

BEVERAGE MEDIA'S

➤ 2017 ➤

# BARTENDERS TO WATCH

**A** lot has changed in the world of bartending since *Beverage Media's* first "Bartenders to Watch" feature more than a decade ago. First and foremost is the increasing awareness that professional bartending is a legitimate hospitality career choice, one with challenges and pitfalls as well as great opportunity.

Included in the profession's evolution is the constantly raised bar of cocktail competitions, giving the industry a greater chance to help discover talent and highlight their achievements. Competitions like these have become an essential component in the timeline of bartenders looking to make a national name for themselves, advance their

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This year's competition took place at the St. Regis Bahia Beach Resort in Puerto Rico. The resort includes four dining and drinking destinations. Fern, with menu designed by Jean-Georges Vongerichten, specializes in handcrafted tropical cocktails including fresh pineapple mojitos and mango bellinis. The St. Regis Bar (top, center) is known for its broad selection of single malts and a ritual Champagne sabering and toast each evening at 6:00pm.

careers and potentially move from behind the bar into sought-after jobs such as brand ambassador. Today, simply holding down a shift and ringing high numbers on the register while creating a welcoming bar atmosphere isn't enough; 21st century bartenders need to possess deep ingredient knowledge, a mental rolodex of historic and trending recipes, and if they plan to go far, presentation skills at media-trained levels.

This year, we drew our Bartenders to Watch from the finalists in Heaven Hill Brands' Bartender of the Year competition, organized in conjunction with Liquor.com, the conclusion of which was held in at the St. Regis Bahia Resort in Puerto Rico in June. This was the second time the family-owned, Kentucky-based company sponsored a nationwide bar star search, and it featured two of the company's many American whiskeys—Elijah Craig Small Batch Bourbon and Rittenhouse Rye—as well as PAMA Pomegranate Liqueur and Domaine de Canton ginger liqueur.

Perhaps it is simply an indicator of how widespread the cocktail renaissance has become, but this year's competition finalists—and our honorees—come from not only major markets but also cities not usually known for cocktail creativity, like Nashville and Tampa. Even rela-

tively small town Livermore, Cal., made the grade this year, a sure indication of how cocktail culture has changed American drinking habits.

At the finals, the judges—Lynn House, Heaven Hill's national brand educator; Jeffrey Morgenthaler, bar manager of Portland, Oregon's Clyde Common and Pépé Le Moko; Joaquín Simó, owner/bartender of New York City's Pouring Ribbons; and Abigail Gullo, Heaven Hill Brands 2016 Bartender of the Year winner—challenged finalists to create an original cocktail

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as if for the host hotel, utilizing ingredients native to Puerto Rico.

The challenge was broken down into: selection of ingredients, concept, ingredient preparation, recipe development and presentation. Contestants were also asked to create two classic-style cocktails, one shaken and one stirred. The winner—Nathan McCarley-O'Neill, currently head bartender at New York City's Nomad Bar—took home pride of place as well as \$15,000, another indication of how serious bartender competitions have become.

This year's class of rising bar stars includes a Barbra Streisand wannabe, a part-owner of a hospitality company, an aspiring gentleman farmer-writer, an avid outdoorsman and a former sommelier. Like many of today's bartenders, they have a soft spot for fortified wines and amari, are concerned about drink potency, and many harbor hopes of running their own bars. Significantly, they are all enthusiastic about the business but acutely aware of the pitfalls and problems, including health and discrimination, that linger. Overall, though, their eagerness to create hospitable bars for one and all shines through, reason enough to name them *Beverage Media's* 2017 Bartenders to Watch. ■





01

## McCLAIN HEDGES

BAR: RINO YACHT CLUB

CITY: DENVER, COLORADO

McClain Hedges, 31, grew up in the South, which he credits for his work ethic: “Having parents who truly cared how I was brought up is a major contributing factor to who I am today. It’s about patience, understanding, empathy, and stepping out of your ‘space’ to make sure the people who took time out of their day to come to your place are getting the most out of their experience.”

