

Bartending 101

Introduction to indoctrination

This paper was written when it became obvious that new recruits on the bar were lacking key skills and knowledge, especially those who had attended a “Bar School”. I hope it will serve as reference material for the basics of bartending, the things that no Head Bartender should have to inform or train their new recruits in. If staff are having trouble attaining these very basic standards, I think they should be encouraged to assess their own suitability to the trade which many of us love.

Whereas this paper has been written with relation to the Specifics at The Rummer Hotel, its lessons translate to all other establishments, and to many other industries.

Part 1 – The first of many many wonderful parts

In this part we examine what should be taken care of before you even get to work. If you work in a tech upstart firm, you would have already picked out your best retro technology t-shirt, and chosen shorts that will not snag on the slide down to the canteen, before you inevitably get to work and open fire on your friends and colleagues as the description of a “sad loner” broadcast on the BBC. The same applies to the bar and restaurant trade.

Are you Sober?

This section deals with the things that should be under control before you even get to work. Unfortunately, many many bartenders fall into what I call the “Booze Trap”. Being an expert on alcoholic beverages, does not mean attempting, an inevitably failing, to build an alcohol tolerance similar to that of Ernest Hemmingway. It is helpful to realise that even you will become as much of a reprehensible twat as the worst guests that you serve. If you really want to learn a lesson from Hemmingway, let it be this: Hemmingway never drank while he was working.

If you are hung-over at work, despite what you may think, you are not working at you best, and yes, your boss has noticed, even if he has let it slide this time. When your drinking affects your work, it is the very definition of a drinking problem, and you should self-assess your suitability to work with alcohol.

Is your Uniform acceptable?

Even if you do not have a prescribed uniform with a corporate emblem emblazoned on it, whatever you choose to wear is your uniform, and sets out how you are perceived by customers and co-workers. I am not suggesting you wear a suit to work, unless you are tired of being as alternative as everybody else in the industry, but that your uniform is clean and well cared for. Even if you don’t notice that those trainers are filthy, everybody else has, and nobody believes that you got that t-shirt dirty within the first two minutes of work.

Uniform includes the tools of the trade. As this is a 101 guide, I will list them for you:

- Waiters Friend. A bartender without a waiters friend is like a member of Avon and Somerset constabulary with or without their tit hat.... No bloody good to anybody.

- Lighter. We used to light cigarettes at the bar, which is no longer allowed, but we still need it for some cocktails, for lighting candles and for unsightly ear and nose hair.
- Pens. Three is the traditional number, but I would always recommend four, because I am going to “borrow” one as soon as you start your shift. You will have to take telephone messages, and you will have to write down an order, and you will look like a dick if you spend ten minutes trying to find a pen to perform a simple task.

If you are a super Dooshy bartender, you will want to spend a little extra time practising tying that cravat because it is an art, not a science, and if I ever see you wearing trouser braces with a belt you will be executed by wedgie.

My Girlfriend crashed into the traffic when the dog threw up.

Excuses for being late are one of the most annoying things about running a bar or restaurant, and nearly always translates to “I am not that bothered about my job. It is only when every system in the city works in perfect harmony that it takes me 14 minutes to get to work, so I leave the house as 5:46pm for my 6pm shift. It is not my fault that perfect urban synchronisation did not occur today.” Whatever response your manager gives, what they actually mean is “I care as much about how your flatmate slept on top of your phone and you could not hear your alarm, as you care about your job.”

Being on time means being on the bar, in uniform, ready to work with your tools of the trade at the time your shift starts. This necessarily means that you will need to arrive at work earlier than this time. Recommended time is 15 minutes before. Adherence to this rule will benefit your life, whichever path you take, more than any other rule, including Newtons Law of Motion. Just imagine a world where you suddenly don’t have to apologise to your boss because the bus was 5 minutes late, or you were delayed 10 minutes by your girlfriend meeting your boyfriend accidentally. It will revolutionise your life if you embrace it with all your heart.

Part 2. The customer is always right.

So you have got to work 15 minutes early. Your uniform is clean, your hair has been brushed, and you have all the tools of the trade with you. Congratulations, you have instantly elevated yourself to the top 50% of bartenders in the country. Yes, most people can’t even get the bit right that only involves taking their first step onto the bar.

