



# COCKTAIL CELEBRATION

*The Manhattan Cocktail Classic aims to nurture consumer interest in mixology culture*

BY AMBER DREA

On a cool spring Friday night in May, thousands of people from all over the world descended upon the New York Public Library's main branch in Midtown Manhattan for four hours of free-flowing libations. Consumers, bartenders, spirits marketers and members of the media reveled in their appreciation of a well-made drink at the Opening Night Gala of the 2011 Manhattan Cocktail Classic. Now in its second year, the five-day festival encompasses educational seminars, spirits dinners, mixology competitions, industry discussions and elaborate parties where the average cocktail fan can mingle with top-notch experts and gain a greater understanding of the components need to create the perfect drink.

"We aim to showcase the intersection of cocktails and culture to a broad consumer audience," says Lesley Townsend, founder and director of the Manhattan Cocktail Classic. "We're trying to keep the audience (for good cocktails) alive. It's about creating the consumer market for the industry."

Townsend estimates that between 6,000 and 7,000 people attended this year's festival, with roughly half of them involved in the beverage alcohol and bar and restaurant industries. But she stresses that the Manhattan Cocktail Classic is not trying to compete with well-established trade events like Tales of the Cocktail in New Orleans. "The Manhattan Cocktail Classic is a consumer-facing festival, in the same way that the New York City Wine & Food Festival or Fashion Week is," Townsend explains.

PHOTO BY VIRGINIA ROLLISON



*The Manhattan Cocktail Classic kicked off with a gala at the New York Public Library (opposite page), and Heering liqueur recreated the world of the TV show “Mad Men” at Ogilvy & Mather (this page).*

“These festivals are geared toward consumers, but also have deep roots with the trade. It’s a great concentration of talent that makes the festival special.”

Other industry professionals agree. “In a short time, the Manhattan Cocktail Classic has established itself as the premier event of its kind in the industry,” says John Eason, vice president and national sales manager of Serrallés USA, which markets DonQ and BlackBeard Spiced rums.

That’s pretty impressive praise for something that started with an email chain among 13 mixologists in 2008. Townsend had just unveiled Astor Center, the events and education branch of Astor Wines & Spirits in New York City, and innocently inquired why there was no cocktail festival in the Big Apple. That statement instantly sparked a year-long discussion, during which Townsend’s colleagues urged her to launch what would become the Manhattan Cocktail Classic.

“People kept saying, ‘It’s a really great idea, and if you don’t do it now, someone else will,’” Townsend recalls. The initial group of trade professionals, including Dale DeGroff, Audrey Saunders, Paul Pacult, Sashe Petraske and Steve Olson, ended up becoming the founding advisors for the festival. Townsend quit her job at Astor Center in 2009, and the Manhattan Cocktail Classic was born.

## Educational Appeal

Seminars comprise a major part of the Manhattan Cocktail Classic. This year, Townsend took a different approach to choosing the programs, inspired by the model used by Austin, Texas, music festival South By Southwest. She began accepting

proposals from bartenders, mixology experts, spirits brands and anyone else who had a seminar idea in fall 2010, and the nearly 100 submissions she received were posted on the website ([Manhattancocktailclassic.com](http://Manhattancocktailclassic.com)) in January 2011. Consumers and trade voted for the seminars they most wanted to attend, and the top 30 choices were selected.

“This process proved that people are interested in a natural diversity of topics,” Townsend says. “It was also a great way to generate buzz for the festival and make people feel like they had a hand in shaping it.”

The seminars covered a wide range of topics, from a focus on specific spirits to practical applications and mixology techniques to connections between drinking and culture. Presentations included “Whiskies of the World,” “Preserving with Liquor for Kitchen and Bar: Local Ingredients 12 Months a Year” and “Global Drink Rituals from Prehistory to Today.” For “The Science of Mixology,” sponsored by Drambuie, mixologist and mechanical engineer Anthony Caporale conducted experiments that tested a variety of hypotheses, including the effectiveness of craft ice, whether a Martini should be shaken or stirred and how much liquid a bottle of liquor can hold when used in flair mixology. To complete the laboratory feel of the seminar, Caporale wore a white lab coat and used beakers, Bunsen burners, agitation machines and other equipment for the demonstrations.