As someone who spent time after college in the music industry, he finds that

**“GROWING UP IN THE KITCHEN HAS HAD A LOT TO DO WITH THE WAY I ASSESS BALANCE OF INGREDIENTS.”**

world a source of inspiration, but after his wife, he ranks his staff high on that list. “One of our bartenders will soon be the fifth woman Master Bladesmith in the world when she finishes her program—that’s pretty badass!”

Hedges says younger bartenders need to be reminded that growth takes patience “It’s marathon and not a sprint. Be a better listener—to your guest, and your staff, and constantly study! You are always a student no matter how far you get.”

An avid golfer and skier, he also spends a lot of time in the kitchen. “I’d also say growing up in the kitchen has had a lot to do with the way I assess balance of ingredients,” says Hedges. “I use my palate for almost everything I do. The hospitality industry has always been a part of my life and the kitchen was home before anywhere else.”

These days, fortified wines and salt top the list of ingredients he likes working with. “Salt makes everything better, it makes flavors not only pop but come



together.” But when it’s time for a drink, he heads toward spritzes or anything made with fortified and sparkling wines.

02

## MARIO ANDRES SALAS

BAR: L. A. JACKSON

CITY: NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

Mario Andres Salas believes his listening skills have a lot to do with his success as a bartender. “That and the fact that, as serious as we can sometimes get about cocktails, I always remember to be fun with it and gauge your guest. The ability to read guests’ needs is something that can really propel your skill set,” he says.

Salas picks South Florida nightclub owner Dan Binkiewicz as an inspiration and role model, someone who still jumps behind the bar after more than 15 years as an owner to keep things flowing.

When he dreams, Salas, 28, dreams big—“If only I could have acres of land somewhere in South America, using biodynamic agriculture techniques, growing grapes, using clean solar energy. If only...” More realistically, he sees

himself in ten years busy writing on a more modest farm. “Of course, it has to have a barn with a full bar.”

One of his favorite moments in life came from a project he and his other half, Jocelyn, took on: buying a school bus and converting it into a road-worthy home to travel the country.

Like many contemporary bartenders, it is the minor ingredients that keep him fascinated today. His three current favorites? Citrus salt (“It activates other parts of your palate that usually don’t in most drinks”), ginger syrup and Angostura bitters (“When in doubt... dash of Ango. It’s the pepper to my salt.”). For his personal tippie, these days it’s Sherry. “I love its texture, range, not to mention its low ABV and deliciousness.” The potency of drinks concerns him, as does drunk driving as an industry issue.

Words of advice for the younger Mario? “Try more things! Write every thought down! Invest in Scotch!”

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## BRENDA TERRY

BAR: TAMPA YACHT AND COUNTRY CLUB

CITY: TAMPA, FLORIDA

As a young girl, Brenda Terry dreamed about performing: singing, story-telling, even ice skating. “I would listen to music and make up choreography in my head. Each moment, each triple toe loop, lutz or death spiral perfectly timed. But I can’t skate to save my life,” she admits.

Ice skating’s loss is bartending’s gain. Beverage Manager Terry, 32, still thinks about belting out a Barbra Streisand tune, but perhaps her inner performer is what makes her a good bartender. “Behind the bar I attempt to do what all of us are trying to do: to connect with others in a meaningful way,” she says. “A great bartender bares their soul at the bar, and knows when someone is doing the same.”

“I have great respect for people who, despite being industry leaders, still remain un-obsessed with themselves.” She mentions encountering Courvoisier Global Ambassador Rebecca Asseline. “She was just a big, walking heart who loved Cognac. One of my bartenders working that night said, ‘I love your shirt.’ Rebecca said, ‘You do? I’m so pleased. Here. You can have it!’ And she whisked the bartender to the bathroom and they exchanged shirts right then and there.”

These days, Terry loves working with amari and Sherry: “They’re bittersweet, earthy, and have a great way of balancing out a cocktail or are delicious just on their own. Sherry makes so many cocktails even better. It can be an essential ingredient for bringing out the right flavor composition.”

She also digs tinctures and sprays: “When I started making tinctures and using them as a spray it opened up a new world for me. And it’s a fun bit of showmanship behind the bar. When someone sees you spray something into a



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cocktail they are immediately interested in what’s going on.”

