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FROM

Bar 101 TO Advanced Cocktails

A Grain cocktail class mixes ice cubes made of tea with gin, lemon and dry hop tincture.

Story by BOB TOWNSEND
Photos by JENNI GIRTMAN

Cocktails are cool. Making your own can be even cooler, which is why cocktail classes have become a seasonal mainstay at several Atlanta bars and restaurants.

The appeal is a simple equation of learning plus socializing. Top bartenders teach barcraft fundamentals. Students learn how to make Manhattans, Mai Tais and more. Everyone enjoys a few drinks, some snacks and the opportunity to meet new people.

The scene is relaxed, convivial and entertaining, with couples, singles, friends and co-workers crowding around the bar for instruction and hands-on experience in measuring, stirring and shaking.

But the setting can resemble a cocktail chemistry lab, with knives, graters, squeezers, strainers, bar spoons, shakers and mixing glasses laid out around the bar, along with ice, fresh fruit, bitters, syrups and tinctures – and even high-tech gadgets like smokers.

At Grain, a chic, petite bar Midtown, beverage director Jonathan Turner presents an ongoing monthly series featuring titles such as “Thanksgiving Party Drinks to Impress Your Friends” and “Hot Drinks to Warm Your Winter.”

Turner’s background includes stints as a bartender at Seven Lamps and bar manager at Cibo e Beve, where he started teaching classes.

“My style of bartending is to kind of bring it back to the people, making quality drinks that people love,” he says. “I want to host you, not just serve you.”

Turner brings that hospitable approach to his teaching style, but he likes to incorporate history and technique, along with culinary flourishes.

“I think the most successful class we’ve done to date was called ‘The Evolution of the Old Fashioned.’”

Turner says. “It’s a simple drink, but the variations are so different. We maxed out with 40 people in this tiny

local lessons

space. Our executive chef, Drew van Leuvan, was there making small bites, and everyone made their own Old Fashioned from scratch to their own taste."

Another feature of Grain's cocktail classes is the "take-away" – a parting gift used in the class, be it a specialty syrup or an ice mold or quick pickles, meant to encourage students to try what they learned at home.

In January, the take-away for "Tea Leaves and Coffee Grounds" will be a special tea blend and a pastry. "We'll be using a cold brew tower to make a coffee-infused liquor," Turner says. "And we'll be making a tea cocktail that's on our menu that would be great to make at home."

At Ration & Dram in Edgewood, owner Andy Minchow teams up with bar manager Kysha Cyrus and guest bartenders to present monthly "Shaken or Stirred" classes, plus some intensive introductory "Bar 101" sessions on cocktail techniques.

Minchow opened Ration & Dram in 2014 as a family-friendly neighborhood restaurant that also draws a dedicated bar and late-night crowd. Before that, he was a partner and bartender at Holeman & Finch Public House, where he presented cocktail classes and worked at the related H&F Bottle Shop.

"I've been doing cocktail classes for a long time," Minchow says. "At H&F it was more like an extension of the Bottle Shop, where we offered recipes that featured the products that were on the shelf. It bridged that gap between bar cocktail programs and what people were doing at home."

"I think when people watch bartenders working behind the bar it looks kind of intimidating. It's like scary potions and magic, but it's also smoke and mirrors. I wanted to kind of pull back the curtain a little bit and give people the knowledge to make great cocktails at home. I like the culture of drinking and making a cocktail before dinner or a nightcap after you get home."

Minchow says the introductory classes are both the most popular and his favorite to teach.

"They're usually about two-and-a-half to three hours, because there's so much to cover," Minchow says. "Some of it is as basic as explaining why we stir and why we shake, or what a double strain is, and even what to buy for your bar and where to buy it."

Other classes often explore a particular spirit or ingredient, such as whiskey, amaro or vermouth, but Minchow always starts those lessons with an abbreviated version of "Bar 101."

"In the summer, we'll do things like Tiki drinks and vermouth," Minchow says. "When it's colder, we'll do heavier spirits and cocktails. But all year, we're teaching techniques. We try to keep the classes under 20 people so we can do that and still have some fun."

Grain, 856 W. Peachtree St. 404-881-5377.

grain-bar.com

Ration & Dram, 130 Arizona Ave. 678-974-8380.
rationanddram.com ■



Jonathan Turner, beverage director at Grain in Midtown (center, with beard), leads a handcrafted cocktail class.



Using the bar at Grain as a teaching station, Turner shows his students how to make a syrup infused with blends of cinnamon, all-spice, peppercorns and other spices to pair with spirits later.

insider TIPS »

- 18.21 Bitters, makers of small batch craft bitters and cocktail mixes, hosts frequent tastings and cocktail classes at its retail shop at Ponce City Market.
- For deals on cocktail classes, check discount sites such as Scout24, which sometimes offer two-for-one specials.



Above, Grain's cocktail class reveals the process of infusing vodka. Below, while learning the craft of mixing, cocktail students enjoy drinks, appetizers and a personalized item to take home.

