

the vesper



STEP ONE: KEEP IT CLASSIC.

BY JACOB HALL
GIBSON GENERAL MANAGER

The Gibson has been doing cocktails for ten years. At an important crossroads it went even deeper into its focus on timeless styles of drink making.

This is a story of how that decision came to be, how the program adheres to that vision, and the wisdom of following the classics.

Sometimes to go forward you look back. That is the core of renewal--something that was always there returning slightly different, by incorporating the new into the best of the old. Renewal is wonderful to see and fantastic to be a part of. To dig into history and rediscover the wisdom of the past is a revolution, a literal cycle, of history.

It would be no exaggeration to say the Gibson's ties to its past were effectively severed in recent years. As happens to many institutions, this one had simply succumbed to the curse of old age. Ten years in, none of the remaining staff had ever worked with the founding generation or been directly exposed to the bar's performance in its greatest years. The bar had lost its way and would only find it again by looking back.

When I took over the Gibson in August of 2018, the first thing I did was present its owner with a choice. As bar-owners go, Eric Hilton imposes few creative constraints on his properties. In the case of the Gibson, even fewer. That looked like a problem to me, because the bar desperately needed a vision for the future of its program. It had been drifting for years, and to corral a renaissance we needed an organizing focus that had the blessing of the owners and senior management.

"When we opened in 2008, hardly anyone in this city had heard of an Old Fashioned; old cocktails were new for pretty much everyone," my ultimatum began. "That's not true anymore. You can get half-decent Old Fashioneds at practically every bar and restaurant in a four block radius. They're not all as good as ours, but most people don't care. In 2008, Gibson cocktails were pre-Prohibition focused and revolutionary at the same time--in 2018 it's impossible to be both."

I had been thinking about this dilemma for two weeks before returning to the city to take the job. On a long drive back from downeast Maine I had concluded the cocktail revolution was marching on without us (see this edition's interview with Ryan Chetiywardana). New concepts, new bars, and new neighborhoods were springing up in DC every quarter while the Gibson languished in the quaint niche of drinks originating before the invention of penicillin (the drug, not the modern cocktail). I had resolved to convince the

owners to unshackle the bar from its founding *raison d'être* and commit to the creative melee of gastro-biological inventiveness.

The cocktail revolution was marching on without us

"Yeah," Eric said, "It's funny. Music from fifty years ago is so much better than music today. Even the new stuff I do listen to doesn't stand up. And as a creative field I feel like cocktails are probably the same. Maybe we should just keep it focused on that classic style."

That classic style. It wasn't even really a decision. It was essentially speculative--a gut instinct rendered as preference. Bosses, to say nothing of owners, all develop the ability to mask directives with the intonation of suggestion, so as to tell you exactly what they want without using the verbiage of instruction. This wasn't that. Eric was casually extolling the creative merit of timeless allure. There was plenty of room to argue my point, but I didn't want to because he was right.

The mandate to restore the classic parameters of the Gibson was immediately impactful. It steered the search for creative talent to revitalize the Gibson by filtering for people who understood cocktails from their classic or foundational principles. Very few people grasp that the first golden age of cocktails occurred in the mid-to-late 1800s. Beloved classics like the Old Fashioned and Sazerac preceded commercial electricity as products of the industrial revolution--and while that might seem like an interesting historical parenthetical to most, there are relevant creative insights to be drawn from such knowledge. Julia Ebell was someone who understood classics. Her skill and thirst for knowledge stood out in what is widely accepted as the Gibson's most accomplished period--the years of management under Jonathan Harris.

The first golden age of cocktails occurred in the mid-to-late 1800s

Jon deserves his own place in this saga as he was, by unanimous account of everyone who worked with him, a virtuoso. He had attended the London School of Economics on a music scholarship, graduated into

financial analysis at Goldman Sachs, and come to work at the Gibson through some manner of disenchantment in the aftermath of the financial crisis. He took the training program initiated by Derek Brown and executed it to a standard that successive generations of Gibson bartenders would learn under.

Julia was the largest beneficiary of that effort. Of the many people who worked with Jon, she was his true peer in enthusiasm for the history and soul of mixing spirits. She paid a high price for that when Jon and the Gibson parted ways on poor terms (all forgiven years later though). The managers assumed she would release the same measure of *creative destruction* as Jon and boxed her out. Sensing this, she promptly moved on. For years she went to other bars, looking for the creative outlet and peers she had enjoyed at the Gibson and not finding it.

When I reached out to her about returning to the Gibson, I understood it to be a long shot. She was gainfully, if not happily, employed at a hotel bar downtown making far more than she would as Gibson's creative director. She'd be signing on to rebuild the beverage program essentially from scratch, and at a time when the Gibson had less stature than competing programs. Attracting talented people would be a daunting challenge and in the midst of a city-wide bar and restaurant oversaturation there was very little appetite to invest money into the program.

