

A woman with long, wavy red hair is smiling and looking towards the camera. She is wearing a pink and white horizontally striped halter-neck top. She is holding a large glass filled with a light-colored beverage, ice, and a slice of lime. A red straw is in the drink. The background is a bar with various bottles of alcohol, including one labeled 'VODKA', and red and white striped awnings.

# *Flair - The Basics*

*How to Become a Better Bartender*

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# How to Become a Better Bartender

## Lesson 10

Flair bartending is one of those things that a lot of bartenders would love to do, and often find fascinating, yet they're often stuck thinking either "I could never do that" or "My manager would never agree to this, or WTF?". There's a lot to be afraid of when beginning to flair... the fear of breaking things, spilling on your guests, wasting alcohol and getting in trouble, and perhaps the worst of all, losing confidence if people laugh when you drop things... *your ego can get destroyed*.

The fact is, almost anyone can flair if they seriously put their minds to it; but not everyone can be good at it. I honestly believe that no-one is incapable of adding flair to the way they work behind the bar in one way or another.

Many bartenders don't know flair techniques, but it's not that hard. The key elements for successful flair bartending tricks are concentration and balance. It is just like any other sport... but you'll need to practice, and then practice, and then practice again, before you do it in front of an audience!

Flair bartending is the practice of bartenders entertaining guests, clientele or audiences with the manipulation of bar tools (e.g. cocktail shakers) and liquor bottles in tricky, dazzling ways. Used occasionally in cocktail bars, the action requires technique and skills commonly associated with jugglers.

***Tip of the day:*** There are two types of flair... exhibition flair and working flair. One is for competitions and the other is for your everyday shift behind the bar as you entertain your guests.

### ***Some Thoughts***

## How to Become a Better Bartender

*What can you flair with?* After you have practiced at home, and you're feeling confident, look around your bar. There are a whole bunch of items behind the bar that are safe and relatively easy to flair with... but do not start with full bottles of alcohol. In your well you will have mixing tins or shakers (virtually indestructible, but potentially noisy when you drop them), soda and sip straws, cocktail napkins, and any plastic glasses your bar uses. If you look further around the station, you will also have a range of fruit, other glassware, a bar blade opener, muddlers, bar-spoons... the list goes on, so don't think that if you want to learn to flair you need to be spinning bottles right away, get a bit creative... and use your imagination.

With a little imagination... combined with your personality and style, you may never have to flip a bottle to be recognized as a flair bartender. You can get more reactions from your guests with relatively simple moves like throwing a lime wedge behind your back and catching it in a drink, or tossing an ice cube and catching it in the glass you are about to start a drink in... than you do from a full working flair routine; and you will have accomplished it without the risk.

Keep in mind that the alcohol behind the bar comes in all sizes and shapes. The bottle most used for flair is known as a fifth. As you practice and develop your muscle memory and timing, it's important to keep the size of the bottles that you will flair with consistent. Flipping a fifth will be different than flipping a liter bottle; (they will be a different weight and size, and will mess with your timing).

*Why bartenders should learn flair:* Refining your bartending skills is a constant work in progress that is, oftentimes, a lifelong journey. It's the reason why so many bartenders choose this profession as a career, because there is always something new to learn and perfect. While some bartenders pursue specializations such as Sommelier, or Cicerone as an area of expertise, some bartenders choose to try their hand at flair bartending.

## How to Become a Better Bartender

Flair bartending can range in expression and complexity and can be as simple as executing a shadow pass behind the head with a bottle to catch the guest's attention, or it can be as intricate as crafting an entire routine with every move planned from your first pour, to your last. The latter, when done primarily for entertainment purposes, is referred to as exhibition flair; but a quick flair routine that doesn't slow down your speed of service and still adds a bit of style to your flow, is often referred to as "working flair."

We connected with Chris Cardone, founder of Continuous Bev and bartender at I Sodi, who is an "OG" flair bartender on the east coast, and expert on working flair, as he has all the tips and tricks for stepping-up your flair game.

*Why Add Working Flair to Your Workflow?* As it stands, the bartending world is filled with a wealth of talent. So, the real question to start with is: What separates one bartender from the rest? Sometimes it is a bartender's ingenuity and ability to creatively craft a bespoke cocktail; other times it is a bartender's ability to connect with a guest and make them feel seen and heard; and other times it is a bartender's ability to tell a story and spark a guest's curiosity; but, then there is the occasional bartender that just mesmerizes the guest with exceptional skill and technique, and this is where working flair has a role to play. "It's about taking your craft to a higher level," Cardone says. "It's about challenging yourself and your skills a little more. It's about separating yourself from the pack and knowing that you're a more skilled bartender with another aspect of the trade in your tool belt that you can use when you feel it's appropriate."