In this part we take a look at customer service. The title of this part should not be taken too literally, but is essentially correct. If you end up arguing with a customer, regardless of their complaint or what is coming out of their mouth, it is because you made a mistake. That mistake may have been letting them in the building in the first place, or may have been an error in managing expectation, or one of a plethora of tiny things that you need to judge and juggle 100% of the time. Customer service is more of an art than tying your cravat, and there is no shortcut other than practice and watching someone who is good at it. If you went to “Bar School” then you are again at a huge disadvantage to the bartender who bar-backed for two years and learned how to handle touchy situations and how to turn an enthusiastic guests into an ambassador for your bar (and a good tipper) in four words.

Fortunately there are some easy starting point from which you can develop your own personal style.

Shop Window

Meeting and exceeding expectations starts long before a guest even steps in the building. Maybe it starts with an advert on MyFace-o-gram, or a verbal recommendation, or some other way that you have no influence over, but for many it will be looking at the building, looking in the window or looking at the menu. If this is not the first impression, it will almost certainly be the second.

A dirty window, broken outside furniture, or tables covered in dirty crockery does not give the impression of a busy establishment with no time for such trivialities; it screams.... nobody cares. If you cannot keep the windows clean, will anybody trust you to balance a daquiri or stir down an Old Fashioned? Probably not.

Meet and Greet

Broadly speaking when a guest steps into the building they will do one of two things.

- Hang around at the door. This is the best case scenario for any one in customer service. They have stopped at the door for one of many reasons. Maybe they are unsure of protocols in the bar, or are waiting for someone to take charge and choose a table, or they are unsure whether they are staying or not. Whatever the reason, it is likely to be a slightly uncomfortable moment of indecision, and a bartender who is on the ball can turn this into a big win and a big tip. Heading straight over with a big smile and a greeting sets the tone for the visit, and immediately ends the uncomfortable moment. Launch straight into a simple question like “are you here for drinks?” and take it from there.
- Go straight to the bar or table. Much more difficult to make a positive impression, but it can be done. At The Rummer we operate table service and as a default service model we will take orders at the table. I have watched this absurd situation unfold many times at the bar. Two gents enter and head straight to the bar. Nobody has greeted them, as they look comfortable and in conversation. They have decided on their drinks and look for a bartender. The bartender looks up from using 100% of their mental processing power to make a Sazerac, and tells them to take a table, and somebody will take an order. Bartender finishes the Sazerac 5 minutes later, adjusts his braces, and heads over to take an order from the two gentlemen who have already left. They did not want a romantic candle lit table, and to wait for a waiter when they were ready to order. They wanted to order at the bar, and possibly stand at the bar to enjoy the atmosphere. They indicated this by heading straight to the bar and trying to order at the bar.

Ambiance

The requirements for the atmosphere change minute by minute and is part of the massive juggling act that you are expected to perform every minute of your shift.

For a venue with windows the lights should be about the same as the natural light outside. If the inside is much darker than the outside, the establishment will look closed at worst and dingy at best.

Music. I don't want to hear the table next to me but I want to be able to have a conversation. If it is a karaoke classic, then best leave it for after work. At all times, please try to remember that the playlist is not supposed to make your shift better, it is to enhance the customer experience.

PART 3 - There is no “I” in team.... But there is lots of individual brilliance

This part deals with the simple mechanics of working efficiently and in a team on the bar. Again, if you went to “Bar School”, this will be an alien concept to you, so sit down and read the next few sentences slowly several times.

It is not all about you. It really isn't. You can only do your job, if others do their job properly. A team is a collection of individuals that work together towards a common goal. On a Friday night in December this goal is survival, but most of the time it is money. Cold hard currency.

Let us not be shy about why we are here, and what our goal is. We work in a capitalist economy and we gauge success using an excellent scale called money. You want to work in a successful bar, and you want to be a successful bartender. If you are good at your job, your bar will be successful and profitable, and you will be able to name your price in terms of wages, and collect vast amounts of tips. As much as you love to sit around with your bartender friends sipping an Apothecary, talking about how artisanal you are when you make your craft cocktails, your job and ultimate goal is to make the bar and yourself as successful as possible and that is done by making money. This part deals with how the team can work together to be as efficient and profitable as possible. An efficient team also has more time to make bubblegum bitters and olive tinctures, to further enhance your already wonderful dirty bubblegum-tini.