I wasn't entirely sure why she said yes. Over the following months, I realized it was probably easier to hire her than it should have been for a number of reasons, persistent industry sexism not least among them (see this edition's *Booze: As Made By Women* and *Brenne Single Malt*). She later confided that her tenure as a DC bartender featured a long streak of job interviews, by men *and* women, wherein her plans of child-rearing were a matter of professional interest. I did refrain from asking that in her interview, but not because I already knew her answer. In fact, I now regard the imbalance in talented women to talented men hired under my tenure (four to one) as a measure of how strong that gender-filtering effect must still be and how the hiring at an operation dedicated to performance will likely skew in 2019.

Perhaps a month after she had returned to "the family," Julia and I were deliberating how our new program would entertain more modern practices, bar equipment, and conventions. These conversations are like a three-step dance for us. Step one, start with an off-hand question related to a problem we're having. Step two, spiral out into a philosophical dialectic on some principle of hospitality. Step three, distill it down to a practical and instructive imperative.

It elevates the craft so there's a kind of evolution to it

My question to Julia was: how do we distinguish practices that belong to a "classic" cocktail program from ones that don't? This was a critical distinction for me, because that line demarcates the classic from the experimentally modern. As important as the things a creative venture does do are the things it doesn't do, and per my own plan it was important to be able to communicate the difference to staff, patrons, partners, and stakeholders.

"Well, I like to think of it as a conversation with history," she offered.

A conversation. With history.

"Huh." Huh.

"It's like, all these generations of bartenders before us did things a certain way," she continued. "They made certain drinks because they worked. And it's extremely egotistical to come along and just assume, *Hey, I've been doing this for two months but I'm probably better than that.*"

Classic step-two of the dance: damn near moral condemnation of bartenders ignoring the history of their craft. Of course, when you pull back and scale up on the value of hospitality (as Julia and I had done numerous times), you spot in bars a necessary haven for people beleaguered by their daily grind--a release valve for societal pressures. Bartenders may not save lives or put out fires, but doctors and firefighters need to blow off steam somewhere. And in my time running the Gibson we have hosted two wakes; no one

witnessing the gravity of those events could hope to argue that bars cannot serve a deep emotional and communal purpose. In such terms, it's easier to take the trade more seriously. But I digress, as many intervening points in this conversation did until this one:

“Ok, but like, simple syrup,” I latched onto a concrete notion for dear life. “Bartenders used to just muddle sugar cubes into cocktails and at some point they traded to using syrup. How is that not a departure from classic cocktail convention?” She paused, but not for long.