Bartending is a form of entertainment, as much as it is a role of service. Not every guest wants to be interacted with, but for the ones that do, working flair can be a great trick to have up your sleeve to really get them buzzing. (It often leads to some free PR for your bar as well since the guests are likely to take videos and share it with all of their friends... something that management will appreciate.)

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*A few things to understand:* Before you start flipping glass bottles, get yourself a few Flairco practice flair bottles; they won't break when you eventually drop them. Then learn the basics, and some of the best sources are you-tube video instruction guides from flair legends like Christian Delpech, Dean Serneels and Scott Young. (Scott is my favorite and spent 30+ years in the business and is founder of NBR Digital Training and Extreme Bartending).

Then KISS it (*Keep it Simple Stupid*). Learn the basics before making a fool out of yourself. Small, quick moves can really impress your guests and go a long way to promoting your confidence while entertaining your guests. There is something quite amazing about a really fast bartender who is adding a tiny bit of flair during a shift... doing it naturally, without making it a big deal. As your guests begin to pay attention to your moves, your shift isn't work anymore... *it's a lot fun*.

Working flair is about not slowing down your speed of service. So, you don't need to flair every single object while making every single drink. Flair one item every few minutes, quickly, and then just bartend and serve your guests... making it seamless and smooth. Make your guest wait for the next move. Create suspense. Make it cool. It's important to note that working flair should always be accomplished during the drink making process in some way, and not just for show; otherwise, that is considered exhibition flair. The goal is... after all... making drinks for your guests while keeping them entertained.

It is best to begin your flair education by first mastering the important basics and then going from there to integrate your own sense of style. You will need to learn the angles, grips, velocity of throws, laws on centrifugal force, and how to properly catch/capture the items before trying to juggle three bottles while simultaneously serving two martinis. It is important to realize that serving your guests is the number one goal, then the entertainment can start. Working flair involves glassware, garnishes, napkins, bar spoons and strainers, and is not just tossing around bottles and tins.

### ***Mixology and Flair Bartending***

## How to Become a Better Bartender

There is a big difference between *mixology* and *flair bartending*, and that being said... there are no mixologists or flair bartenders. Simply put, there are just different bartender styles. As you learn and evolve in your chosen profession, you will realize that every bartender has a little flair... and is constantly learning how to create new cocktails.

As a Flair Bartender; your ego has gotten the better of you. You are basically a “show off”, utilizing a combination of being an exhibitionist and your need to show off what you know. You don't need to pour using two bottles in each hand, to exhibit your own style. Flair is all about your *own* personal style... from how you place the cocktail napkin in front of your guest, to how you handle their money. There will always be a few Mixologists that won't know how to actually talk to their customers... and there will always be a few Flair Bartenders that are so busy juggling that they haven't learned the basic ingredients of the drink they are attempting to make... but that just shows you that *nobody is perfect*. There are bad flair bartenders, bad mixologists, and bad bartenders... but we all had to start somewhere.

As a Professional Bartender, you already have the knowledge and ability to be a Mixologist, a Flair Bartender or simply put... *a Professional Bartender*. A Mixologist takes the time to learn about the ingredients of a cocktail, a Flair Bartender is all about how you include your own personality and style in how you actually make the drinks, and a Professional Bartender is doing all of the above while entertaining their guests., managing their bar, while doing it with speed and personality.

A Mixologist has the ability to mix complicated cocktails, using a variety of liquors, mixes, and liqueurs, but they are still bartenders. If you're in the middle of a busy shift, and the bar is busy, a mixologist can spend too much time in the creation of that special cocktail, and customers may leave... *ere and you can lose income*.

A Flair Bartender can take too much time flipping bottles and tins, while in the entertainment facet of the job and not enough time focusing on the service end of the business. If the emphasis is on the flair and not as bartenders taking care of their guests, then their ego has taken control... *and they will lose customers and income*.



## How to Become a Better Bartender

**Tip of the day:** When asked... what do you do for a living? “I’m a bartender.” Now this may be a different answer than the owner or management might have, but again... it’s all about ego. The label of Flair Bartender or Mixologist is just that... a label. As a *Professional Bartender*, you will have, or may already have accumulated the knowledge and expertise, to be whatever is necessary to do the job you were hired to do.

