in an interview with the San Antonio Express about the renovations. Booths were polished and revived, original tin ceiling tiles restored, wallpaper re-created to mimic the existing sheets, and original light fixtures refurbished to revitalize the vintage elegance of the saloon.

The finished product fittingly restored the spirit of the space without tarnishing the vibes with too much modernity. When cocktail historian David Wondrich included the bar on his coveted list of "Best Bars" for *Esquire Magazine* in 2013, he said it was in part for the honorable redesign. He wrote, "Despite the scrubbing and the painting and the modernization, the Esquire still feels old—still feels like a place where life has been lived."

Cloaked in its new skin, Esquire reopened in 2011, bolstered by a budding bar crew eager to put San Antonio on the map with smart, well-made drinks. At the time, the sea change of cocktail culture was starting to swell in other parts of Texas, and while a few whispers were trickling into Alamo City, San Antonio's cocktail scene largely remained a sleeping giant. It didn't take long before Esquire became the darling of San Antonio's nightlife.

On early menus, drinks like bar manager Jeret Peña's, Mas Chingoni, drew attention from local media for its tongue-in-cheek name: a play on the Spanish slang term for "troublemaker" melded with the negroni, a classic Italian cocktail. The drink was made with añejo tequila, mezcal, sweet vermouth, and an Italian aperitif. That year, a review in the *San Antonio Current* called the drinks menu at large, "worthy of the oldest bar on the River Walk," citing the Oaxacan Mule (a mezcal-based take on the Moscow version of the mule) as a drink that's emblematic of the bar's penchant for updating classic cocktails with new ingredients. Both locals in search of a cheap beer and national cocktail nerds quickly came to love Esquire's new attitude.

Austin transplant, Houston Eaves, took over the bar program in 2012, joined shortly thereafter by bartender, Myles Worrell. Together, with a quiet fortitude, they built upon Peña's foundation and transformed the cocktail offerings at Esquire into a world-renowned program that's rooted firmly within the zeitgeist of Texas cocktails. Drinks like the Texecutioner and the Wonderlust King were emblematic of the intention to pay homage to the flavors of the region, with mezcal and grapefruit in the former, and whiskey, amaro, vermouth, and bitters in the latter.

"San Antonio has a huge Mexican-American population and that has tons of influence [on our menu], but we try and stick to a foundational dedication to quality and do cocktails the way I understand them and like them, which is classical in a sense," says Eaves. "I like to use high-quality ingredients and do whatever is fun."

As the years went on, Eaves and Worrell continued to tighten up the menu upstairs, and opened a basement bar called Downstairs at the Esquire in 2016. With a more opulent, but cozy, den-like feel, Downstairs was meant to attract a more upscale crowd with discerning tastes.

"It's a space for more experimental cocktail menus, in addition to an elegant collection of wine, beer, sherry, cider, and specialty spirits," Eaves says. "It's an extensive collection of really high quality stuff in pretty much every bar category you can think of."

Downstairs, Worrell and Eaves upped the ante with the cocktails, devising special concept menus like 2016's *Cócteles De Maíz*.

"Corn has played an integral role in the lives of humans in the Americas for more than 10,000 years," the artsy menu (printed on artisanal paper made from Oaxacan corn and designed in collaboration with local artist, Cruz Ortiz, at Snake Hawk Press) reads. "Please join our curious exploration of this unique and indigenous grain."

In the Champurrado Complicado, a variation on the classic Mexican chocolate drink, masa meets cacao, green French liqueur, and "many rums." While in the less subtle F--k Monsanto cocktail, non-GMO bourbon blends with fresh corn syrup and Mexican cola bitters. Every drink uses corn in an interesting and resourceful way while telling a story about the ingredient and the context in which it is consumed.

In 2019, a new menu called, San Anto Stories, arrived Downstairs featuring drinks that reference San Antonio's darker side of history. The Battle Of Béxar nods to one of the first major events of the Texas Revolution in 1835. "There is a gorgeous and gigantic split-trunk Cypress tree that sits just down the river from The Esquire," the menu explains. "Although the Texans proved victorious in the Battle Of Béxar, they suffered a great loss as Benjamin Milam, their courageous leader, was shot in the head and killed by a Mexican sniper who had taken roost in that old Cypress tree." Made with high-proof tequila, madeira, mezcal, and orange bitters, the menu suggests that "any agave spirits enthusiast will, albeit potentially begrudgingly, relish this battle."