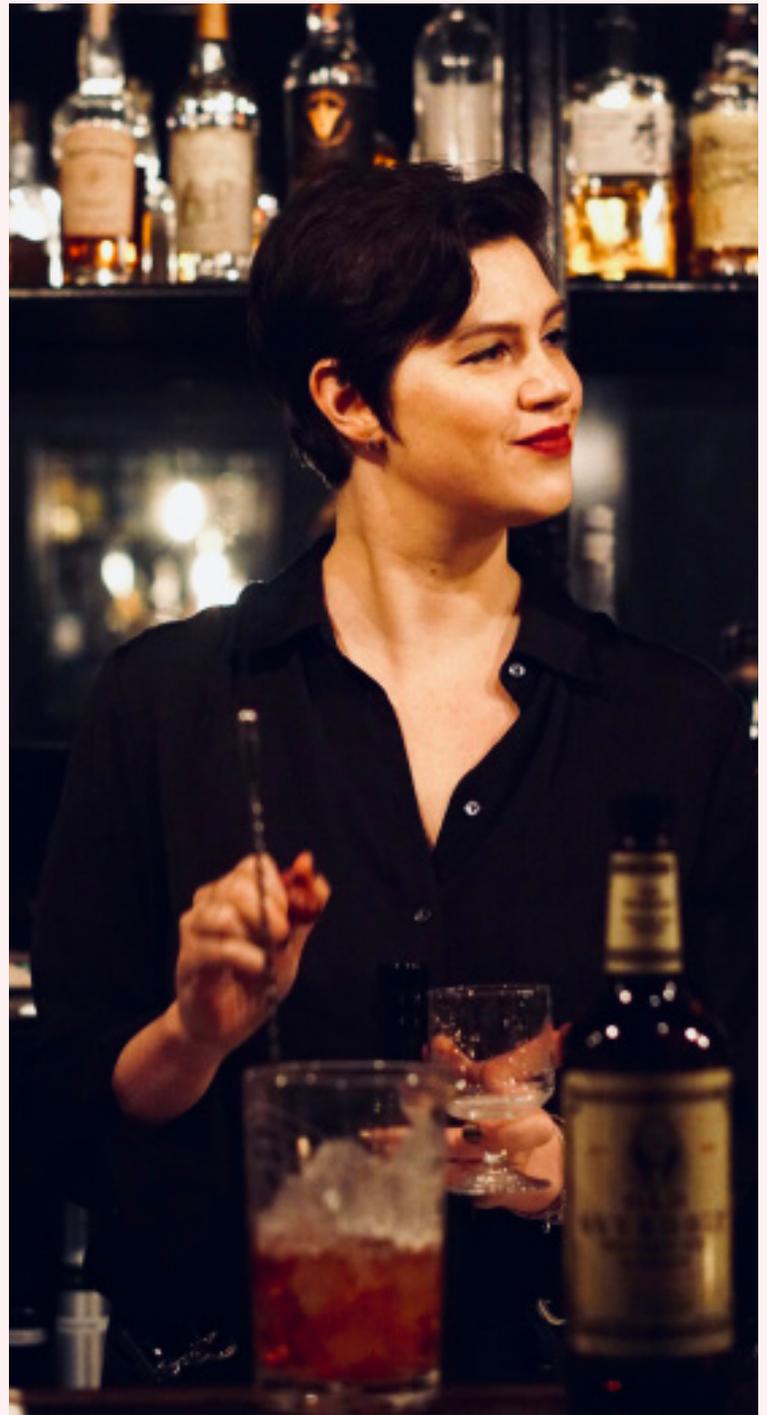
“Well that’s the thing. Over time different practices emerge and it’s a matter of whether it simplifies the process or makes it better versus just complicating it for the sake of standing out. Simple syrup is easy to make, incorporates into cold liquid easier than sugar cubes, and can be measured into cocktails more consistently. It elevates the craft so there’s a kind of evolution to it.”

“So we’ll experiment with new practices and adopt the ones that work?”

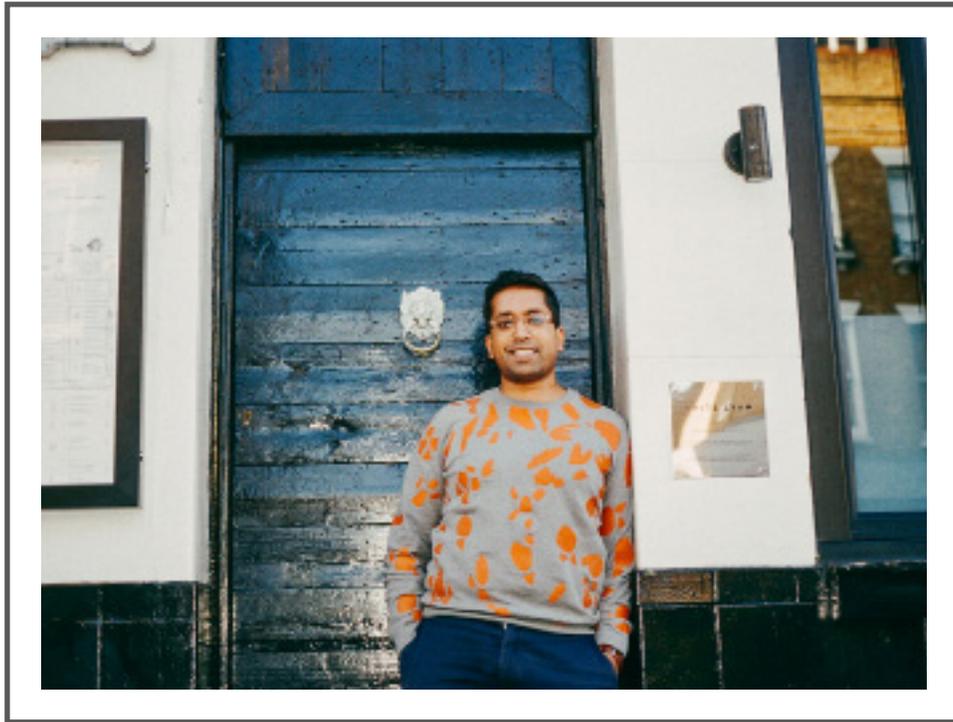
“Oh yeah! We’ll always try new things--just probably not first. I see us as a bar that validates whether something belongs to the bartending cannon or not.”

Boom. Step-three. We had worked our way through the Socratic dialectic of what makes an Old Fashioned an Old Fashioned to a simple prescription for our cocktail program: learn from the past, be wary of the present, and teach the future. In a world and era obsessed with the newness of “innovation,” Julia made the case for the elegance of well-worn ways. For the Gibson, she was the case.