Put it back. For F@#k sake, Put it back!!!

If the police had not confiscated it, I would use my cattle prod more for this reason than any other. Nothing slows me down more, when I am making a round, than reaching for a bottle that is not there. You eventually find it lying on another station, but by this time you have lost the rhythm and your glass is definitely half empty.

Clean as you go. F#@king Clean up your own mess!!!

The round isn't finished until all your equipment is clean and put back in its rightful place. You can do this while you are taking the next order, or while the girl with pink hair and a lisp fumbles for the exact change to pay for the Appletini you tried to talk her out of.

God gave you two hands. Use both or suffer his wrath.

This does not apply to people who have less than two hands, but does apply to if you believe in other deities. For God said to Sebastian the bartender, “Why do you insult me by placing one hand on your hip while pouring with the other, when it could be employed in distributing a bevnep, or administering a fist bump to the pink haired girl with a lisp who has finally found the right change”

Think ahead.... Way ahead.

Finding your ice-well or lime wedges empty, or that there is only a quarter of a shot of gin left in your speedrail, does not have to be a bartending inevitability. If you manage to think ahead you can avoid the difficult situation of having to explain to the lawyers who just ordered 3 gin and tonics that you have to run about a mile to gather all the ingredients to make the simplest of drinks. Refilling should be done when you are less than half way through. If you think you can ride it out to the end of the shift, then you are just about to get busier than you have been all night. This is the way the bar gods (or other bar deities) work.

PART 4 – Sweat the petty stuff, but don't pet the sweaty stuff

We have all had moments of great clarity when we realise how much a small fact can change our world. You will not find any of those facts in this section, just remedies to annoyances to keep your boss and co-workers happy

Labels forward

This sounds patronising, but needs to be said. All labels need to face forward, so that the product can be identified by the bartender and the guest. This applies to all products at all times.

It should be obvious that display bottles need to be facing forward and regularly spaced, but the same must also be true for beer bottles in the fridge and wine bottles. If these items are not lined up and facing forward you are likely to make mistakes when deciding when to bottle up, or even grabbing a beer for a guest.

Bank Notes

Every note should be put into the cash drawer the same way round with the queens head facing up. The more time and care you take over the handling of notes, the less likely you are to make a mistake.

Drinking

Like Ernest Hemmingway, drinking alcohol while working should not even enter your mind. You have way too many things to juggle to risk losing your edge with jagerbomb or two. The inevitable will happen and the rotund lady who has slammed twelve margheritas trying to keep up with her boss, who is a notorious alcoholic, pays the bill and insists she gave you a £50 note and not a £5. In this situation your head bartender can look deep into her unfocused and glazed over eyes, then deep into your crystal clear pools of radiant blue professionalism, and weigh up the probabilities of who has made a mistake. They may even curiously check the till drawer to see if there are any £50 notes in the £5 note slot. Finding perfect rows of pictures of Her Majesty starring neatly back at him from the drawer, he will have no doubt as to who make a mistake and admire your professionalism, neatness and eyes.

Back Bar

Back bars are display areas, not storage or utility areas. Turn that internal monologue, which sometimes turns into competing voices in your head that tell you getting a tattoo of Daffy Duck is only acceptable after killing a puppy in a microwave, to good use. Ask yourself, "Is that a display item, used for selling?", then let the crazy little voice answer "No, blue roll is for cleaning, not for selling. Look, the microwave is just over there, and it is already turned on!".

Bring a friend to work!

Don't. The last time it was acceptable to bring a friend somewhere was a 7th birthday party. You are a grown up with a proper job, it is the opposite of acceptable to bring a friend to work. If you are visited by a friend at work, it is advisable to either keep the chat brief, or if they are staying for drinks, have them sat some distance from the bar so that you are not distracted by them. The same logic applies to members of staff who are not on shift

Mission Critical

If you don't need it for service, it should not be on the bar, and that includes the guy who turned up without a waiters friend. You can find him cleaning the bins outside.

