

A woman with long, wavy red hair is smiling and looking towards the camera. She is holding a large glass filled with a light-colored beverage, ice, and a lime wedge. The background shows a bar with various bottles, including vodka, and red and white striped awnings.

Craft Concept & Creativity

How to Become a Better Bartender

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How to Become a Better Bartender

Lesson 8

Creativity is not essential, and you may never be asked to make a special cocktail, using a unique ingredient, with a new type of alcohol... *but it can't hurt to know*. That cocktail that a customer's personal bartender invented for them in New York but they now live in California, gives you the perfect opportunity to become their *next* personal bartender. If you are fortunate enough to know how to cook, then you already know how to mix ingredients for a new cocktail experience... *a little of this, a dash of that, and just a touch of imagination*.

Tip of the day: Think about it... it's alcohol, not rocket science; it's hard to make a bad drink for a thirsty customer when you use a little common sense. It also helps if you start by asking your customer "what do you like?"

But don't stop there, becoming a true Mixologist can help you be creative with your surroundings, your attitude and your personality... there are very few limitations when you start your shift. How you handle certain situations, or when to throw an impromptu party will have as much to do with your creativity as it does your personality. When you start your bartending shift, take a look around and do a quick analysis of your customers and your bar... in less than a minute, you'll know who or what needs your immediate attention... *just open your eyes and mind*.

Tip of the day: Start your shift by greeting everyone sitting at your bar... personally, and then introduce them to their neighbors if they are new to your bar. you never know where the conversations will lead; but it will be a friendlier place and happier start of your shift.

Limitations

Simply put... there are none. There are no limits to what you can create when you open your mind and ask a few questions. In the "A Bar Story" section below, you will realize that creativity has no boundaries; just pay attention to what your guest would like and use a little common sense. If a woman sits at your bar wearing a bright pink hat and scarf with matching pink shoes, do you really need to ask if pink is one of her favorite colors? Don't be too surprised if a Cosmopolitan is her first choice.

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A couple just joined you at your bar and would like a menu; but before they order a drink, they order half a roasted chicken for one entrée and a small steak for the other. Be creative and suggest a bottle of a light Pinot Noir that would go with both. A bottle of a good red wine on the lunch tab is always better than two smaller, less expensive glasses. Another option, if they aren't wine drinkers, would be to offer specialty cocktails that could pair with their entrée selections. A Rosemary or Orange flavored Vodka with the chicken and a Rye or craft bourbon Manhattan with the steak.

Tip of the day: A little imagination can go a long way when trying to exceed your customer's expectations, and there are no bad suggestions when you are trying to please and serve. A good wine or liquor pairing with a customer's food goes a long way when trying to exceed their expectations.

Iron man creativity

Matt was my bar-mate and work-husband, and more than a little crazy, but you would never know it unless you spent some personal time together. I have worked with him for almost nine years and he has worked for this restaurant in Long Beach for over twenty. A broken thumb would have kept most bartenders from going to work, but not Matt. He had a wife to support, bills to pay, and disability income would not have cut it; and after working at the same place for over two decades, he considered himself a true professional.

After the doctor inspected the break at the local hospital, a young nurse was asked to apply the cast to Matt's right hand. She didn't give it a second thought when Matt offered her a liquor bottle asked her to set the cast while he was holding the bottle. It only took a few moments and Matt was out of the hospital and on his way to work before the doctor came back to inspect the work.

Matt now had a cast in a shape that he could quickly drop down over the neck of a liquor bottle, lift it up and pour a drink; with no pain or loss of dexterity. *Now that's a true professional, a little crazy, but a professional.*

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Tip of the day: Where there's a will there's a way. Matt couldn't afford to take time off from work and the cast on his hand made it impervious to pain. He actually thinks that he made more money because of the sympathy factor.

Triple sec

It was the start of an average night, with the entertainment starting at six-thirty, and the happy hour crowd just starting to make their entrance. I had just finished making one of our more popular custom Martini's, which uses Triple Sec instead of Dry Vermouth, and was looking for a bottle of Triple Sec to replace the one I had just emptied... and there was none to be found... anywhere. I called management to check our liquor room and I went to the side bar at the other side of the room, but still nothing. I was just about to send one of our managers out to buy a couple of bottles, when I thought, why not create one?