Looking back on the conversation with Eric, I appreciate that I had been on the wrong side of history, so to speak. Had I advocated more firmly for a program decoupled from Gibson’s past, what would have happened? Very im-probably anything as good as what did.



A creative act need not be a departure from the past, but can quite naturally be a continuation of it. That point is routinely lost on fiery youths (myself among them). The wisdom of history often discourages our most obvious ‘innovations,’ and so it makes for easy dismissal. In the end though, all our innovations are judged by that same sweep of history, and that marks a great point about a renewal: you’ll always find one when you keep it classic.



A Chat with ‘Mr. Lyan’

Ryan Chetiwardana is an acclaimed and accomplished leader in the food and beverage world. His best achievements are known in the industry and without. Dandelyan, the hotel bar in the Mondrian of London, reflects this best of all in the wide recognition the program garnered with its Modern Life of Plants menu--a study in modern and industrial food systems and how beverage programs can operate sustainably.

In November the Gibson hosted Ryan and several members of his Dandelyan team for a two-day popup in the bar. The drink selection showcased two different styles of creativity. Dandelyan utilized a greater range of culinary techniques to draw flavors into their offering. It was an approach to bending flavors that sharply contrasted with the Gibson's and we had to pick his brain about his process.

How do you understand the role of creativity in providing experiences that are important and/or valuable for guests?

Our approach we've always dubbed purposeful innovation. We want what we do to be accessible, but we also want to offer something distinct to what else is in the landscape. There's room within the food world for both traditional and innovative products – sometimes the same person wants different things – and we want to offer something that feels different to what else is around. But it has to be relevant else it's just gimmick, or arrogant.

When it comes to the combination of the feeling, flavors, and ideas experienced in your venues, how do you determine success? Specifically (e.g. at Dandelyan) or generally (e.g. across your various venues)?

Our main approach is to make people happy, so if we see that in whatever form, we see it as a success. But we also look for feedback. It's great that even the weirdest drinks in Dandelyan sell well, and the responses the staff get, and we see in reviews is wonderful – it's incredible and very humbling the number of people who give feedback that Cub is the best meal they've ever had.

You're midway through closing what is well-known as the best bar in the world. What has that process been like?

In some ways it's familiar as we did the same sort of change with White Lyan (into Cub), but every project is unique and there's a huge number of people working really hard on a huge number of tasks to make it happen. The process started a long time ago, and it's different because Dandelyan is a very busy venue that's open, so the approach has had to be military!

When you announced closing Dandelyan, you wrote, "It would be a disservice to these amazing people [and what] we have created together to

continue when we think the landscape and the conversation has shifted. There's so much I think we can do, and so much we want to challenge, discuss, and create in this industry that, like with White Lyan, it makes sense to burn it down, start afresh, and rise again..." In a business where the overwhelming majority would cash in on the "best in the world" recognition forever, that's an incredibly striking sentiment. What exactly warrants a hard reset for a wildly successful bar like Dandelyan, opposed to letting it live and continuing to "challenge, discuss, and create" through new projects?

I'm so proud of what we've achieved with Dandelyan, but the world changes, and I believe we have a duty as well as an opportunity to change with that given our statement that as a company we always wanted to be challenging conventions. That said, I don't think we wouldn't ever keep a bar going (!) it's just that the specific conversations we wanted to challenge with both White Lyan and Dandelyan (especially as Dandelyan was born from White Lyan) shifted – more quickly than we expected – so it's great to be able to look at new discussions we want to have

What will the new concept for the Dandelyan space be (or feature) and how does it express the conversation and challenges you want to bring to the food and beverage world?

It will be called Lyaness and specific details will be revealed soon!

You've launched a number of different concepts by now. When it comes to developing new ideas, what if anything do you feel is consistent about your creative process?

I think the idea to challenge in a warm, inclusive way is at the heart of what we do. There are elements to our approach, methodology and style of drink that are consistent across the projects but the desire to challenge is probably the constant they have.

What was the first original cocktail you came up with (including specs if you're willing to share)?

Ooft! I'm not sure my memory stretches back that far! I always loved making new drinks, and I loved competitions so there was always experiments on the go. Since I started bartending there were always trials, bits of equipment I built and archives amongst my house. I recall the first competition I won back in 2006 which was a Bacardi halloween competition and I did a pumpkin tiki style drink. Definitely can't remember the recipe though!

Isn't DC great?

It really is! I really fell for the city after my first visit and I'm really excited to be able to spend more time there!

There are a lot of people excited that team Lyan is coming to the city. Is there anything new you're able to say about Silver Lyan at this time?

