

Sips

all bottled up

bartenders make the best confidantes because they keep their secrets — and yours — so close to their vests

“I have hundreds of stories I could tell,” says Steven Wilcoxson, a bartender at The Ritz-Carlton, Naples. “But, as with a therapist, they must remain between the bartender and the guest.”

Wilcoxson, who has worked for more than 20 years in his industry, personifies the sometimes oppressive discretion that bartenders (especially of the Ritz-Carlton variety) show when someone — say, a probing writer — tries to find parallels between those who tend bar and those licensed to tend their patients’ mental health.

Most of Wilcoxson’s guests are locals who enjoy the bar for its relaxed and inviting ambience, which entices many patrons to get intimate about their private thoughts and problems. But he flinches at sharing specifics, even about anonymous subjects, because patrons might recognize themselves in the article and snare him into a professional or political fracas.

Victor Jules Bergeron Jr., also known as “Trader Vic” and the founder of those legendary, eponymous Polynesian-themed restaurants, shared some wry observations about what bartenders need to do to maintain that comfort zone and their reputations. For him, the worst bartenders, “the ones who make customers see red — or drink elsewhere — are listening in on conversations and joining in uninvited; gossiping about other customers; griping about the boss, working hours, and pay; or discussing the boss’ private affairs.”

DEADLY DISCRETION

The preferred technique for therapeutic bartending is a more demure approach: listening with at least seeming interest and nodding to give what behaviorists call “positive reinforcement.” But this has also posed problems. In June 1953, *Time* magazine published a provocative article entitled “Analysts and Bartenders,” which lumps together bartenders and psychoanalysts — not as great therapists, but as potential patients.

The gist of the piece is that both are leading contenders for heart attacks due to their mutual job stresses. Ottawa, Canada psychiatrist Dr. John P.S. Cathcart stated in a presentation to the Canadian Psychiatric Association in Winnipeg that the death rate from coronary attacks

Looking for a spot to safely spill your secrets? You’ll need a private place — and, perhaps, an extra-potent potable. Bartenders at the most intimate bars and lounges at The Ritz-Carlton properties recommended these signature drinks that are strong enough to loosen even the tightest tongue.



O2 lounge / the ritz-carlton, moscow

THE DRINK: MOSCOW SANGAREE

O2 mixologist Roman Milostivy took home the top honor in the 2008 Bols Around the World Cocktail Competition in Amsterdam for his concoction, which combines the sweetness of honey and cassis with the full body of prunes and orange bitters.

INGREDIENTS:

- 2 prunes, cut into small pieces
- 3 cloves
- 30 ml Russian vodka
- 20 ml crème de cassis
- 10 ml honey syrup
- 15 ml lemon juice
- 1 dash orange bitters
- 30 ml tawny port



INSTRUCTIONS:

Muddle prunes and cloves with vodka, crème de cassis and honey syrup in the shaker. Add lemon juice, fill shaker with ice and shake. Double-strain in a highball glass filled with crushed ice and top with red wine. Squeeze orange peel, run it along the highball rim and drop into glass.

among psychoanalysts at the time was much higher than among doctors generally: "Recent statistics indicate that bartenders share the top rung of the mortality ladder with the analysts. . . . Both are dealing constantly with the frailties of human nature and are witness daily to hostility in naked form, but are forced to restrain themselves."

When customers start disclosing their tender or terrifying sides, bartenders who cultivate the art of not taking issue might come across to their more probing or sensitive confessors as patronizing; service with a smile could look more like a sneer when given at the wrong time. This troubled emotional transference may be similar to what many go through in therapy as they tell their problems to people who are essentially paid to listen, to humor and sometimes to nod too much.

In this regard, the bartenders' veil of secrecy hints that underneath all the snappy and shallow patter of "cocktail culture" lurks a world of genuine souls with lots to keep buried. Some bartenders might be dying to share their customers' darkest secrets, but the tighter their lips, the more they serve as blank screens onto which we can project imaginary intrigues, romances or horrors.

DRINKING IN THE SHALLOW END

Shortly after my book *The Cocktail: The Influence of Spirits on the American Psyche* was published in 1995, I developed a conceptual hangover whenever folks insisted on asking only about the style and celebrity side of drinking.

