

London

BY LAURA PANTER

calling!

a cocktail revolution

You say you want

When I visited London for a cocktail research tour five years ago, I was looking for a fresh new take on mixing drinks behind the bar. What I got was a jaw-dropping insight into a cocktail revolution, one that has since swept across the world and influenced every major market from Amsterdam to Winnipeg, Shanghai to New York City.

There is little doubt that passionate mixologists were working in almost every city in the world, especially in the last decade. Notables like Dale DeGroff in New York, known as the master of new American mixology, were honing their craft many years before some of us could even hold a shaker. So, what gave UK, and London in particular, the foresight to share knowledge and passion to make their mark on the world stage?

London is a bustling city, steeped in history yet thriving with modern art, fashion and design. In years past, travelers would scoff at London's lack of cuisine, complaining that pints and pies weren't enough for such an international gateway city. To their credit, London heard and adapted and now boasts some of the most respected restaurants in the world. The gastro-pub revolution, combining homey yet upscale ambience with solid and interesting food choices, changed the way Londoners, and the visiting tourists, viewed eating out at a pub. At the same time, bartenders started looking at new and interesting ways to entice guests to move away from their favourite beers and into a cutting edge cocktail.





You say you want a revolution

My first cocktail experience was at Dick's Bar at the Atlantic, the namesake of cocktail godfather Dick Bradsell. After convincing the sturdy doorman that we were, in fact, dear old friends of Dick's, we scooted straight to the small bar at the back of the room. It wasn't Dick mixing up the drinks, but our barman was as passionate and as learned as any bartender I had ever met. His bar was small, with just enough room for one person, as well as a stealthy bar back who swirled in and out of the space in a quiet rush, replenishing the extensive *mise en place* every few minutes. We were asked what spirits we liked, what flavours and styles of drinks, and I ended up with a bourbon, lime, passionfruit and chili pepper sour that was so new and exciting to me that it felt like the best Christmas ever.

I returned to Toronto renewed and began to create cocktails in earnest, understanding that the world of cocktails was as vast as cuisine,

an idea that had just begun to take form in the minds of mixologists around the world. The revolution had begun.

What separated London from the rest of the cities, working towards a new kind of drinking experience, was the speed at which the culture burst into action. By the time I returned to London the following year, there were a dozen very notable cocktail bars, and when I went back again a year later, there were too many to visit on one trip (believe me, I tried).

Coming from Toronto, where fickle patrons fall in and out of love with the newest cool spot in less than a year, boutique bars were defining themselves by styles of cocktails, from the Tiki madness of Trailer Happiness and Mahiki, to Montgomery Place's studied menu of true cocktail classics, to the cool modern vibe of The Lonsdale and Volstead, and every one of them seemed packed with loyal followers night after night. What made it all the more amazing was the

camaraderie among the venue's mixologists, respecting each other's craft and recommending the next bar to visit.

Who started the revolution?

Just who is responsible for London's cocktail fame is too difficult to answer. Veteran bartender Salvatore Calabrese, a Peter Sellers lookalike and host at his stunning, sophisticated and private club Fifty, which boasts a collection of some of the most rare spirits in the world (which he sells by the ounce, some at the cost of a small car), has penned his own signature cocktail books, as have many younger mixologists, such as Ben Reed.

The ever-popular Simon Difford (I have never met a person who didn't *just love* him) helped launch the bar industry magazine

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Class, before continuing with his volumes of Difford's bar guides and the subsequent online version of the same. Brand ambassadors for global spirits such as Beefeater and Chivas Regal hobnob with clients and celebrities in bars where mixologists are as celebrated as their guests. In short, if you ask 10 industry insiders to name the best mixologist, you will likely receive 10 answers, all of them with their own relevant reasons for their recommendation.

Perhaps this is the key to London's success. New York has a well-known mixologist or two, and Canadian cities have their own bar celebrities, but no city seems to have gelled together for one cause: to create better cocktails, different cocktails, inspiring cocktails that have changed the way we mix and the way our customers drink. **yfm**

Laura Panter, along with Michelle Hunt, owns The Martini Club International Inc. Beverage alcohol experts and innovators in modern mixology, they have trained on the art of bartending, service and trends in venues across Canada. Their cutting edge research, cocktail design and special events division make them undisputed leaders in the field of beverage alcohol. Visit The Martini Club at www.martiniclub.com