It'll probably be the grandest venue in our group. It will still be tongue-in-cheek, playful and fun, but it will also have a sense of glamour that I'm really really excited for!

What do you hope to gain from or contribute to DC's food and beverage community by bringing a new project here?

I'm so excited to learn from the city, and to offer something that's a compliment and a homage to all the other wonderful things already in the city – and across the US! We are excited to be part of a really vibrant community – I was so excited by what was happening in DC and the amazing momentum behind both the historic as well as younger operators. I want to be able to work with all those wonderful people to try and offer something special and exciting to those in the city!



When a bartender buys you a drink

tips from your bartender

BY JACOB HALL

GIBSON GENERAL MANAGER

If you've spent any time at all in a bar and you're any kind of a decent human being, there's good odds you've encountered this particular gesture of goodwill: the bartender buying you a drink (or more) on the house. Assuming you're not a service industry worker and thus do not have quick rapport with service staff by the merit of your shared experiences, you should take a small measure of satisfaction here. Someone who deals professionally in social interaction found some aspect of your company enjoyable enough to reward with a perk. It's no small feat for your personality to shine in the context of work that largely entails accommodating people's--ahem, extra--personalities.

Sometimes though, rather than denote a modicum of personal goodwill, it serves the ulterior motive of a shameless cash grab. The unrestrained dispensation of free booze in an effort to bump tips at the house's expense is bad form. Beyond a certain point and/or with a certain intent, bartenders are effectively stealing money from their employers by converting sales into tips. It's hard to spot this behavior--frankly because the line gets blurry--but one telltale sign is a bartender giving away **multiple** rounds to multiple guests that were neither requested nor offered with an option to opt-out. This behavior is not to be encouraged.

That said, plenty of bars allow their staff to comp drinks with the tacit understanding that the proceeds supplement staff incomes and give staff a measure of influence over who becomes repeat customers (and thus who they have/get to deal with repeatedly). In this convention, eunoia and financial incentive are not mutually exclusive, and free drinks often are motivated by some balance of both.

I have given away countless drinks on the house tab in my years of bartending. The beneficiaries have ranged from my closest friends to tourists who will obviously never return to my bar again. Through it all, I've often reflected on a little conundrum: if I'm giving away a round as a gesture of goodwill, what if anything is it fair to expect in return? On the one hand, I'm giving my guest something because I enjoyed the company--a statement that should require no kickback, least of all in an amount that erases the original gesture. On the other hand, a free drink is necessarily scarce and literally value-able, surely warranting some fiduciary reciprocation. It's hard not to feel disingenuous checking for a larger tip when you hook people up--as it's hard not to feel slighted when they do not return the favor by way of a larger tip. See? A conundrum.

As a bartender, I do have rapport with service industry workers. Though I stopped announcing my shared employment years ago, it's virtually impossible to hide the fact, and this simple fact results in a number of free drinks dispensed. There is a foolproof formula for handling tip gratuity in this situation. It's one that allows each party an act of gratuity that doesn't undercut the other. It's elegant, universal, and memorable when drunk. Ready? Pay less than you would have paid and more than they would have made. Stick to that rule and you will always be a valued bar patron. Here's a number-laden demonstration of how it works.

Pay less than you would have paid and more than they would have made.

Assume you've run up a \$40 bar tab on four \$8 beers. A normal 20% tip on \$40 (\$8) would run you up to a total of \$48. If some affable bar-hand comped one

of your beers and your tab is now \$32, a 20% tip now amounts to \$6.40. Don't even think about tipping \$6.40. By not meeting the \$8 amount you would have tipped on the original \$40 bill, you would be rewarding your bartender's generosity by shorting them \$1.60 from your original tip. But that's just the first hurdle. Some people make the well-intentioned mistake of tipping slightly extra on the new subtotal. A normally generous 25% on the \$32 bill works out to \$8. Do you see the problem? You're still right back where you started with an \$8 tip. You've profited from the bartender's gratuity, but the bartender has not. Herein lies your moment to shine, as long as you can do some simple math. To satisfy both parts of the rule, tip less than \$16 (pay less than you would have paid) but more than \$8 (pay more than they would have made). Reread this until the math makes perfect sense. It really is a simple rule and by following it you and the bartender live in a balanced state of generosity and financial gain.

It also calls for a moderate measure of situational awareness. You might find the effort rigorous and clunky at first. You will have to look at your bill and figure out what (if anything) was given to you, take stock of how much it costs and thus how much the original bill would have been, how much you would have originally tipped, and then do some quick math to sort out the difference. The whole ordeal can add a few minutes to your departure, and interrupt the flow of conversation in your party.