Phones

In a world that has become hyper connected, and lives that rely on instant communication it is understandable to want to keep our phone in your pocket. They are wonderful devices, that enhance our lives and keep us connected to the ones we love. They fill our social lives with wonder and amazement. In the bar and restaurant industry, the guests provide all the wonder and amazement you will ever need, and your social life probably mainly involves other service industry workers who are also working on a Saturday night.... So you will not be needing your phone then will you. Nothing looks as bad as somebody who neglects their responsibilities to make a facebook update about the shape of a lime they have just discovered. Don't keep it on the backbar just in case you need to look up a recipe. Learn the recipes and keep it in the staff room. If you turn it off during work, you may even have battery left at the end of the shift to actually use it for social purposes.

In this connected world, your Head Bartender or manager may not adhere to this rule for the same reason you do. Customers use many different mediums and channels to communicate with the business and absorb information from the business. A good manager will be utilising posts, websites and messaging systems to provide good service and benefit the business. They may also make use of the funny shaped lime that you found earlier.

The Individual Brilliance Bit

It's your station. It's your setup. It's your memory that hasn't been fried by weed. It's your time. It's your glory. It's your fault if you crash and burn and end up sobbing into lime soaked hands in the store room while pretending to look for the last bottle of Yaks Milk Bitters, that a previous bar manager had made, and you suddenly really need.

Building a Round

The windows are clean, your cravat is resplendent, and no alcohol has passed your lips since you "accidentally" swallowed some Old Spice this morning, The smell of weed that you were sure would be disguised by the cheap aftershave has returned, but you have the confidence of the guests and they are looking to you to make their night.

Guests should always be encouraged to place a full order rather than order one item at a time. (If you can relate, at all, to the previous paragraph... grab a pad and pen. You are not fooling anyone.) They should allow the professional, that's you, to decide how the drinks should be prepared, and the most efficient way to do so. This isn't taught at The International School of Playboy Bartending, because it is hard, and takes practice.

There are a thousand little rules that will ultimately make up the algorithms of the synthetic life form that will eventually replace you, conveniently freeing up your mind to allow you to drink Old Spice and vape cannabis, so they will not be covered here. Instead, consider the following rules as a starting point, allowing you to think more deeply about the processes involved preparing multiple drinks simultaneously. You could also develop your own set of algorithms to sell to CyberCorp International, to buy more Old Spice.

One Touch. If you need to pick up that bottle of Oak Aged Limoncello more than once while you are building a round, you have done something wrong (And somebody needs to take a look at whether

the cocktail menu needs to be a little less twat friendly). Organise your shakers, glasses, hands and brain so that you only touch each item once. This will make the single biggest improvement to your speed and efficiency, but will also open up Theo to physical, intellectual, emotional and familial abuse for not putting the Chilli and Refreshers Syrup back in the fridge, and ruining your flow.

Beers last. You should be pouring at least two beers at a time due to the number of hands that the divine creator blessed you with, and with that specially oiled bar blade tucked into your waistband (as you haven't considered the hygiene issues), they should be the quickest drinks to make. So that the look of their effervescent loveliness does not diminish before getting to the table, lets pour them last, it just makes sense.

Lumpies

Lumpies. I used to work in a bar where bar-backs were called "Lumpies". This was not to be degrading or to try and humiliate, (we loved them dearly and would stroke their ears and show them pictures of lumpies in the wild) but to define roles for efficiency. Lumpies lumped stuff for you, and were there to allow the bartenders to make drinks. It should be the lumpy looking for the Yaks Milk Bitters, Grabbing the frozen coupes while you shake, and refilling the limes. Lumpies are magic, but not mind readers, so they need to be told. By being told to grab a coupe they learn that a Clover Club goes in a coupe. By being told give a glass of water to the off-duty policeman at the end of the bar, they learn what an intoxicated incompetent looks like. Lumpies make the best bartenders, not graduates from the International School of Playboy Bartenders, because they already know all the things you cannot teach them.

Part 5 – Conclusion of the Delusion

You can teach anyone some rules and recipes, but you can't teach them to be a bartender. Learning to be a bartender is a long process of trial and error and a mountain of experience. When you are starting out, just remember not to be a dick and don't take the piss.

THE END

HAVE A GOOD SHIFT