### ***The Rise & Fall of Flair Bartending***

There was a time when flair was king. The flashing lights, the whistles, the ceremonial emblazoning of a hundred-dollar bill on the forehead, they were all part of the show. Bottles and tins filled with brightly colored mixes and booze flew through the air in an all-out “shock and awe” aerial spectacle. Amazing bartenders pouring ten drinks at a time had cash thrown at them; and the crowds cheered. The “golden age” of flair bartending was truly a sight to behold. It marked the culmination of years of economic boom in America, and it thrived in a bar scene with rampant strobe lights, pounding club music and an intense party atmosphere led by rockstar bartenders.

Flair bartending has been around since the 1800s and has slowly evolved through the years. Around the mid to late 1980s, the modern form took hold and became more than just popular. What began as exaggerated bar antics soon grew into a juggling, showmanship and drink slinging exhibition of style and grace. One of the first to make a name for himself was John Bandy, who famously trained Tom Cruise for the movie that was the ultimate catalyst for flair, “Cocktail.”

Flair spread, starting from New York, and then throughout the rest of the world; but nowhere did it shine brighter or last longer than in Las Vegas. Some of the best flair bartenders on the planet could make six figures on competitions alone, and behind the bar, enough to drive Lamborghinis. Companies were created, and now, with the popularity of you-tube videos, flair is easily available for the young bartenders to hone their craft. In Las Vegas they had many restaurants and ultra-sheik cocktail lounges that were located all over the strip. At one point, the entire Rio Casino went 100 percent flair! All of these venues attracted a slew of new flair bartenders to Las Vegas from the U.S. and abroad.

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But like all good things... it didn't last. Flair became less lucrative and desirable in New York City, in the wake of 9/11. In many ways, the exciting party days had come to a close. The fear of terrorist attacks, a long, drawn out war in Afghanistan and then a recession covering the next several years could be blamed for the lack of a general party atmosphere. But then, it seemed that the very essence of our beverage world began to change. There was a trend to drink quality over quantity, and the introduction of the Mixology concept became of age. There are a few die-hards that have claimed that flair bartending has yet to reach its peak in popularity; and when done well, is a direct reflection of popular culture of the time. When it's fresh, unexpected and relevant to the situation, it can be an amazing show.

"Mixologist," a term used as early as the 19th century, resurfaced and rather than putting on a show, they prioritized proper execution of classic cocktails, along with in-depth knowledge of spirits, the growing popularity of new and creative beer styles and flavor profiles. Our current bar culture has migrated from flipping bottles and free-pouring; to control of the ingredients using the jigger, and bottle presentation. For some, throwing the bottle almost seemed disrespectful to the glorious liquid held inside; not unlike a top chef jumping onto his cutting board to celebrate a victory.

The Flair Bartender and the Mixologist share a passion for their craft; and both bartending styles deserve respect. Many bartenders have lost their connection with flair as the divide between mixologists and flair-bartenders deepen; but with a little education, bartenders taking their profession seriously, should work on their knowledge and technique. In different parts of the world flair and mixology are just associated as being a professional bartender... *you're expected to do both.*

The more bartenders that embrace all aspects of bartending, the faster it grows and the better it will be, whether Flair-tender... Mixologist... Professional Bartender. Bartending is and always will be fundamentally linked to the heart of our culture; they are on stage and are responsible for our good times. Flair bartenders have found a way to take the show a step further; it's the evolution of bar shenanigans on steroids. When done well, flair creates a dynamic and exciting experience.

### ***The Basics***



## How to Become a Better Bartender

The first rule of flair is that the bar is not the place for practice, but for performance... your ego is on stage. So, grab yourself something that you can throw and catch, and potentially drop without damaging either your ego... the “thing” or your practice area... ice, a lime slice, an olive... fruit won't shatter or break, and ice is just frozen water. When you are in “Practice Mode”, a suggestion is to use whatever won't break or shatter as you practice.

**Level 1:** You should start by throwing your item with your dominant hand (we'll call it right hand, if you're left-handed you should be well practiced by now in flipping instructions) and catch it in your left hand. Do this a few times, and in fact, practice throwing it back each time with your left, so we can stay ambidextrous (or become ambidextrous). Throw it back and forth in front of your body, peaking about eye level until you do it enough times to be comfortable with the act and you don't drop it.

**Level 2:** Once you've accomplished this, congratulate yourself, then go back to practicing. Now repeat the same thing again but try not to move your catching hand at all and focus on making your throw accurate enough that the object just lands where it should. It's a little trickier than it sounds, but you need to keep practicing and focusing on accurate throws, (rather than chasing wild throws around the bar). You should be looking for accurate throws and catches before you start a mini celebration and moving on to the next section.