Who wants to go through all that effort?

Solid people who aren't garbage people. That's who. The kind of people this world needs more of.

Here's the real beauty of the rule--abiding it will make you a better person that more people like and like to have around. Bars are, after all, public spaces that you share with other people. As much as they are a place to blow off steam, they are not any one person's living room and so merit a small degree of constant consideration for the people around you. When you start exhibiting that level of consideration, I guarantee your drinks will flow a little more freely.

~~your father's idea of whiskey~~



Brenne Single Malt

BY JULIA EBELL
GIBSON CREATIVE DIRECTOR

The Gibson picked up a new product recently. It's Brenne, a French barley whiskey, aged in ex Cognac casks, with a heady white fruit perfume and a lingering, delicate, smoke and ginger finish, all carried along by a finely oily body. When we first tasted it, I knew I had to have something so distinctively French and so undeniably delicious.

Then I read Brenne's reviews online. I looked at a few whisky review publications, the same professional websites I use to source background information or tasting notes for new products. The reviews I read were often negative, touching on a 'cloying' sweetness and a 'candylike' finish, an unpleasant 'clinging.' For something aged in cognac casks. Cognac, the dessert of the spirit world. Cognac, prized for its



sweetness and lingering effect on the tongue. And then I read that the founder is a woman. And things, unfortunately, started to click.

Brenne is no lighter than a Speyside or sweeter than a bourbon but I kept reading about its exceptional lightness and sweetness. That it isn't 'your father's idea of whiskey.' No, and thank all that's holy, since fathers are as likely as anyone else to have a proscriptive and limiting idea of whiskey. The reviews as a whole didn't seem to describe the spirit I was having but they did seem to describe a certain viewpoint as to what is an acceptable whisky and who can acceptably make it. There is no necessarily offensive content, but rather the same failure of tone and awareness running throughout.

Brenne is more than its admittedly glamorous founder, who you can research on your own. And we don't know that she was 'grasping' at a trendy new product versus just interested enough to invest in it

and spearhead its production. And it shouldn't matter that she seems 'charming and bubbly from the Instagram accounts with that overriding positivity that makes a dour Scotsman want to barf.'

I don't know anything about Brenne's female founder, besides what I've read from spectacular reviews like the one above. But I know she's made a whiskey that's a strong and interesting presence- the rare whisky that is subtle enough to have before a meal but is also flavorsome enough to enjoy at the end of a night- and something that I'm proud to have in my bar.

And if I may suggest a lingering, fragrant whiskey cocktail:

Little Twirl

1.5 oz Brenne

1 oz Cocchi Americano

0.5 oz Don Ciccio & Figli Amaro de Sirene

Bar spoon of Apricot Liqueur

Dash of Absinthe

Build ingredients in a mixing glass, add ice, and stir. Serve in a chilled coupe glass. Garnish with a lemon peel.

— Julia Ebell, *The Gibson*, 2019



A Perfect Refresher For Spring

BY JULIA EBELL
GIBSON CREATIVE DIRECTOR

Do you have any shameful secrets? Have you ever given your heart to something no one else understands? Do you know the kind of secret passion that, kept too long to yourself, changes the arrangement of your heart and mind and morals and guts so you find yourself leaning over the bar after a couple and whispering it to the sympathetic-looking bartender? Have you ever loved a white wine spritzer?

White wine spritzers are my secret, my guilty pleasure; one that I will only admit when already half-drunk, dead tired, and fiending for a dance floor. The low ABV keeps me from falling over, the bubbles are refreshing, and the lemon peel can be repurposed as an à la minute breath freshener depending on how that dance floor goes.

The only thing that allows me to retain my composure as the bartender's look of confusion turns to mild horror as he or she realizes there's a cougar* loose in their workplace is the knowledge that wine spritzers have a long, noble, and very Germanic history.

According to the SAGE Encyclopedia of Alcohol the spritz probably originated in Austria in the mid 1800s, with its name coming from the German süßgespritzter. I assume they came about from the custom of drinking carbonated spa waters and a generalized enthusiasm for wine, the OG health drink. But feel free to prove me wrong (or fund my research). There are a ton of charming Hungarian names for different varieties of spritzers, including ones that translate to teddy bear, long step, and whistle.

From the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the spritz spread through Europe, with every country putting its spin on

the low alcohol plus bubbles template. Aperol Spritzes are cool! Pimm's Cups are cool! Our pals at Bad Hunter Chicago are supercool spritz aficionados! White wine spritzers are... not cool, whatever the New York Times says every couple of years. Still, the pleasure of the white wine spritzer are worth the shame of ordering them.

*Cougars are judged by behavior, not age or gender. Please consider releasing your inner cougar soon--it's a lot of fun.

