

FLAIR BARTENDING: PROS AND CONS

A growing but widely unrecognised facet of the Dubai bartending scene, flair is coming into its own, but not without challenges

— By Cecilia Rabess

Hosted by Nick Hancock, World Flair Association (WFA) ambassador to the Middle East, and organised by MMI in conjunction with Skyy Vodka, an invite-only roundtable on flair bartending was held on February 8. It was the first in a series of events planned for 2009, designed to enhance the profile of flair throughout Dubai. Sixteen of the city's top bartenders were on hand for the roundtable held at the Palm Jumeirah's Beach House Cabana, which began with a brief demo followed by an engaging dialogue on the pros and cons of flair bartending.

FLAIR BARTENDING: NOT JUST BARTENDING WITH FLAIR

Contrary to common perception, flair bartending involves more than just pouring drinks with a little showmanship. Over the years, it has evolved from a set of simple bar tricks into an international phenomenon practised by professional barmen the world over. Annually, there are now hundreds of flair competitions, including a professional tour. A number of governing bodies, including the WFA and the Flair Bartenders Association, have been established to organise events and competitions. The MMI roundtable was an opportunity for some of Dubai's best bartenders to come together, practise their flairing and discuss the future of flair in a fun, friendly environment. The event kicked off with a demo from host and award-winning flair bartender Nick



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Hancock, who has been flairing since he was fourteen. Hancock wowed all in attendance with a series of impressive tricks, including his signature moves "The Kiss," the "Nipple Tickle" and "Eggs & Spatula." To a steady soundtrack of The Prodigy and a cheering crowd, he then invited some of Dubai's best barmen to take centre stage and showcase their skills. In succession, some of the city's best took turns manipulating cocktail shakers and liquor bottles in complex and unconventional ways.

Fortunate bar guests were able to witness it all live at The Grosvenor House's Buddha Bar. A casual request for a cocktail produced a flurry of flames, flying bottles and sailing shakers. The end result? A perfectly crafted mixed drink and a round of applause.

This is exactly the kind of excitement and awareness that MMI and Dubai's bartenders are hoping to raise in support of flair bartending. However, without the platform or the support required to perfect their craft, flair bartenders in Dubai have found it somewhat difficult to develop within this niche. To that end, after the MMI demo at the Beach House Cabana, the bartenders sat down to discuss in earnest the state of flair in Dubai: its past, present and future.

COCKTAILS AND CONVERSATION: FUTURE FLAIR

After the exhibition, programme

participants sat down for some cocktails and canapés and an engaging roundtable discussion on the future of flair in Dubai. The dialogue opened with a simple question posed by Hancock: what is the outlook for flair bartending in Dubai? Although responses were mixed, a few clear themes emerged.

First, while the future of flair bartending in Dubai looks bright, it will not be without its share of challenges. Second, although the flair community is small and tight-knit, communication and connectivity are major obstacles to the development of the flair scene in Dubai. Third, all agreed that the aptitude and passion necessary to develop the flair community were present in Dubai, but that there have been, up to this point, few opportunities to really exploit this talent. In this sense, it appears that the flair bartending scene is not unlike other sectors in the UAE: growing steadily, but fraught with all of the limitations of a new and nascent industry.

THE BAD NEWS

In spite of the fact that the flair community is universally committed to raising its profile, many bartenders noted that Dubai, and the UAE as a whole, still have a way to go if they hope to catch up to the flair scene in other countries. One of the biggest obstacles cited by roundtable participants was a lack of consistent communication. Although steps have been taken recently to ▶



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Flair bartending consists of more than just simple bar tricks performed by professional bartenders around the world

improve the dialogue among flair bartenders, limited Internet access and the lack of a central source of information in Dubai are seen as inhibiting factors to its progress. It is hoped that a new Facebook group and initiatives from MMI in the coming months will help rectify some of these issues. Another concern was the limited involvement in, and understanding of, flair among local bar managers. Participants noted that while bar managers were well versed in the particulars of food and beverage, they weren't necessarily as knowledgeable about cocktails. According to the bartenders in attendance, this was especially true of hotel bar managers, creating an additional challenge for Dubai barmen, since the city's bars are located exclusively in hotels.

Much of the discussion revolved around the fact that there is limited awareness of the distinction between "exhibition flair" and "working flair." The former largely focuses on performance, and typically involves highly technical and difficult manipulations that may not even involve the production of a drink. "Working flair," on the other hand, is a lower-risk form of the craft that aims to provide exciting and efficient customer service. A lack of understanding about the difference between the two contributes to bar managers' hesitancy to recognise flair bartending, and their failure to realise the added value it provides.

THE GOOD NEWS

The bartenders were extremely optimistic about the future of flair in Dubai. They agreed that increased communication and local awareness would elevate Dubai's flair community to the next level. Integrating flair into Dubai-wide functions such as rugby tournaments, horse races and high-profile events was

recommended to raise awareness levels. Competitions, master classes developed by MMI and independent initiatives advanced by Dubai bartenders themselves are also expected to contribute to the growth of flaring in the

UAE going forward. "Look around the table," said Hancock. "This is the future of flair in Dubai." Based on the energy, talent and commitment demonstrated by each of the event's participants, the future looks bright indeed. **TR**

REAL BARTENDERS DO IT WITH FLAIR

Top flair bartenders compete for the prestigious SKYY FLAIR GLOBAL CHALLENGE



The "art of flair" is high-energy performance bartending, often witnessed in premium cocktail bars, clubs and restaurants throughout Dubai. Flair bartending has been made famous by SKYY Vodka over the past few years through The SKYY Flair Global Challenge.

The Challenge selects regional winners from countries across the world that will go on to compete in the final in Shanghai in October. Throughout the competition, bartenders will be judged on their ability to create world-beating cocktails, perform spectacular bartending routines and demonstrate skill and knowledge in relation to the art of flair.

SKYY Vodka, the super-premium brand, created the SKYY Flair Global Challenge in partnership with the World Flair Association (WFA). Their objective is to reward the best of the flair bartending community, while making this growing sport more accessible by highlighting the glamour, spectacle and skill of flair. With the rise in popularity of cocktails across the world, SKYY Vodka is passionate about raising the standard and quality of cocktail and bar experiences and the art of flair is an important part of this enjoyment.

Lionel Boutry of SKYY Vodka comments, "We're delighted that this will be the third SKYY Flair Global Challenge and it's clear that the competition goes from strength to strength every year. We're keen that people support their local bartenders in the Dubai heat. Flair is a truly fabulous spectacle and to see the talents of the best bartenders in one location is a rare sight. We believe that this year's challenge will prove that the glamorous art of flair is a growing sport and occupation in its own right."

Winners of each challenge will advance to the SKYY Flair Global Challenge, to be held in Shanghai in October 2009. The final competition will include more than 13 bartenders from different countries competing for the title of SKYY Flair Global Challenge Champion 2009. The judging panel for the national competition is made up of WFA Pro Judges. The scoring system used has been created by the WFA to fairly assess and score the performance on-stage.