But when it’s time to drink, get her a whiskey. “It’s a go-to spirit for me and always a late night sipper. I find the buzz enchantingly contemplative”

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## ADAM GEORGE FOURNIER

BAR: FAITH AND FLOWER

CITY: LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

Adam George Fournier likes to think of himself as a good storyteller: “From the moment you sit down at the bar, through my actions and words I am telling you the story of the venue, the drinks, the spirits, and a dash of my own story thrown into the mix to enable the customer to tell the best possible story of their evening.”

Another bartender with itchy writing fingers (“If I wasn’t tending bar I’d be attempting to outdo *Infinite Jest*”), Fournier, the 31-year-old bar manager at Faith and Flower in Downtown Los Angeles, has a better fantasy: “My secret dream is to own a massive rare book and spirits store where I can while away the hours writing,

talking shop, sipping on fine spirits... all in a day’s work.”

Fournier picks a rare bird for one of his favorite ingredients: kirschwasser. “The spirit is dry yet immensely flavorful.



I usually find that any drink that calls for maraschino, or especially Cherry Heering, benefits from being rebalanced with a good kirschwasser.” He also favors rosé for its beneficial effects on his girlfriend’s mood, and then there’s whiskey: “Its natural flavor complexity allows so many branching paths,” he says. It’s also his go-to drink. “It is liquid memory mellowed by time. You can also do shots with it.”

In a more serious mood, he identifies sexism, racism and harassment as major issues within the industry: “We are a microcosm of our society as a whole but have the blessing and the curse of working with alcohol, which can heighten emotion and lowers inhibitions. It makes the highs higher and the lows lower, and we have to work together to treat everyone in our industry with the respect and compassion they deserve.”

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05

## NATHAN McCARLEY-O'NEILL

BAR: **NOMAD BAR**

CITY: **NEW YORK CITY, NEW YORK**

Nathan McCarley-O'Neill, Heaven Hill's 2017 Bartender of the Year, likes to keep learning. "I have made it the focus of my career to learn as much as possible by traveling, immersing myself in different cultures and always trying to push myself. I see every day as a new challenge," says the 29-year-old bartender.

He names Nomad's kitchen as one of the major sources of his cocktail inspiration: "Having this in the same building allows us to collaborate very closely with the kitchen. I can gain advice, knowledge into techniques and the best ways to produce new ingredients. The list is endless."

Like many bartenders, he is fascinated

by the diversity of fortified wines: "They allow us to enjoy lower alcohol spirits in fun ways." The marathon-runner and photographer is also a big fan of biodynamic wine. "So many incredible producers doing really cool and fun things."

But he has sage advice for the younger Nathan or any other novice bartender. "Try to learn about all aspects of the hospitality industry," he says. "Do not only focus on cocktails, but learn about food, wine, beer, management, and stock control. Understand how to motivate people, and learn the ability to teach others around you."

Real estate in New York is notoriously dear, and it needs addressing by the industry. "I think one of the most serious issues right now is the difficulties of opening bars and rent prices; in major cities it is becoming more and more difficult and I do not foresee it changing anytime soon."

McCarley-O'Neill credits his wife, Hana, as an inspiration—"She pushes



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herself everyday and is one of the most exceptional people I have seen in life and in hospitality"—along with the team running the multiple units at the Nomad Hotel. "They challenge me everyday," he notes.

06

## MATTHEW EGGLESTON

BAR: **SPILT MILK TAVERN**

CITY: **CHICAGO, ILLINOIS**

Matthew Eggleston, partner and bartender at Chicago's Spilt Milk Tavern, says that constant skill polishing is the best way for his cohorts to improve their game: "Be it continuing to catalog a vocabulary of spirits, flavors and techniques or the different types of guests and their requests, it has helped me continue to improve the craft aspect of the job." Of course it helps that he enjoys the work. "I think that guests can pick up on that vibe. I've also become pretty good at faking that I like the work on tough days," he offers.

**"THE BAR ROOM EXTENDS FROM WALL TO WALL AND EVEN OUT TO THE CURB, SO OWN THAT."**



When asked how he'd advise the younger Eggleston on the best way forward in the bar business, he says start saving, pick your risks, and "Do the serious things now and then duck around later."

