



BEYOND THE BAR



Sometimes Old School is the Best School

BY COLE DANEHOWER



PHOTOS BY COLE DANEHOWER

In a Northwest drinks scene where it seems every young mixologist is out to spark a new cocktail trend using the latest hip spirit or funky technique, it is reassuring to know that there are bartenders like Kurt Fritzer who still focus on the fundamentals of their profession.

“I don’t really follow the trends in drinks too much,” he says. “I prefer the classics. A great Manhattan, a great Martini, a great Old Fashioned—they are considered classics for a reason. They have perfect balance and great character. I pride myself in making them, and making them well.”

Kurt’s refreshingly old school attitude comes from an unusually steady bartending career. He came to Portland, Oregon, in 1977 after attending the University of Idaho, finding his first job in a restaurant kitchen. When a bartender job opened a few years later at a restaurant called the Veritable Quandary—even today the “VQ” is a landmark Portland establishment—he took it.

“They wanted someone without any bar background because they wanted to train them,” Kurt recalls. “The head bartender said, ‘Watch what I do, do what I do, and stay out of my way.’ I got two out of three right—but I really got in his way!”

A few years later restaurateur Michael Cronan was planning to open an Italian restaurant called Serratto in what was then a rather down-and-out Northwest Portland neighborhood. Kurt had gotten to know Michael by serving him at the VQ. Kurt joined Serratto as bartender in 1983. He’s

been there ever since.

“It was never my thought to be a career bartender, and I never intended to be in one place this long,” says Kurt, as he sweeps a towel across the polished wood of what is today a stylish restaurant bar in the very definition of a happening Portland neighborhood. “But something about the work clicked with me. I love the intensity of it—imagine this place packed to the rafters and only one bartender behind the bar all night—and I learned that I can talk to anybody.”

Cocktails, for Kurt, are a means to an end—not the end itself.

“I have never considered myself to be a mixologist,” he says. “There are definitely some real mixologists in this town, people who think about—obsess about—blending flavors and textures and colors and making fantastic new cocktails. That has never been my thrust. Mine is to create a dynamic at my bar.”

Kurt knows he is in the people business, and that cocktails, no matter how creatively conceived, are ultimately about people. “If somebody comes into my bar with energy and helps create a positive dynamic at my bar, it is my job to encourage that. It’s like tending a garden: you weed out what doesn’t work and try to create an environment where people feel good and they talk to each other.”

By way of example, Kurt recalls one summer night when “. . . a little old man, hardly five feet tall, in an impeccable old-fashioned suit hoisted himself up on a barstool and asked for a menu and a wine list and a newspaper. I didn’t have one, but I went out to the corner and dropped a quarter in the box and bought him a paper. He ordered a rack of lamb and a half bottle of Barolo that we had. He wanted the paper to read his wife’s obituary. He had been her 24-by-7 caretaker; she had just passed, and he was taking himself out for the first time



STRAWBERRY SPIKE

Kurt Fritzler, Serratto, Portland, Oregon

MAKES 2 COCKTAILS

- 3–4 fresh basil leaves
- 2 ounces Mazama Infused Pepper Vodka
- 2 ounces purée of fresh Oregon strawberries
- 1 ounce fresh lemon juice
- 1–2 dashes of simple syrup

Put the basil leaves in a shaker glass half-full of ice. Add 1 ounce of the vodka and muddle until the basil is thoroughly crushed. Add the fresh lemon juice, sweeten to taste with the simple syrup, and then add the remaining vodka. Combine with the strawberry purée. Shake well and strain into a chilled martini shell. Garnish with a sprig of basil.

in many years. It was a bittersweet moment for him,” Kurt recalled. “I tried to make his dinner a good one.”

That is tending bar.

Kurt proves that old school doesn't mean ho-hum. “There was a time when I railed against making Mojitos. I mean, the guy who invented them wasn't a born bartender and make up a drink that required that much effort?” Yet for us today, Kurt's making a kind of Mojito.

The drink he's come up with for a Northwest spring cocktail is a muddled fusion of sweet, spice, and picante. He calls it the Strawberry Spike.

“Spring cocktails are not the easiest to intuit,” Kurt admits. “With summer and autumn it's easier, because fresh fruits are in season . . . In early spring, what's in season? Fresh grass?”

Oregon strawberries, Kurt points out, are his choice: “They are some of the first fruit you see and they are incredibly delicious.” He starts the drink by muddling some fresh-picked basil leaves with a dash of lemon juice, some simple syrup, and an ounce of pepper-infused vodka by Bendistillery (see sidebar “Mazama Infused Pepper Vodka”). The bite of the pepper balances the sweet of the fruit to prevent cloying, and the spice of the basil complements the acidity of the lemon juice, making a well-balanced drink.

Watching him make the cocktail, I note his lack of precise measurement.

“Making a great drink is all about proportion, isn't it?” Kurt asks rhetorically. “And I don't know that you can teach that. I can't say that a quarter-teaspoon of this and two ounces of that is the right measure. At this point in my career it's more of a feel and muscle memory and a sense of proportion. I don't measure anything anymore. And I couldn't honestly tell you the measurements of some of the drinks I make routinely.”

As he goes through the process he says to use “about” an ounce of the vodka, “add some more later” and drop in “some” simple syrup. “I'd say about two ounces ➤

of strawberry purée.” Then “shake the hell out of it.”

The method is in keeping with Kurt's ethos: it's not as much about the drink itself as the people who will consume it. Sure, the drink needs to be balanced and delicious. Kurt knows how to do that. But the drink also needs to be satisfying to the customer—so they can help create the dynamic. And—here is another old school rule—it has to be served with a smile.

Some days, he admits, you come in to work and you don't feel all that social, but you know you just have to do it. Like the night in December when, just as he was getting to work, he got a call that his stepdaughter was in the hospital with a brain aneurism. Until a relief bartender could come in, Kurt had to put on his game face. “It's almost like a part of you steps out from yourself and looks back and says, ‘All right, you've got to do it, you've got to smile.’” And you've got to serve a great drink.

There are others who can serve a great cocktail in Portland's burgeoning drinks scene.

“We have great bartenders in this town, amazing personalities,” Kurt says. “When I read their menus I think about how extraordinarily creative they are. It would never occur to me to put the textures and flavors and colors together that they do.”

What those bartenders don't have is Kurt's 28-year perspective.

He's serving customers today that he held as babies, when their parents first came into Serratto. He's had Madonna in the house, the state's governor, the city's mayor, movie stars, and all the leading lights and known names of Portland's society. He's seen them huddle together in conference over a drink the night before momentous news is publicly announced, and he's seen them stolidly sit alone with their ponderous thoughts. He's seen them in triumph and tragedy. Sometimes they know him by name, sometimes it's just a nod to a familiar face. It doesn't matter. Kurt knows he has two things he can always offer them: a genuine smile and a well-made drink.

If that's old school, I'll have another round, please. 🍷



MAZAMA INFUSED PEPPER VODKA Bendistillery is a small-batch distillery located in Bend, Oregon. Founded in 1996, and boasting a long history of tasting awards, they are best known for their Crater Lake Vodka and Cascade Mountain Gin. The distillery uses its Crater Lake Vodka as a base (filtered ten times through charcoal and crushed volcanic rock), and infuses it with a blend of six different sweet and hot peppers to achieve the balanced bite of this lightly golden spirit. Named after Mount Mazama, the volcano that erupted to leave behind Crater Lake, this is vodka with heat that's fiery yet doesn't overwhelm the spirit.