**Level 3:** Now, take your practice object in your throwing hand, and throw it from behind your back to your catching hand. We're not catching blind here, but you will be throwing blind. You will probably be running around initially to catch these, but get used to it, it's part of your training. Aim to throw the object directly upwards, and a little higher than we threw at the front just for now. The extra height will give you more time to see where the item is and adjust your catching hand until your throws become more accurate. Once you're getting the hang of this, simulate squeezing your “Lime” (substitute object) into the glass in your catching hand, then swipe your arm up and away from the “glass” and smoothly throw the item behind your back, catching in the glass hand. This looks so nice and smooth once you get used to the movement and will become a good basis for bottle work later down the line. Don't forget to practice throwing with both hands and catching with both hands. You will be far more proficient and much faster when using two hands.

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**Level 4:** When you think you're ready for the real thing; go to the store and grab a few limes. Slice your limes as you have them at the bar (normally 1/6 or 1/8 wedges) and choose a glass or cup that has a similar size to the Collin's glass that you use in your bar. Now instead of catching the object in your hand, you're aiming to catch the lime in the empty glass. Really work on not having to move the glass too much and continue to focus on your accurate throws to land that lime. It will eventually make sense as you get more proficient.

**Finally:** You may want to practice this in your yard or garden if you have one, or a park, as it will most likely get messy. Fill your glass with ice and water (and really stacking in the ice will help stop the liquid splashing around too much). You should leave the normal 3/8" 10mm gap at the top of the glass just like a drink you would serve. Now perform your move. Wet hands? Then your throw is probably not quite accurate enough. Keep trying or go back to Level 4 to practice more if you're really wet!

**Advanced Tip:** Congratulations on arriving, (or successfully catching an ice cube in an empty glass); but you still have work to do. You could get behind the bar and throw and catch some, but not all. Go in for your next shift before opening and practice in the bar you'll be working in. You now have a working knowledge of the skills, but being in a new environment may well throw you off a little, so get used to catching it in the environment you will be performing in. It's the same concept that actors have when using rehearsal rooms to learn their part, they still have up to a week of rehearsals in the actual theatre with dress rehearsal and technical runs before they perform for an audience.

Something else they often do in the theatre is have invited friends sit in on the dress rehearsal... so why not show your colleagues your new moves behind the bar before performing for the paying public (that drink price being their admission to your new show)? When you do inevitably miss a lime, be the first laughing about it and everyone will laugh with you, not at you, and just give it another go. As you get more involved when behind the bar, you need to understand that you will always have a few issues... nobody's perfect. look up... smile... and do it again... *your patrons will love it.*

***Basic flair bartending moves & equipment for beginners***

## How to Become a Better Bartender

Starting out as flair bartenders can be tough, but there are many easy tricks to help you get the hang of it.

**Basic Flip** One move that most bartenders start with is called "basic flip." All you have to do is grab the bottle by its neck and spin it around in front of your body before catching it.

**Ice Throwing** For a refreshing treat, throw [ice cubes](#) in the air and catch them in your drink. This move will be one of the first flair bartending moves you ever learn. Suggest tossing the ice and catching them in "empty" glasses... it makes less of a mess.

**Bottle Stalls** Flip like a pro, and to master it, you will need to get the bottle spinning in your hand before catching it. At that point, you can either catch and hold onto the neck of the bottle or just let it go, but be careful not to drop it. This is more difficult than flipping from palm to palm because when using that technique, you use the only momentum instead of manually rotating an object for additional speed.

**Palm Spin** The ability to spin a bottle and pour is not as easy as it may seem. Many people have tried this before, but only a few succeed in doing so perfectly. The skill takes some serious dedication if you're going for the 360-degree mark or even 3 spins. As you practice, try spinning 2 bottles at once... that will give your fingers quite a workout and you will need as much practice as you can get.

**Ten out of Ten** The 10 out of 10 practice technique is about trying to land that tricky move using a [bar tool](#) ten times in a row; but, if you miss, start back at number one again until you nail it. Ten shots at this can be challenging but achievable... even for novice bartenders who have practiced before and know what they're doing. The repetition trains your focus, so that when you've nailed nine moves in a row, you don't get too relaxed or risk messing up on #10.

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***Tin Pivots*** Tin pivots are the next movement to master because they can be used in combination with tin flips. As you spin the tin horizontally, the key here is to get your thumb and fingers out of the way, this will allow for a pure, spinning experience on its surface so long as it has enough momentum from being spun overhand rapidly. Once that's done, try rotating on an axis by grabbing hold of one side or another, even without any other movements at all, there'll still be plenty going on!

