

# No Ordinary Cocktail

The growth of the mixology culture in Toronto. BY DIANE J. McDOUGALL



From the Sidecar to the Singapore Sling to that most famous of martinis (“shaken, not stirred”), the precise history of the exalted cocktail is obscured in legend. Yet the combination of art and science that surely inspired the very first one is regaining in popularity across the globe.

Consider this summer’s 10th annual Tales of the Cocktail event calling itself the world’s largest cocktail festival and drawing more than 25,000 “mixologists” to New Orleans’ French Quarter.

The distinction between mixology and bartending is most notably in the time and attention invested in creating an original drink. And one North American hub that’s making a name for itself in the culture of mixology is Toronto, Canada’s largest city.

Take, for example, Fynn’s of Temple Bar—a cozy establishment on King Street West. Manager Robin Wynne, 33, first took a turn “behind the wood” two years ago when he was trying to save labor costs on slow Sunday evenings. But before long, he was hooked.

Like more than a few of the city’s mixologists, Wynne brings years of culinary training to his creativity, experimenting with drinks that use fresh ingredients found at any local produce stand.

“Sometimes you win and make an extraordinary cocktail,” he says. “Sometimes you fail and make a really horrible drink. But it’s more wins than losses. I think that with my chef background, my palate is refined to the point where I can pinpoint the flavor combinations I want to hit.”

For Wynne, though, it’s not just the flavor. He calls himself a

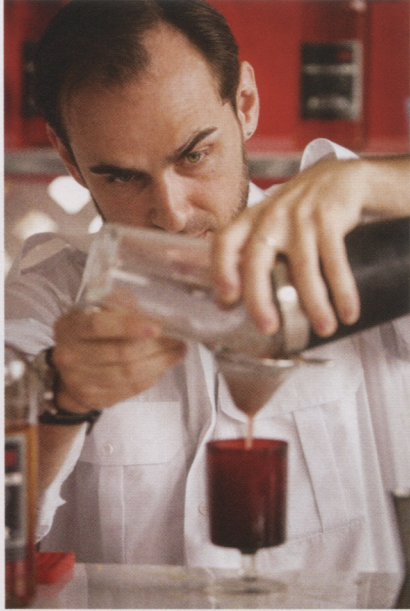
modern molecular mixologist (as contrasted with a classic mixologist) because he experiments wildly with the chemistry as well.

“When you cook a steak,” he explains, “you’re searing the meat, which changes the format and texture. That’s a molecular process. There’s also that process in a drink—changing the format. So instead of giving you a vodka-with-cucumber cocktail, I’m now infusing the cucumber *into* the cocktail.”

“There are some crazy ones, like a Peking Duck-infused bourbon old-fashioned. Then there’s one,” he begins, leaning forward a bit and demonstrating with his hands, “where I turn truffle mushrooms—which are really pungent mushrooms—into a powder, like a snow; then I take Parmesan cheese and I make it into an air, like a foam; then I turn balsamic vinegar into little ‘caviar’ balls.”

“You can turn anything, with a chemical process, into any kind of drink.”





(Opposite page) Robin Wynne manages Fynn's of Temple Bar. At a July competition, he and nine other Toronto mixologists competed in crafting rum-based cocktails (right), including Scott McMaster (above) and Michelle Tham (top right).

## ON THE MENU

Wynne's unique combinations have earned him a reputation that brings guests to his bar from as far as 50 minutes away by subway. He might only be serving on Sunday evenings, but all week long he's concocting a specialty cocktail list, including such novelties as these:

» **The Red Maple** Maple and black pepper bacon-infused vodka, house-made Worcestershire, celery bitters, Tabasco and Clamato juice served in a bacon salt-rimmed glass.

» **The Michael Corleone** A barrel-aged cocktail made with Buffalo Trace Bourbon, both dry and sweet marsala wine, Angostura bitters, a drunken cherry and the secret: home-brewed Cohiba cigar syrup. "It's kinda crazy," Wynne admits.

Wynne's passion for mixology has only grown since he started competing and winning. For a competition earlier this year sponsored by Made With Love (an event-based celebration of the cocktail culture), he joined 16 other mixologists in

a "market race" preliminary round.

Each was given US\$30 and 20 minutes to gather a maximum of six ingredients with which to create their cocktail. Then it was "1, 2, 3, go," with everyone racing to get their favorites. Wynne walked out with cucumber, lime, cilantro, red chili peppers and sesame-seed oil.

The result? Thai One On, which earned him a spot in the final competition, two months later. There, he won "people's choice" when he served up the three-part concoction Cool Runnings, which he calls a playful mouth experience: caramel popcorn made with rum, brown-butter rum ice cream and the rum cocktail itself.

## GLOBAL INFLUENCE

While Toronto's cultural diversity is ideal for the mixologist on the hunt for inspiration, the reinvention of the cocktail isn't limited to this city alone. In fact, Toronto

is trying to catch up to Vancouver, not to mention cities such as New York, New Orleans, Hong Kong, Berlin and London.

Michelle Tham, a director for the Canadian Professional Bartenders Association, credits the rise of mixology to society's desire to live better, eat better, drink better and celebrate local products.

"I think that every culture has a cocktail of its own," she adds, offering an example. "A Flor de Caña rum is the product of Nicaragua and of the processes they use, the local water they use, the natural ingredients they use."

In fact, Tham, Wynne and eight other Toronto mixologists recently spent five days in Barbados at the invitation of Mount Gay Rum, after making the final cut in a rum-based competition. There, they met with a master distiller and observed the entire process for creating a quality spirit: from the sugarcane fields to the island's "rum shacks."

"All to educate bartenders," Wynne marvels. "But you're educating the people who probably can make the most impact on sales and the building of the brand in this city."

In the end, yes, mixology is a business. And those who make the rums, bourbons, gins and more are well aware of the impact of one passionate bartender. But for individuals like Wynne, Tham and their tight-knit cadre, it's so much more.

As they share recipes and techniques, hanging out together in the wee hours after closing down their own bars, mixology is the perfecting of a craft—creating that next amazing combination and seeing the look of surprise and delight on a customer's face. And perhaps winning another competition in the process. ■



Visit [selamta.co/cocktails](http://selamta.co/cocktails) to try your hand at crafting several creative cocktails from Toronto's mixologists.