Not enough people were curious about the cocktail's quirky, psychosexual dimensions. The conversations lacked flash, blood and libido. I wish more had engaged me in chats about what constitutes a "girl drink" and why so many insecure men are afraid to drink one, or if the letters S-E-X really are subliminally embedded in liquor ad ice cubes to tempt a different kind of thirst.

Instead, people focused on whether martinis should be shaken or stirred, or if the "new cocktail trends" were having a salable effect on the food and beverage industries. Soon, I felt a bit of empathy toward bartenders, imagining the near-catalepsy they might also experience when barraged with similar trivia all day long. (I still wonder how they cope.) Compared with such cocktail banality, even the most pretentious of pop-Freudian psychobabble sounds superb.

"NEUROTIC" ISN'T WHAT IT USED TO BE

Bartender principles of silence, while admirable, are increasingly becoming less necessary: Lately we're all too happy to spill our own secrets.

In a post-Jerry Springer and Dr. Phil climate, mental anguish lacks the mystique it might have had. Those once-private problems like hang-ups about sex, love handles and money are now as common and predictable as mass-produced widgets. In this "new normal," people's self-esteem is too high, not too low; they fancy themselves more fascinating than they really are.



Norman Bukofzer
Star Bar, New York

star bar / the ritz-carlton new york, central park

THE DRINK: THE SHINING STAR

Norman Bukofzer, named one of "New York's friendliest bartenders" by *Forbes* magazine, created his signature cocktail for Star Bar, where he has worked for the past two decades.

INGREDIENTS:

120 ml Ketel One Citroen vodka

15 ml Cointreau liqueur

30 ml fresh cranberry juice

Juice from half a lime

Star fruit garnish

INSTRUCTIONS:

Pour vodka, Cointreau and juices into a cocktail shaker with ice.

Shake until well chilled

and strain into a martini or cocktail glass. Garnish with star fruit slice.



Judging by how more and more people practically scream the most embarrassing details of their private lives on cell phones in the most public places, secrets seem to have lost their cachet. And those who bother keeping mum, like Wilcoxson, are a dying breed.

"I meet guests from all over the world and many cultures," he says. "I have met celebrities, CEOs, government officials, and people from all walks of life. ... I have found when they are at the bar, they are talking with a new friend and open up their life to you. ... The reason I have been successful is because I hear everything and know nothing."

● BY JOSEPH LANZA

the churchill bar / the ritz-carlton, guangzhou

THE DRINK: THE GUANGZHOU GENTLEMAN

With its rich wood and gilt interior, Churchill's was designed to mimic the atmosphere of British private gentlemen's clubs. So bartender Bruce Deng was inspired to use gin and Scottish whisky to pay homage to the drinking etiquette during the heyday of World War II-era British Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

INGREDIENTS:

- 25 ml Tanqueray gin
- 3 dashes Angostura bitters
- 10 ml Sambuca
- Pinch of sugar
- 55 ml Islay whisky (Bowmore 12 years)

INSTRUCTIONS:

Fill a shaker with ice; add all ingredients except whisky. Shake well and pour through a double strainer into a chilled martini glass. Stir in whisky.



Bruce Deng
The Ritz-Carlton, Guangzhou



Artur Kosmala
McGills, Ireland

mcgills / the ritz-carlton powerscourt, county wicklow, ireland

THE DRINK: PÍOG ULL (IRISH FOR "APPLE PIE")

This seriously delicious and potent blend created by Artur Kosmala has a secret of its own: Despite the name, it contains no apple-flavored ingredients. (Credit goes to the blend of melon, peach and Baileys liqueurs.)

INGREDIENTS:

- 25 ml Midori melon liqueur
- 25 ml Crème de Pêche liqueur
- 50 ml Tullamore Dew whiskey
- 50 ml Baileys Irish Cream
- Dash of Irish Mist liqueur
- Dash of fresh milk
- Pinch of cinnamon

INSTRUCTIONS:

Fill a shaker with ice; add all liquor ingredients and milk. Shake well and pour through a double strainer into a chilled martini glass. Sprinkle cinnamon on top.

