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Bartenders are getting their due and making an art of mixology again

ANNE BROCKHOFF SPIRITS & COCKTAILS

Bartending isn't what it used to be, or is it?

The answer depends on how far back into history you look, says Dale DeGross, author of *The Craft of the Cocktail* (Clarkson Potter, 2002).

I know, I know — friends complain about how frequently I quote this book. But it's a reference mainstay for me, mostly because DeGross is one of the most complete cocktail experts out there. Indeed he's billed as "The King of Cocktails."

To what does he owe this distinction? Nothing much, except that he's largely responsible for re-establishing bartending as an almost culinary profession, says Doug Frost, a wine and spirits expert and *Star* columnist.

"Dale taught us to have respect for a craft that many of us had almost forgotten," says Frost, who is also DeGross's partner in a venture called Beverage Alcohol Resource.

DeGross came to bartending in the 1970s in what he calls an "oddball move for someone of my generation." DeGross's natural bar talent soon drew notice from Joe Baum, the legendary restaurateur who created Windows on the World in New York and was a consultant to the American Restaurant in Kansas City.

Then, in 1987, Baum asked DeGross to create a 19th-century-style bar for New York's Rainbow Room. Baum demanded classic recipes using fresh everything, artificial and premixed nothing.

"I didn't know what ... Joe was talking about at the time," DeGross told me in a phone interview before coming to town for the Greater Kansas City Bartending Competition in August. "I had learned all the same tricks as anyone else, using sweet-and-sour mix and soda guns. It took a tremendous amount of research."

DeGross consulted recipe books written by celebrity bartenders such as Jerry Thomas and Harry Johnson during what he calls the "Golden Age" of the bar. He mixed and remixed, finally recapturing the sophisticated, complex character of the martini, Manhattan, fizz, Old Fashioned and countless other drinks.

Other bartenders elsewhere were probably doing something similar — after all, the "return of the classic cocktail" was hailed throughout much the 1990s. But DeGross codified and inspired the revolution.

It's now not unusual to find bartenders calling themselves bar chefs, mixologists and cocktailians. Today's pros act a lot more like chefs and a lot less like people just trying to pay their way through college or score dates. They're searching out local, seasonal ingredients, mastering technique and carefully balancing flavors and textures. And they're finally getting the credit they deserve.

In August David Smuckler of Morton's Steakhouse topped the Greater Kansas City Bartending Competition, beating out about 100 competitors for the title.

On a national scale, bartenders and cocktail experts are on TV (Tony Abou-Ganim

on the Fine Living Channel), winning publishing contracts (Jeff Hollinger and Rob Schwartz for *The Art of the Bar*, Chronicle, 2006) and launching Web sites (check out Ted “Dr. Cocktail” Haigh at tedhaigh.com/cocktail.html, Robert Hess at drinkboy.com and DeGroff’s kingcocktail.com).

“If the '90s were the age of the star chef, then the new millennium is the age of the star bartender,” DeGroff says.

Could it be the beginning of another golden age? Let’s hope so.

The Old Fashioned has for years been, well, old-fashioned. But made with fresh oranges, Angostura bitters, maraschino cherries and the right proportion of sugar, bourbon and soda water, it’s at once sweet and bracing. Try the version served at the Aladdin Hotel’s Zebra Room downtown, or mix up your own using this recipe from Dale DeGroff’s *The Craft of the Cocktail*.

Old Fashioned

Makes 1 drink

1 teaspoon sugar

2 dashes Angostura bitters

2 orange slices

2 maraschino cherries

Water or soda water

2 ounces bourbon (I prefer Knob Creek)

Ice

In the bottom of an Old Fashioned glass, carefully muddle the sugar, Angostura, 1 orange slice, 1 cherry and a splash of soda water. Remove the orange rind and add the bourbon, ice and water or soda. Garnish with the remaining orange slice and cherry.

Per serving: 328 calories (2 percent from fat), trace total fat (no saturated fat), no cholesterol, 47 grams carbohydrates, 3 grams protein, 1 milligram sodium, 9 grams fiber.

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