

Don't Bother Reading This If You're In a Hurry

It may sound a little far-fetched, (and if you've read my column before, you know that's sort of the point) but I learned the secret to life the other day. Really, I did. I've heard the secret hundreds of time before. But it was the other day, when I actually learned it. I was shaking up a Sidecar (*a delicious Brandy cocktail invented in Harry's American Bar in Paris during World War I that fell through the cracks*), and for some random reason, I paid extra close attention to the process of making it, much more so than usual.

Now understand that usually, I pay quite a bit of attention to my concoctions. So this was more like a quest. I delicately laced the rim of the chilled Martini glass with fresh, fine sugar. I studied the streams of Cognac and Cointreau pouring over the ice cubes. I slowly pressed the fresh lemon against the glass, squeezing every last drip of juice from it. I actually listened to the rhythmic sound of the shaker as the ice and liquid cracked and sloshed back and forth between the metal and the glass. I felt the chill of the shaker growing colder and colder on my hand as the frost formed on the outside of it. Then I looked around the room, and almost as though things were in slow motion, I looked at each person and "soaked in" the sights and sounds at that one moment. I slowly "sipped" that second or two, instead of guzzling it down. It was relaxing, refreshing, delightful.

I rapped that Boston Shaker against the heel of my hand, dropped the Hawthorne Strainer onto the stainless tin, and slowly poured the delicious libation, the moody cocktail creation, into a neatly-chilled cocktail glass. As I struck the match and squeezed the fresh peel of the navel orange, I saw the short, bright burst of flaming zest send its sparkling secrets across the top of the drink like the first drops of rain on a pond, right before a Summer storm. I gently slid that little masterpiece in front of one of my regulars.

He never had a Sidecar before though he watched me make it, struggle over it, get lost in the creation of it. He probably never saw a bartender labour over a drink like that before. Or maybe I just had food in my teeth. (Either is very possible at any given moment behind my bar on a Friday night.) Regardless of which was accurate, I noticed a change in his face; and like a runaway yawn, the contagious "slow moment"

left me and invisibly engulfed him, apparently following the Sidecar. I watched him sink in his stool, and slowly sip the nectar I put before him. He seemed immeasureably pleased. And that's one reason I make drinks: to see that look, that contentment in people's eyes when they sip my liquid artwork. I work to see the "Ahhhh....." that my cocktails can put on people's faces that slows down time.

Crafting that Sidecar, was the exact moment when I consciously realized what my grandfather and millions of people of a different era were trying to tell us all: ***slow down***. The secret of life (get your pens ready) is enjoying each moment you are in. The hard part is figuring out how to do that. Some people never figure it out. Others are lucky enough to have wise grandparents and open minds so that they can learn at a young age, what it took those before us decades, perhaps centuries, or even possibly a millennium of hand-me-down wisdom, to learn. (I had to tie in the millennium, somehow into the December 1999 column.)

For me, that's the magic of a cocktail: you can't make a good, "fast" cocktail. You can't truly enjoy a great cocktail "in a hurry." You sip it, savor it, over time. You muse a cocktail. Just ordering a true cocktail like a Martini, a Manhattan, a Sidecar, a Margarita, an Old-fashioned, or a Mojito begins a natural process of relaxing, slowing down, unwinding. The cocktail is the shiatzu-massage of the adult refreshment. It is the hot bubble bath of the bar beverage. Perhaps only the pint of Guinness (and I emphasize perhaps) can equal the cocktail's ability to allow people to stop, for a few minutes, and just stew in the moment, and savor each sip of it.

It's funny: there's a shared smirk of mutual understanding sometimes between patron and barkeep, when both know this little secret, as we watch everyone around us winding up tighter and tighter, moving faster and faster. It's for people like that, those "bunnies-on-acid," that those ready-made drinks were invented. For the rest of us, who take the pleasurable time to read a column about nothing terribly earthshaking or "productive," who don't mind seeking out the simple pleasures of life, who appreciate the difference between a quick drink and a true cocktail, that I proudly call myself a bartender, and cheerfully make all those drinks that other people "don't have time" for. But I have to get going, I've got a million things to do and I'm in a big hurry.

- Toby Ellis, Bartender @ The Stoop, Armory Square