***Pour Cuts*** You can make your pour more fun with a few tricks. One way is to swoop. Simply take the bottle and sweep it up from low to high, like you would if you were drawing a letter 'Z' in front of somebody's head or something similarly swoopy, all while holding an ice cube between two fingers on one hand for dramatic effect. The second cut is called "the snap." Do you know how bartenders usually have that little bell they ring when someone orders another round? Well, this technique does precisely what its name implies. But, first, pull your back so far as possible before launching forward to swing out rigidly towards them again, just like ringing those bells around town at Christmas time.

***Spoon Flip*** Both a tin flip or spoon toss, are both relatively easy tricks. [Spoon flips](#) have the advantage of having an extended handle to grab on to after you complete the trick, while spins require more practice and patience before succeeding. When getting started, you should try spinning your spoon around your index finger... this can be difficult so don't be discouragedt first!

### ***Flair bartender's equipment***

Bartenders are on stage and are like magicians. They can make beverages come to life with the flick of a wrist. An ordinary drink is always better when you add a little flair. With all of your favorite liquors and mixers on hand, this is one party trick that will always keep people coming back for more! Check out this flair bartending equipment that you can use.

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**Flair Bottle** The first and maybe the most obvious choice is the flair bottle. This tool was designed specifically for making you a master of flair bartending, and can also be used by beginners to practice their skills before trying them out in front of an audience; (remember that your ego is on stage as soon as you step behind the bar). Made from shatter-proof solid plastic that won't break during your training sessions, this little helper should last throughout many drops, but hopefully you have learned and mastered the art of flipping.

**Tin Cocktail Shaker** The tin cocktail shaker is a bartender's best tool and closest friend. It does not matter if you are doing classic or flair bartending. The metal container can be used for all types of mixing drinks and has been used for many a show. Tin is the most common material for cocktail shakers because it is lightweight, durable, and cheap; and it is easier to clean than stainless steel or glass because it doesn't have any seams that can trap bacteria from melting ice cubes.

**Collinson Bar Spoon** Collinson bar spoons are the perfect way to make your cocktails more appealing and entertaining. The Collinson Bar Spoon is designed with a decorative yet functional flair that will add an extra level of elegance to any drink-making routine. Perfect for stirring martinis or lifting ice cubes out of a glass without spilling them all over the table, this unique bar spoon is a much-needed tool. It allows for easy grips and provides an excellent way to whip up any drink.

**Jigger** Jiggers are an essential tool for this style of drink making. Using a Jigger has become such an essential skill in the industry that it's worth taking time to master while you can. These tools will help with measuring liquids for your drinks as well as figuring out when they're good or bad before pouring them into glasses - which could save some embarrassment later on down the line.

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**Bar Service Spill Mat** A bar mat helps keep any spilled liquids from going all over the bar and floor. This is an excellent addition for flair bartenders as it can help them do tricks without worrying about their feet getting wet or worse, slipping on some liquid before they finish drinking. Customers want safety when they go out with friends in town, especially if you have slippery surfaces like tiles that could cause someone to slip right off their chair onto the ground. Likewise, a bartender needs to work with precision so they don't spill anything while giving everyone at the table one heck of an experience through this professional-grade tool designed just for these purposes.

**Conclusion** Flair bartending is a skill that takes years to master, but with these easy tricks, you can develop a start. If you want to become a bartender with all the necessary skills and start making your way up the ranks as a professional, make sure you practice before showing off your new moves on stage. Remember to focus on concentration and balance when executing any of these simple tricks so that you don't end up spilling anything or falling while trying them out for the first time. Which one of these simple tricks do YOU think will be easiest for you? Let us know in the comment section.

## ***final thoughts***

*Ice* doesn't just cool down a drink, it absorbs the heat from the warmer-than-ice liquid inside. As it absorbs that heat, it melts, adding water to your drink. Contrary to popular belief, bartenders do not fill the glass all the way because they want to cheat you by leaving less space for booze.

*The purpose of Palm spin in bartending:* The aim is to spin the object. Start with the metal part of the Boston cocktail shaker and progress to a bottle and a highball glass... 360 degrees on the palm of your hand.

*The start:* Flair bartending has been the 1880's and has slowly evolved through the mid to late 1980s.

*What is fire flair?* As a noun, it refers to *fire or light*, something that bursts outward, or something that widens. The verb usage corresponds to the noun meaning "to produce light or fire" as well as "to burst or spread out."