One of my regular customers grabbed the empty bottle on the bar and read the ingredients as I started to ask the other two bartenders working about their thoughts. Mix up some simple syrup (a water and sugar blend with just a touch more water for this experiment), add some orange zest to the mix, a touch of Cointreau, and a little salt and viola. I'm sure the makers of the original version would argue, but it did the job.

Tip of the day: It wasn't perfect, but I was able to take care of business, and not one cocktail was returned; and at the end of my shift I could spend a few extra moments perfecting the recipe if i ever needed to improvise again. of course, as mentioned in lesson 9, i could have used cointreau, blue curacao or Gran Marnier... *use a little knowledge and that imagination of yours.*

The wine "connoisseur"

One of our new guests sitting at the bar was keeping his group entertained with stories from his latest trip to Napa Valley, a California Mecca for those who love good wine. He had been fortunate to have spent some time with a wine maker and decided to share his new found knowledge with us all.

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A good red wine, properly aged and stored, should be enjoyed, with almost a reverence. The soft delicate flavors that have developed over the years should be handled with respect, but the newer wines, less than a couple of years old, should be beat up, manhandled if you will. To prove this point, he asked me to put the bottle of cabernet he had just purchased in the blender so that he could demonstrate. I was intrigued to say the least, but my sommelier training wouldn't let me. It took the coaxing of several of my bar regulars to convince me.

I poured a sample of the wine into several of the glasses on the bar and then put the rest into the blender and let it rip, for no less than sixty seconds. I then poured the just aerated wine into a few more glasses and sampled... *damn if he wasn't right*. I wasn't impressed with the finish, but the aerated version was considerably smoother and had a fruitier, "softer" taste. It's not something I was inclined to share at my next sommelier class, but it is definitely something I could keep for future use.

Tip of the day: Taking a very young, inexpensive red wine and zapping it a blender for about twenty seconds is an excellent way to allow the wine to breathe and maybe taste just a little more palatable. It is not something I would do at my bar, but it is a definite consideration for those times a guest of mine was more concerned about the price and not the quality.

A few days later my friend, the bar manager on duty informed us that the wine connoisseur who told us to blend his bottle of wine, wanted his money back for the \$100 bottle of wine that he told us to put in a blender; claiming that we should have known better and that a wine that expensive should not have been blended.

Tip of the year: That's one way to not pay your bill... now the bartenders have been directed to tell the next customer that wants his wine blended... *"sorry but that it is not company policy."*

A party

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A bar patron always seemed happiest, when given an opportunity to celebrate *something*. A round of shots, a toast, and a race to see who can finish it first, would always put people in a better mood. Matt created his “special shot”, a little sweet and sour mix, with a float of vodka, for sixty cents.

It was a Tuesday night.... it was early and the bar was full, but boring, when the bartender decided to shake things up. He placed one of his “special shots” in front of everyone on the bar, about twenty people, and proclaimed... the first one is on me, but after this, the shots will cost you sixty cents. Everyone lifted their shot glasses and a simple toast of “*To Tuesday,*” and the race was on to see who could finish the shot and slam the glass to the bar, first. Not a minute later, one of the patrons ordered another round of “specials”, (about \$12), then another race... and that’s how it started. They would literally pour thousands of these shots every night.

Tip of the day: They were priced right, everyone ***loved*** the celebration, and no one ***ever*** got drunk. the bartender had calculated that one bottle of vodka could make as many as one hundred of his “special shots”. Today, with the multitude of flavored vodkas, how creative can you get? just make sure the house has purchased enough shot glasses to pull it off.

A bar story

The bar is actually called “Bar Stories” and is located in the center of the financial district of Singapore. There are no drink menus, and in fact, no menus at all, cocktails or food, but I have yet to meet anyone who has left disappointed.

