

E.G. Young (published under Emily Young in the [Tampa Bay Times](#))

Journalism Sample: *We Tried That: Learning how to bartend at the Mandarin Hide in St. Petersburg*

Every bar's a stage, and all the bartenders merely players.

At least, that seems to be Erin Lee's philosophy. As director of operations at the Mandarin Hide, a prohibition-style bar in downtown St. Petersburg, she equates bartending to acting.

"When we open, the curtains go up, and the show is on," she says. "You guys are on stage. It's a play that acts out differently every night."

Let's hope the play isn't a tragedy tonight. This is my first attempt at bartending.

When I recently tried to make Fourth of July cocktails, they ended up looking less like patriotic drinks and more like decaying swamp water. As I nervously step behind the bar counter, Manny the Buffalo — mounted to the wall — watches me with suspicion.

"What drink do you want to make?" asks Erin Davey, director of spirits and education. Since Davey creates most of the Mandarin Hide's cocktail recipes, she'll be my instructor tonight.

I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind: an old fashioned. Is that too cliché?

"God, no," Davey says. "We get so many orders for old fashioned ... It's also one of the hardest things to get right."

My first lesson: Always keep your liquor bottles in the same order.

"You want to be eyes up," Davey says. That means grabbing the correct bottle from the bar well using only muscle memory. She rattles off the liquors, right to left: vodka, gin, rum, tequila, triple sec, bourbon whiskey. To be honest, I'm not even sure what triple sec is. For the old fashioned, we use Buffalo Trace Bourbon.

Creating an old fashioned is just as much fun as drinking one: a tiny sugar cube, placed inside a double rocks glass, muddled with a splash of soda water. Two dashes each of two different bitters from slender-necked bottles; one contains a blood-red liquid labeled Ango, making me feel like I'm in a potions class. Two ounces of bourbon.

I'm going to be free-pouring the liquor, which means pouring it directly into the glass without measuring it first. Before I try with the bourbon, I practice with a bottle of lemon juice. I lose control. The juice sprays in a violent arc, attacking Davey's strappy black shirt.

"It happens all the time," Davey comforts me.

Manny the Buffalo looks down at me. His glassy eyes seem to indicate this does not happen all the time.

"You're going to get this," Davey says, demonstrating how to pour without soaking your co-worker. Her quick laughter and authoritative air convince me.

I count to six as the bourbon streams out, while Davey's shirt remains unharmed. Success.

Next, a scoop of ice-cubes: Kold Draft, which are square. (Kold Draft cubes are larger than regular ice cubes, so they melt more slowly and are used in drinks that will be consumed over a long period of time.) Now it's time to mix the drink. Instead of shaking an old fashioned, you stir, so it doesn't become too aerated. Stirring helps the ice melt, making the cocktail "drinkable" rather than "straight booze," Davey explains. "Every drink you make, you're going to want to have about 33 percent ice-melt [dilution] in it." This is getting very mathematical.

Finally, Davey shows me how to make citrus flame-throwers for the garnish. Despite the lemon juice incident, she trusts me with fire. First, Davey peels a strip from an orange with bumpy skin, which usually contain more oil. She places the flame of a Bic lighter next to the rind and squeezes the juice. Fire flares like a miniature Molotov Cocktail.

It's my favorite bar trick. It's also my only bar trick.

The finished drink is amber in the bar's champagne light. A single cherry balances on a toothpick over a curled orange garnish.

"You made a fantastic old fashioned," Davey says.

Next up: We concoct a glass of Marrakesh. Davey created this creamy dessert drink after she traveled to Turkey, because she wanted a cocktail that embodied the flavors of Turkish Delight. My only familiarity with Turkish Delight is from the children's book *The Chronicles of Narnia*, in which Edmund sells out his family for a taste of enchanted candy.

This recipe combines pistachio butter, rosewater, milk, Kappa Pisco, Hendrick's gin and lemon oil. I'm enthralled by the Kappa Pisco — an unaged brandy from Chile — which comes in a midnight blue bottle scattered with stars. To combine the ingredients with a scoop of ice, I shake the tin in front of my chest. That's not how you do it, Davey advises me, or men will make lewd comments. The best method is to shake it over your shoulder, like throwing a football.

As the creator of Lady's Behind Bars, an education and support group for women in the industry, Davey is passionate about educating female bartenders. She's also careful to keep the bar a safe space for customers. What happens if a man sexually harasses a female guest? She kicks him out.

As a bartender, it's "on you ... to make sure things don't go too far," she says.

Strained into a chilled Nick and Nora glass — named after the detectives in the 1934 movie *The Thin Man* — the drink is sweet and frothy, with a dash of cinnamon on top. Edmund was right: I would 100 percent sell out my family for this.

"Did you make these beautiful drinks?" asks Drew, one of the bartenders. He wears a skinny tie with a mustache clip. Shaking a dirty martini over his shoulder, he talks about the classic simplicity of a dry martini, an "old-school cocktail."

"We're trying to bring it back," he says.

As a live band starts playing, customers push for space at the counter. With rhythmic efficiency, the bartenders and barbacks mix cocktails, hand out menus and lead customers to their new favorite drinks. Between juggling orders, they all manage to teach me something new. Drew shows me how to tell the difference between fresh mint and fresh basil, just by looking at the leaves. Sami tells me how to hold large bottles so you don't get carpal tunnel. Maurice demonstrates how to make three Moscow Mules at once, free-pouring the liquor.

I make my first gin and tonic to a rousing clap of thunder. Rain pounds against the window as I mix a daiquiri with pineapple rum. It tastes as tropical as it sounds. Finally, Lee asks me if I'm ready to truly bartend.

When the next couple walks in the door, I hand them a menu and tell them the Thursday night special: \$5 Moscow Mules. Although the man doesn't like Moscow Mules, I somehow convince him to order one by rambling about how much I love vodka.

Two Moscow Mules in copper mugs. Vodka. Fresh lime juice. Ice. Topped with ginger beer. Garnished with a lime.

I ask the couple how they like their drinks, feeling like a contestant on one of those cutthroat cooking shows. Though still not a fan of Mules, the man says he likes my drink better than most he's had. I'll take it.

The verdict

By the end of the evening, I've learned how to mix an old fashioned, a Marrakesh, a gin and tonic, a pineapple daiquiri, and a Moscow Mule. Creating each drink felt intoxicating, like magic, but it was more complicated than I ever imagined. The next time I come back to the Mandarin Hide, I'll have a newfound appreciation for the work behind that counter.

As I prepare to leave, I see the Moscow Mule couple kiss passionately, his arm slung over her chair. Despite the crowds, they're in a private world of cocktails and romance.

It's time for me to walk off-stage.