

Just what is a mixologist?



► Tony Abou-Ganim is the proprietor of the Modern Mixologist, a beverage consulting firm that specializes in bar-staff training, product education, and cocktail development. He and his recipes have been featured in a variety of magazines and books and on television and radio shows. He is presently at work on his first book, *The Modern Mixologist*.

Try looking the word up in *Webster's*; you'll find a spare, incomplete definition. I reached out to my friend, cocktail historian David Wondrich, for help. He responded, "Charles G. Leland . . . wrote [a Mace Sloper story for] the June 1856 issue of *Knickerbocker Magazine*. . . . Leland has Mace sitting in a hotel room with thin walls one night when some carpetbagger enters the room next door and starts talking. The guy's so addicted to doubletalk that, instead of saying 'barkeeper' or 'mixer of tipples,' he says 'mixologist of tipulars.' Maybe Leland made it up, maybe he heard it in a bar somewhere. In any case, these Mace Sloper articles were popular and were reprinted in various newspapers all around the country. For a few years afterward, you see people using 'mixologist of tipulars,' all in quotes, as an in-joke. But by the 1870s, 'mixologist' loses the quotation marks and the 'tipulars' and starts taking on another meaning. Since there's no word for a bartender who has unusual interest and expertise in mixing drinks, people start using 'mixologist' for that. Some time later, the *Washington Post* acknowledged this when it said, 'When [bartenders] become especially proficient at putting odds and ends of firewater together, they become mixologists.'"

Deserving the Designation
Professor Jerry Thomas, the "grandfather" of the bartending profession, more than likely would have been referred to as a mixologist. So would Harry Johnson, the legendary barman and author of *New*

and Improved Illustrated Bartender's Manual or How to Mix Drinks of the Present Style. These two pioneers not only earned the title "mixologist" but also established the necessary criteria for today's bartenders.

Dale DeGroof goes by the title "master mixologist." After more than 20 years in the industry with stints at the Hotel Bel-Air in Los Angeles and 11 years as head barman at New York City's Rainbow Room, he is the bartender most recognized as being responsible for the current resurgence in classic cocktails. Dale also wrote one of the top bartender books, *The Craft of the Cocktail*, and has developed cocktail programs and trained hundreds of bartenders both here and abroad. He's earned the moniker.

Francesco Lafranconi, director of mixology and spirits educator for Southern Wine & Spirits of America, started working in this profession in Italy at the age of 15. He learned his trade at some of the world's top hotels and won the Bacardi-Martini World Championship, among other honors. Francesco has shared his vast knowledge and passion with hundreds of bartenders in Las Vegas and around the country. He is the Nevada chairman of the United States Bartenders Guild (USBG). He's earned the title.

I have worked in this business for over 25 years. I got my start under the watchful eye of my aunt Helen David, who taught me the classics at her Brass Rail Bar in Port Huron,

Michigan. I've worked in New York City, San Francisco, and now Las Vegas, where I had the opportunity to develop the original cocktail program at the Bellagio, working with more than 200 professional bartenders. It was there that I was given the title "master mixologist." I still wonder if I've done enough.

A New Standard?

So how do we define a mixologist? Someone who has trained and educated him- or herself in the art and history of mixology? Someone who has taken the time and made the commitment to train others? Someone who can talk knowledgeably with a guest on the subtle nuances of vodka, the distinguishing characteristics of single-malt whiskies, the history and origins surrounding the mai tai, and much more?

Do we need to go beyond the old *Washington Post* definition cited above? Should we bring back the apprentice system? Should there be a hierarchy in our profession—bar apprentice, bartender, head bartender, mixologist, and master mixologist? Should there be an accrediting academy such as BAR (visit beveragealcoholresource.com) or a governing body such as the USBG that would be similar to the Court of Master Sommeliers?

These are not easy questions to answer, but they are questions that I feel the bartending community needs to address. Just a little something to tinkle over!