It’s all about knowing your customer, their likes and dislikes, and more importantly, their personality. Every bartender and server will spend a few minutes asking questions and getting to know their guest. *“Do you like fruit juice? How do you like your drinks? Over ice, blended or straight up? Do you like the taste of alcohol? What is your favorite fruit? What is your favorite food? Do you like it spicy?” Are you allergic to anything?*

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It only takes a few minutes, but a person trained to actually listen, will be able to create a drink that the customer will truly love. The customer leaves, usually after a few more custom made cocktails, satisfied and bragging to all their friends.

Grace, a flight attendant who was just getting back from a long trip, stepped into Bar Stories for just one drink before meeting her friends for dinner. After the bartender's ten-minute conversation, he knew that she was a sushi fan, and loved the softer, more subtle styles of fresh ingredients. When the bartender placed a slightly chilled Mojito in front of her, shaken, then strained into a martini glass, with just a touch more emphasis of mint, her smile lit up the room. Her friends joined her at the bar for a few cocktails *invented* just for them, and they spent the rest of the evening in the company of a very creative bartender.

Tip of the day: A bartender that listens and learns from their customer, will have a very satisfied, and hopefully new regular customer for a very long time. They will spend more money and tip, and isn't that one of the reasons that we became bartenders in the first place?

From the other side of the bar

Four simple questions that will take almost two minutes of your valuable time, and you now have a basic knowledge of what your customer would probably enjoy having. With a little creativity and a little imagination, everyone wins. If your customer comes in knowing what they want, then that part of your job is relatively simple, but if they are not sure and looking for a little direction, talk to them, a couple of questions can go a long way:

- *Do you like the taste of hard alcohol or do you prefer a fruitier taste?*
- *Do you prefer it chilled, blended or over ice?*
- *Do you like fresh ingredients like herbs, or fruit?*
- *Do you have a preference for the type of alcohol? (Vodka, Gin, Rum, Bourbon, Scotch?)*

Discriminating tastes and the unusual

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There are dozens of new flavored Vodkas and unique new blends that allow a customer to be as creative as the makers of the spirits; and the use of fresh unique fruit like blueberries and raspberries makes it fun. The internet and the makers of distilled spirits are coming up with new and exciting recipes on a daily basis; and keeping up with the imagination of the bartenders asked to create the new drinks using new ingredients is impossible.... *but here are a few samples:*

A new customer at the bar, a Cosmopolitan, a simple drink really.... until... Please use Chopin Vodka and Cointreau, and I would like it light and very cold. The bartender delivered it perfectly... she was about to add a plump red raspberry but chose instead a touch of dry ice that created the very cold, chilled, smoke effect... *very cool.*

In a tall cocktail glass... just a splash of red wine, and cream soda, with a couple of slices of peaches... an old Italian's version of a Sangria. (It helps if the wine used is a good Merlot, the Cream soda is not diet, and you like the flavor of vanilla.)

A shot of Green Chartreuse with a few dashes of Tabasco Sauce; served shaken, not stirred. This can also be served as a shot or martini... whatever your guest deems appropriate... with your guidance of course.

Triple Sec uses a foundation of orange flavors from oranges found only on the Island of Curacao. Gran Marnier, Cointreau and Blue Curacao are also considered triple sec. Use of Blue Curacao to replace Triple Sec in a recipe would allow for a blue version of the original but with almost the same taste.

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A unique Bloody Mary, replacing well Vodka with a flavored variety and adding horseradish and ginger to the tomato juice mix; replacing the dash of Tabasco and celery salt. Adding a spear of pickled asparagus to replace the celery stick that no one seems to like anyway is a nice touch.

An “Old Fashion” cocktail... replacing bourbon with a good Rye Whisky and muddling blueberries with an orange flavored sugar and a dash of flavored bitters. This should be served in a traditional rocks glass; but shaken and poured into a chilled martini glass is a nice twist. You can also use the orange flavored sugar to rim one side of the glass... just one more option to enhance your creativity.

Passion for life... Passion for your family... Passion for your job.

Wanting to do the job and *having* to do the job are two completely different motivations. Coming into your bar and actually wanting to make a difference is so much more than just coming into it because you get paid to.