

EXCLUSIVE EXPERIENCE

# Intuitive MIXOLOGY

DON'T ASK FOR A MENU. A NEW GENERATION OF BARTENDERS KNOW EXACTLY WHAT YOU WANT IN YOUR (VERY PERSONALIZED) DRINK.

by Anthony Giglio

How many times have you taken a seat at a bar and when the bartender asks, "What's your pleasure?" you start to answer, then realize you're not quite sure? If you ask the professionals who ask you that question, they'll tell you it happens all the time. But what separates the good bartenders from the best is their ability to figure out what you want, even if you have no idea. These intuitive mixologists blend intuition, science and the ability to read your non-verbal cues, to create personalized cocktails that elevate the craft of drink making.

"I recently had a request for a drink that was 'very fruity, but not too sweet,'" recalls bartender Alex Howell, talking about a patron who was lucky enough to nab one of the six plush stools at the Gold Bar at Menton, a serene saloon in Boston's burgeoning Fort Point neighborhood.

It's a place where you might not expect to have much latitude with the bartenders, who employ polish, pedigree and brass-plated cocktail shakers to fill the gold-rimmed stemware. But if you're simply not feeling in the mood for one of the dozen drinks on the menu, the bartenders there not only don't mind going off-menu, they actually enjoy the process of figuring it out.

Howell asked this particular customer if she had any spirit preferences and she said her only request was "nothing whiskey based." He dug deep into his mental cocktail Rolodex and landed on something he named the "Theresa #1" because, in his words, the drink is extremely fruity with Crème de Cassis, but supremely balanced by Campari and lime. "When I go off menu and I have that much free reign, I often like to surprise the guest with a spirit choice they would have never otherwise considered," says Howell.

Jillian Vose, longtime beverage director and bar manager at the Dead Rabbit Grocery & Grog in New York City, collaborated with owners Sean Muldoon and Jack McGarry

on the 44 libations featured on the menu at their new Manhattan bar, BlackTail at Pier A. "We designed our menus to be easy to navigate, but in some cases, people don't want to look through a menu or just want to engage with the bartender to get the right drink," says Vose. "It's important for guests to realize they can have what they want simply by asking."

So how does Vose go about creating a personalized cocktail? "I ask them questions like, What's your favorite cereal? Ice cream flavor? For dessert, do you opt for cheese or sweets?" For more discerning-yet-non-committal guests, she takes it further in mixology parlance:

● Would you prefer something bright and refreshing or something stirred and spirit-forward?

▲ Well, I don't know, I don't like sweet...

● Alright, well, would you pick a whiskey sour or a Manhattan if they were put in front of you?

▲ Whiskey sour.

● Great, now we're getting somewhere! Let's talk flavors now. What are your favorite fruits? Do you like berries?

"Usually after this, the bartender has a pretty good idea of what type of drink the person is going to like from their drink options or classics," says Vose. Like many bartenders who dream up their own drinks, she keeps them in her proverbial back pocket, able to reach for them as springboards whenever guests don't know where to begin.

At Restaurant 1833 in Monterey, California, head mixologist Josh Perry is another mind reader who recounts similar conversations with undecided guests and reduces this philosophy down to its very essence: "Our mantra is: Whatever you want—all you have to do is ask."

So, back to your cocktail. What's your pleasure?

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MARY PICKFORD Jillian Vose put her own interpretation on the classic Mary Pickford, adding citrus for brightness and hibiscus-flavored Burlesque Bitters. Perfect for a guest with a modern palate.



BELMONT STAKES A regular who loved Manhattans and wanted to try something new inspired Alex Howell to riff on the standard by using walnut-flavored Nocino and Punt e Mes, a bitter vermouth.



TRANSCENDENTALIST Howell designed this concoction for someone who insisted she had "never had a 'good' gin-based cocktail." The result: an approachable drink with (surprise!) gin.



GOD IS A DJ Vose dreamed up a spice lover's cocktail, making sesame-infused Irish Whiskey to add nuttiness, combined with the essence of autumn by way of cinnamon, maple syrup and banana.