The People Of Reason cocktail references the name given by Spanish conquistadors to the indigenous people of Texas (Gente De Razón in Spanish). The derogatory term was used to distinguish between the native people who were converted to Hispanic culture from the ones who held onto their indigenous ways. With manzanilla sherry, carrot eau de vie, pineapple, and absinthe, the stunning drink is an eye-opener for both its flavor and backstory.

"For the most recent menu Downstairs, we tried to focus on things we think people should drink—getting someone in San Antonio to order a glass of sherry or madeira can be difficult if they haven't experienced that before, so working with ingredients they might not know, but having them presented in that cocktail format, and with a thought-provoking name, means we can celebrate these great ingredients while still paying homage to San Antonio," Worrell says of the approach.

Eaves echoes the sentiment. "We like to be on the progressive and modern side of cocktails, but we don't do much with pretense."

Thanks to its unique mix of progressive cocktails and razor-sharp hospitality, Esquire earned a spot on the James Beard Foundation semifinalist list for "Outstanding Bar Program" twice—once in 2012 and again in 2017. Eaves believes that at its foundation the Esquire is "just a really good bar with everything you'd want from a good bar—the design, the food, people, and quality of the drinks—but I may be a little biased."

I'd raise a glass to that sentiment any day. There's something special about sharing a barstool with the ghosts of Texas past. Sitting in beautiful tavern that channels the gusto of every great saloon of the Wild West, armed with a cocktail that celebrates the flavor intersections of Texas and Mexico, there's no better place to discover the essence of what makes Esquire a truly special bar for both Texas and beyond.

Recipes

DO TRY THIS AT HOME



Laddie Highball

2 oz Bruichladdich Classic Laddie

Pour in highball glass, top with Topo Chico. Optional lemon peel garnish.



Boilermaker

Nickel City, Austin

2 oz neat pour of Westland American Oak whiskey

Garnish with a pint of beer.



Supreme Sidecar

Midnight Rambler, Dallas

1½ oz Remy Martin 1738
¾ oz Cointreau Daisy syrup (1 Cointreau: 1 mineral simple with crazy water #4)
½ oz fresh lemon juice
½ oz dry sack 15-year oloroso sherry
½ oz maraschino liqueur
⅙ tsp absinthe
2 dashes Angostura bitters

Shake all ingredients with ice and serve up in a Nick and Nora glass. Garnish with a lemon diamond.



George Kaiho's Martini

Jettison, Dallas

2¼ oz Botanist Gin
¾ oz French dry vermouth
2 dashes orange bitters

Pre chill the martini glass and mixing glass. Discard any extra water in the mixing glass. Mix ingredients starting with bitters (so it will coat the ice and mix better). Stir 50 times. Serve up. Garnish with lemon peel, olives, or cocktail onion.



Original Margarita

1 oz Cointreau
1 oz fresh lime juice
2 oz blanco tequila

Shake all ingredients with ice. Strain into rocks glass with a half salt rim. Garnish with a lime wheel or wedge.



Mexican Martini

1 oz Cointreau
1 oz fresh lime juice
2 oz reposado tequila
¼ oz fresh orange juice
¼ oz olive juice

Shake all ingredients with ice and serve up. Garnish with lime and olives.



Slam Antonio Daiquiri

San Antonio

2 oz Mount Gay Black Barrel Rum
¾ oz fresh lime juice
¾ oz simple syrup

Shake all ingredients with ice. Serve up. Optional lime garnish.



Double Under

HG SPLY CO, Dallas

½ oz Cointreau
1½ oz beet infused tequila
½ oz rosemary syrup
¾ oz fresh lime juice

Shake all ingredients with ice. Serve up, on the rocks, or frozen with a half salt rim. Garnish with a lime wheel or wedge.

Appendix

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