In the Bénédictine-sponsored “History: What Is It Good For?” session, author David Wondrich led a panel discussion featuring Phillip Duff, a bar and beverage consultant based in the Netherlands; St. John Frizell, the operator of Brooklyn, New York, café



This year's Manhattan Cocktail Classic included the "Stories From Behind the Bar" series with influential venues like Death & Co. (top left); DonQ's Ultimate Mix-Off Challenge (top center); and Campari's "Spirited Fête for the Senses" (bottom center), featuring "Top Chef" host Padma Lakshmi and master mixologist Tony Abou-Ganim. Festival director Lesley Townsend (right) hopes to showcase the intersection of cocktails and culture with these events.



and bar Fort Defiance; and Chad Solomon, co-founder of the cocktail consulting firm Cuff & Buttons. They covered such topics as America's obsession with the past, the classic cocktail movement's role in resetting the mixed drinks trends of the 1990s, and the importance of origin and authenticity in the enjoyment of a beverage. "People don't just want a delicious drink," Solomon said. "They want context."

In between seminars and other events, festival attendees mingled at the Official Bar at Astor Center, where brands like Angostura bitters, Pierre Ferrand Cognac and Ramazzotti amaro served cocktails, while Leblon cachaça parked a bright-green Caipirinha truck outside the venue. Many brands found the exposure to a diverse audience of trade and consumers to be invaluable. "We need these bartenders to talk about us, because they're incredibly influential with other bartenders," says David Rotunno, executive director of marketing for Mizkan Americas, which imports Angostura. "And we like the fact that non-professionals who have an interest in cocktails attend these events, as they can be influential in their circle of friends."

## Featured Festivities

In addition to seminars, the Manhattan Cocktail Classic featured an abundance of events that took place at bars and restaurants around the city. "We have a policy of ticketing all the events and seminars at the same price—\$50, which is ludicrously under market value for New York," Townsend says. "There are so many festivals happening in the city, and one way to compete is by making things really affordable and accessible. It also gets dicey when assigning value to different sponsors' events, so I wanted to keep that level across the board." The only exception is the Gala, which cost \$150 per person. "It's still a steal," she notes.

Events ranged from sports tournaments like 360 vodkas' "Sustainable Olympics" at the 632Below events space to traveling excursions like Moët Hennessy USA's "Sunset Cocktail Cruise"

in New York Harbor to themed parties like Beefeater gin's Beatles-inspired "British Invasion" at Eleven Madison Park and Campari's "Spirited Fête for the Senses" hosted by Padma Lakshmi at The Box burlesque lounge. There were also a variety of food and cocktail pairing events at such restaurants as Hearth, The Breslin and The Standard Grill.

The Xanté Co. and Peter F. Heering's "Heering Goes Mad (Men)" event at Ogilvy & Mather advertising agency featured "Mad Men"-era cocktails, such as the Classic Martini, the Manhattan and the Sidecar. Proceeds benefited the Design Industries Foundation Fighting AIDS, and the Manhattan Cocktail Classic matched Xanté's contributions.

Gran Sierpe once again led its Manhattan Pisco Bus Tour to four cocktail bars throughout the city, including 1534 and Macao Trading Co. in Manhattan and The Gibson and The Counting Room in Brooklyn. "Touring to venues around town allows us to introduce our brand to a lot of people who otherwise wouldn't have heard of it," says Gran Sierpe owner Herbie Loeb.

Serrallés USA and the United States Bartenders Guild hosted the 2011 Ultimate Mix-Off Challenge at the Skylight West space in Hell's Kitchen. "We were able to expose hundreds of key mixologists from all over the world to the Serrallés USA portfolio," says Serrallés' Eason. "We plan to be part of the Manhattan Cocktail Classic for as long as they will have us, or until we run out of rum—which ever comes first."