Disco Ball Moth

2 oz dry, high acid white wine
0.5 oz Creme de Bergamont
0.25 Creme de Violette
1 oz Fine Club Soda

Build in a goblet or wine glass, add ice, top with soda, and stir to incorporate ingredients. Garnish with grapefruit peel.

— Julia Ebell, *The Gibson*, 2019

the gibson curse

For Valentine's Day the Gibson ran a Love Story writing contest. For a bar that hosts so many dates, anniversaries, engagements, and wedding parties, we felt like there must be a wealth of rich experiences our guests wanted to share, and we weren't disappointed.

This is the winning submission for the contest, a story about a string of bad dates.

Known for its romantic ambience, you would think bringing someone that you started dating to The Gibson would be a fun idea. I didn't find that to be the case. Time after time, it became a turning point that led to the last scene of dating. It didn't matter if it was two weeks into dating or two months in, it was a curse. Maybe the combination of boozy cocktails being *so-good-you-don't-realize-how-drunk-you're-getting* and the extremely dim lights concocted the perfect storm for my dates to magically divulge their deepest secrets about their past relationships. Something about this "speakeasy" made it a place to speak a little "too easily."

My first experience with The Gibson Curse was some years ago. I had been dating a guy for two months when I introduced him to The Gibson. At what seemed his big chance to whisper a sweet *nothing* to me, he leaned in closer across the bistro table to hold my hand, stare ever-so-deeply into my eyes, and tell me over the flickering tealight candle, "My ex-girlfriend was extremely jealous." Completely unprompted, he launched into a tale about one of her fits at a pool hall, really quite too boring to recall or retell here. His words crashed out waves of resentment, almost visible even in the dimly lit bar. I thought she was an ex of maybe a few months earlier. Not so much. Try closer to 4 years ago.

"Hmmm, do you maybe wanna talk to someone else to get over her?" "Is this what you consider romantic talk?" were two of the main questions I wanted to ask as soon as he took a breathe. When The Smiths' "Bigmouth Strikes Again" played in the background, the waiter approached us to see if we would like another round. "Yes, *pause* please, *deep sigh*" I responded. Two days later, he acknowledged it was weird, *mea culpa*-ing for another date. I agreed, but knew it was over before it began, ending things shortly thereafter.

Two years later, another guy and another date at The Gibson. He seemed really uncomfortable halfway through cocktails. He started to talk about an ex, telling me where she worked, what she liked to drink, and so on. *Was his ex here?* I thought. *Will she be joining us this evening? Why the rundown of her*

predilections? Was I supposed to take notes?

The torch he carried for her could have illuminated the entire bar and the intersection of 14th and U Street. I was bored, older, and slightly wiser in addressing this sort of lecture-about-my-ex. To douse the dialogue I asked him, "Why are you talking about her so much?" With barely saying good night, he left - maybe he realized it was finished or perhaps to call her to profess his love. Either way, he raced out of the dimly lit hallway and out the unmarked door, the trail of his torch lingering wherever he sprinted. For his sake, I hoped its flames would eventually flicker out like the nearly-extinguished candle in front of me. The curse had struck again.

Close guy friends confirmed these were "rookie moves" and that I was better off. I followed the mantra my sage friend shared, "Don't sweat someone who wears a fashion sweatshirt." Regardless, I stopped taking anyone I was dating to The Gibson for years. The curse seemed a little bit too real. I considered sending the bar a note asking them if they would kindly rename some of their drinks to "Red Flag." Or, "Hold That Thought In Your Head." Maybe, "Don't Spill Your Guts So Soon."

After a bit of time passed, I thought to give The Gibson Date another chance. Who knows? Maybe the curse had eventually expired. But I was wrong. The Gibson Curse tapped me on the shoulder again, reminding me that I shouldn't have gone back...

We had been seeing each other for about a week before we went. An hour into our conversation, he tells me that his ex didn't want to have kids. "Ummmm, OK," I conveyed with a tilted head and a raised eyebrow. Was hoping we'd maybe talk about something else, anything else. Perhaps he couldn't see the *why-in-the-world-are-you-telling-me-this* reaction on my face because the bar was so dark. I kept the questions in the thought bubble over my head. *Have I mentioned wanting kids? Or, did I ask why you two broke up? Perhaps this your way of not taking any responsibility for why the relationship ended?*

Naturally I was quite uncomfortable hearing all this

intimate past relationship intel. Resisting the urge to tell him it's never a good idea to talk about your ex's life goals when you just meet someone, I filled in the air time nervously blabbering so he couldn't stick his foot in his mouth anymore. After our 2-hour reservation was over, I walked home and opened my online dating profile, needing a palette cleanser from The Gibson Curse. So I sent a message to a guy whose profile was short and sweet. All the while thinking that expression - *less is more (more or less)* - would surely be a good sign.

