

MAGAZINE: ENTERTAINMENT



Competitors got creative beyond belief at last night's Battle of the Bartenders at The Penthouse Club Baton Rouge. (Credit: Noel Marcantel)

CLASH OF THE COCKTAILS

BR'S TITANS OF TASTE BATTLE IT OUT FOR TITLE OF BEST BARTENDER

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Monday night in Baton Rouge got a whole lot sweeter as The Penthouse Club hosted their first annual Battle of the Bartenders. Nine competitors of all different experience levels, from establishments all around town, put their best unique mixes forward in pursuit of the \$1,000 grand prize. In a contest where originality rules, these players brought their 'A' game.

The competition's platform was simple: One after another, each bartender took his or her place behind the bar to make and serve their very best homemade drink recipe and shot recipe to a panel of five judges.

Resident Penthouse Club bartender Crystal Shankland has been bartending for six years and was the first competitor out of the gate.

"In this kind of industry, speed definitely makes a good bartender," said Shankland.

The most seasoned bartender, with seventeen years under his belt, was Tony Pourciau. More than anything, he values entertaining the crowd and learning to use a bottle opener efficiently as one of bartending's must-have traits.

Schlitz & Giggles (Perkins) bartender Taylor Martty has an affinity for making margaritas and a knack for remembering all of her customers' faces, as well as what they ordered. She also thinks that staying happy is very important behind the bar.

"If you're not happy, you're not going to make the money and you're not going to make your customer happy, either," Martty explained.

Well-known Stroubes bartender Nick Rhoton has been bartending all over the U.S. for the last decade and likes to keep his customers cool with a Cucumber Collins. The Penthouse Club invited Rhoton to compete in their inaugural showdown, and he gladly accepted. In this, his third competition, he shared his simple philosophy on standing out.

"Make a drink that tastes good, make a drink that tastes good, make a drink that's unique and tastes good," explained Rhoton.

Over the last 15 years, Florida-trained Frank Conte has been in six bartending competitions and taken the title in three. His top three qualities for a bartender to master are: personality, attentiveness, and remembering your customer's drinks.

"My background is in fine dining, but then I moved down to the Florida Keys and learned the island-style kind of bartending. It's definitely a lifestyle," Conte said.

He may be a tough and seasoned man, but the creation he decided to debut for the battle was on the sweet side. Conte premiered his new creation of milk, chocolate, and banana infusion, which he calls the Coco Loco. Aside from the tropical side, his heart is in the old school art.

"I like to make anything old school – Martinis, Manhattans, Rob Roys, Old Fashioneds, things like that – because I find that bartending is a lost art," Conte lamented. "Drinks like that...are all about the presentation."

Cocktail judges Geoffrey Wilson and Korey Tichenor helped decide the fate of the contestants.

"We looked for style, taste, and how long it was going to take for them to do it," said Wilson. "Efficiency is part of style."

"Balance in a cocktail, originality in a cocktail, and the best use of the ingredients that you have," added Tichenor.

After all was said and done, bartender Kaleigh Humphreys came out on top. She wooed the judges with a cocktail called the Mamma Jamma Cocktail, which includes blackberry jam preserves, vodka, fresh mint-infused simple syrup, and fresh-squeezed lemon juice. Humphreys' shot was called the Smokin' Basil Lemon Drop and was truly a sight to behold. Imagine citrus vodka, fresh-squeezed lemon juice, basil-infused simple syrup, and just a dash of liquid nitrogen to create a frigid floating cloud to wash over your hand.

As the winner of her first competition, what was her secret?

"Being awesome," Humphreys joked. "I'm naturally awesome and I think that comes through in my cocktails. I'm inspired by fresh and simple, and I think that does better than something with thirty ingredients," said Humphreys.

It was a simple competition that didn't include a lot of flair, but hopefully that will be a part of next year's battle. The crowd, the judges, and especially the competitors all had a great time and the atmosphere was that of rock-stardom. Now that you know who the best bartenders in town are, go out and explore what they have to offer. Tell them Noel sent you.



Battle winner Kaleigh Humphreys pours her original Mamma Jamma cocktail into mason jars to be served to the judges of last night's Battle of the Bartenders at The Penthouse Club Baton Rouge. (Credit: Noel Marcantel)

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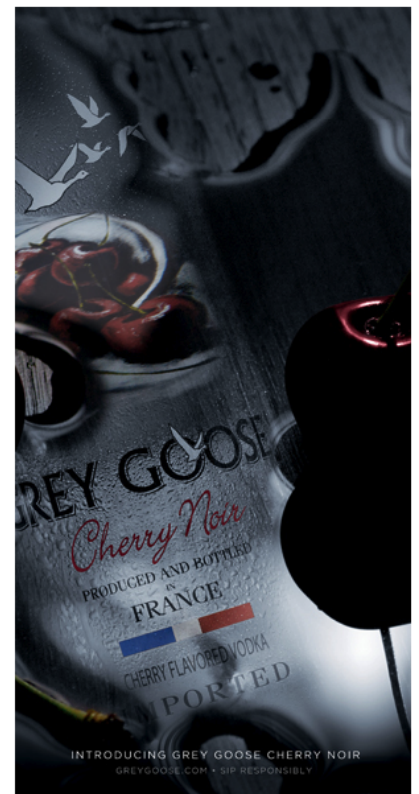
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