He sees writing in his future, and still harbors dreams of space flight, if only the more modest sub-orbital type. "I recently shared my childhood wish of being an astronaut with my five-year-old daughter. She sort of squinched up her face, shrugged and replied 'Well, at least you have a bar.' So there's that."

Assessing the industry as a whole, Eggleston, 40, points out that freebies like trips can easily turn a bartender's head, but more attention needs to be paid to the nitty gritty of bar life—making sure workplaces are great, safe and inspiring. "Keep shining a light on the worst parts of the industry. There is way more good than bad, but complicity or 'It's just part of the job' does not cut it anymore," says Eggleston. "Going on another bar crawl won't make you a better bartender, but picking up an extra shift will...Get to work without a hangover. Work sober. Be respectful. The bar room extends from wall to wall and even out to the curb, so own that."

07

## JESSE PETERSON

BAR: LAST WORD BAR

CITY: LIVERMORE, CALIFORNIA

Jesse Peterson likes pushing her customers' flavor boundaries: "I've gotten really good at playing by a guest's rules, while breaking their norms and making them fall in love with something they thought they hated. The 'Oooooo I hate gin' Lemon Drop drinkers are the most fun because, well, quite frankly they don't even know why they hate gin."

Like many of this generation's female bartenders, she has some advice for the younger Jesse. "Get used to being a minority. This is a very male-dominated industry, and where that's not a negative, you may not see as many women behind the bar at first. Don't let it intimidate you,"

**"A WHISKEY SOUR MADE WITH AN EGG WHITE IN SAN FRANCISCO BACK IN 2010 CHANGED MY LIFE."**

she asserts. "Stay confident, keep studying and learning, network and meet people, and stay creative! Trust yourself and know you're strong enough to play with the boys."

As a child, Peterson, 31, had different plans: "I wanted to be a dolphin trainer." After college she coached softball as she found her way. That experience informs her view of her future: "I'd love to get back to that, but in the capacity of the bar, service, and hospitality industry. Meet with young people who are just tapping into their bar skills and help them hone in on what they are really good at, watch them work hard and succeed, while still learning myself."

But in her fantasy life, she'd rescue homeless cats animals: "I have two rescue cats already, but I've always wanted to do more. Sometimes I can't help but love animals more than people."



She's another big amaro fan, but these days also likes working with egg whites. "It's absolutely one of my favorite cocktail ingredients! It changes the mouthfeel and texture of a cocktail. I can't tell you in enough words how a whiskey sour made with an egg white in San Francisco back in 2010 changed my life as a cocktail enthusiast," she recalls.

08

## CHRIS MORRIS

BAR: READY ROOM

CITY: HOUSTON, TEXAS

Chris Morris wants every drink he serves to be perfect: "Not just in construction, but in application. I want my mis en place perfect, so I can serve the drink

quickly. I want to talk to every guest, find the right drink, and make it to the best of my ability every single time, whether it's 3:50pm and we're not quite open, or it's 1:45am and I've worked 65 hours already that week. There's something you can see in a person's face when they're tasting something extraordinary, and I'm addicted to it."

If not for bartending, Morris might still be working as a sommelier. "Wine was one of the first biggest loves of my life. It taught me that there were actual people, farmers, families, and stories behind the things we're serving."

Whether as an owner or manager, hospitality is where he intends to spend his working life." And he considers

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himself lucky to work in Houston. "I'm surrounded by incredible bartenders of all colors, backgrounds and genders."

Morris, who likes to imagine retiring to the Scottish Highlands and running a quiet pub, is another of our fans of fortified wines: "Vermouths, Madeiras, Sherries, I love them all. They're a great way to add complexity to a cocktail, and being low ABV in comparison to spirits, they help to keep your drinks sessionable and safe."

The 32-year-old is also a fan of celery bitters and coconut. "It's so much more than Piña Colodas. Coconut water is a great lengthener (and hangover magic, for the record), coconut cream adds body and a well-made coconut rum can be mind-blowingly refreshing," says Morris. He also likes using coconut liqueur and even his own coconut bitters. "Hell, it's even its own piece of drinkware," he adds.

As for favorite drinks, it depends. In a cocktail bar, the Negroni. In a dive bar, it's a cold beer. "And whenever possible: Ramazzotti. No explanation necessary, it's the Milanese nectar of the Gods."