In addition, the new series "Stories From Behind the Bar" featured some of the most popular events in the festival's program. High-profile bars like Employees Only, Death & Co., Pegu Club, Flatiron Lounge, PDT and Little Branch regaled attendees with tales of their origins, philosophies and mixology styles. "I've received great feedback about that series," Townsend says.

Her favorite event was the closing night Anti-Gala, an industry-only party at Skylight One Hanson in the Williamsburg Savings Bank Tower in Brooklyn. Beer and shots were served



(FROM LEFT) Zacapa rum brand ambassador Danny Valdez (left) and mixologist Mike Flannery served rum cocktails at Zacapa's "Shall We Rum-Ba?" event; The Xanté Co. CEO Adèle Robberstad (right) emceed the "Hearing Goes Mad (Men)" event; and Gran Sierpe's Herbie Loebel led the Manhattan Pisco Bus Tour.

in place of cocktails, and attendees were encouraged to wear alcohol-themed costumes. The event was the culmination of the Great Cocktailian Charity Challenge, a photo-based scavenger hunt that was open to teams of mixologists and Manhattan Cocktail Classic sponsors. The winning team, Hudson Whiskey, received \$10,000 for Kingston, New York-based charity Family of Woodstock.

## Equal Opportunity

For the 2011 festival, Townsend decided to try a different approach to acquiring sponsors. Last year, she allowed spirits brands to purchase packages at different price points, as well as Gala real estate that the companies could decorate however they wanted. "But the Gala ended up being dominated by some of the larger companies and felt like it was sponsored by only a few, when it was really sponsored by 50," she explains.

For this year's festival, Townsend came up with a solution that allowed each brand to buy the same basic membership package and receive the same amount of space at the Gala, where the brand could serve one cocktail. The Manhattan Cocktail Classic organizers in turn took care of all the branding and signage, as well as music, food, lighting and entertainment. This arrangement meant that every brand, whether it was a multi-national company or an independent distiller, was represented equally.

"Small brands don't frequently get the opportunity to be shoulder-to-shoulder with the big guys," Townsend says, noting that the 2011 festival had 120 sponsors. "Our new strategy of leveling the playing field at the Gala was well-received from all sides, which I find very encouraging."

Adèle Robberstad, CEO of The Xanté Co. and Peter F. Heering, believes that this egalitarianism is essential to the Manhattan Cocktail Classic's success. "It's important to keep the possibility for small brands to be part of it," she says.

Gran Sierpe's Loebel agrees, adding that freedom of vision is also key. "The Manhattan Cocktail Classic allows brand owners the creativity to present our products to the public in whichever way we want, while still having the organization's full support," he says.

Another successful addition to the festival was the Bar Fellowship Program, which paid the expenses for 19 up-and-coming bartenders from all over to world to attend the Manhattan Cocktail Classic and work as part of the festival's staff for the week. More than 100 hopefuls submitted written questionnaires detailing their mixology-related experience and knowledge, as well as a video application.

Overall, Townsend has received a good response from sponsors, trade and consumers about this year's festival, despite a few obvious issues like long lines. "Ninety-nine percent of the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive," she says.

The Xanté Co.'s Robberstad says the Manhattan Cocktail Classic has become a "can't-miss" event for the beverage alcohol industry, adding that a media sneak preview for the brands would help generate consumer interest. Rotunno of Mizkan offered a related suggestion. "Perhaps one way to improve the festival might be a more formal press room where brands can talk with media without a lot of noise and distractions," he says.

Gran Sierpe's Loebel felt that aside from the Gala, the festival seemed a little scattered over the five days. "I would've liked to see more events that brought us together," he says. "Otherwise, it continues to grow as the best cocktail event in the United States."

Townsend is currently working on the next Manhattan Cocktail Classic, scheduled for May 11<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup>, 2012. "Now we know that we're not just a blip on the radar, and we can go back to the drawing board and start working on more long-term plans," she says. 