*** Fast forwarding to last summer, my husband and I were taking a sunny Sunday stroll through Malcolm X Park. Drum circle drummers pulsated out the heartbeat of the park. Every spot of green grass was brimming with people savoring picnics, playing frisbee games or soccer matches. Slacklining sets were perched between trees. After circling the inner path, we took the peripheral more shaded, less crowded sidewalk. I noticed a small white sign delicately planted in the grass next to this somewhat hidden walkway. In a cursive swirled robin egg blue font, it announced, "Happily Ever After." A few steps later another one proclaimed, "Follow Your Heart!" Still another professed, "True Love." The sprinkling of signs ended with a pacing young man dressed in a pale blue suit that matched the font on these romantic clues. Pink rose petals surrounded his feet. He was slightly nervous, but more excited.

We had accidentally waltzed in to a proposal about to happen.

I asked the young man the obvious. "It's a surprise... she's here for an internship and doesn't know I'm here..." he said, radiating so much love. Wanting to bottle up this beautiful moment, I ask him if I could take his photo and instantly agreed. I considered posting it to social media, but never did and am not sure if I ever will. Couldn't help but wonder how I would feel if a stranger posted a photo of my engagement? I'll just say that if you saw his ear-to-ear smile in this snapshot, you wouldn't be able to stop yourself from grinning just as widely.

I did say "my husband" earlier so you're probably wondering - Did I ever take him to The Gibson while



we were dating? I certainly did. Turned out that the person with the "less is more" profile would be "the one." And that's when I realized there was never a Gibson Curse. It was the Gibson Test. The date who could handle the elixir atmosphere of The Gibson without boring me with tales of erstwhile exes, passed with flying colors.

Guess where we celebrated with impromptu we-just-got-engaged-cocktails three summers ago?

You got it. The Gibson. Didn't need to think twice about where to go.



**ANXO Cidery's Work to Showcase a Women Owned and
Produced Beverage Selection for March**

BY MOLLIE BENSEN
ANXO CIDERY GENERAL MANAGER

We got a phone call the other day.

“Hi, I’m interested in celebrating my sister’s birthday at ANXO in March and I heard that you’re only serving beverages owned or made by women. Will the drinks be any good?”

The first part of her remark was normal enough; as General Manager I plan events like hers on a daily basis. The second half has also become standard. Awareness of our March drinks list has exponentially increased since we put out a press release. It was her question that was troubling: will the drinks be any good?

The answer, obvious to me, was yes. The drinks will be good. Some will be great — sublime in their complexity, their delicate balance, the elegant roundness in the mouth and the lingering finish where you don’t know how much you crave another sip until you realize you’re visibly salivating. Others will be more straightforward, light and crisp and quaffable because let’s face it, drinking is not always an intellectual pursuit. And there will be everything in between.

ANXO Cidery & Pintxos Bar is a woman-owned business. We’re owned by men too, but we usually don’t need to clarify that. On International Women’s Day 2018, the restaurant held a fundraiser for Planned Parenthood featuring woman-owned and -made beverages. We received an overwhelmingly positive response from guests and producers alike, multiple thousands of dollars went Planned Parenthood’s way, and we were on such a high that we said to ourselves, “next year we’re going to do it bigger!” So here we are one year later, and during the month of March all beverages ANXO serves — thirty six draft lines, a dozen ciders and wines by the glass, a full bar with all liquors and mixers plus non-

alcoholic drinks too — are either owned or made by women.

The customer on the phone continued, “Well, like, I’m used to your menu being really great and I just want to make sure that it’ll be as high quality as I remember it.”

Her follow-up was perplexing, and to be honest, disappointing. Why would this woman think that we would sacrifice quality to prove a point? Moreover, why would she think we needed to? Am I staring down one glass ceiling women have yet to shatter?

I have been planning this menu for months. It has not been my only task — far from it! — but rather a job best done little by little and since the middle of last year I have been adding to a compendium of beverages for this project. Along the way we have had to ask ourselves and answer many questions: does a woman need to be the sole proprietor? (No, but we prefer principal or majority ownership.) Are husbands and wives working together fair game? (Yes, as long as there’s an equitable division of labor.) Will we carry beer from a brewery primarily staffed by women? (Not unless there is a woman in a production management or ownership role).

Initially I was concerned that we would have only a handful of products to choose from, especially when it came to spirits. How would I make a cohesive menu? As the weeks went by and my reps brought in more and more samples, I realized that fear was completely unfounded. Some of the largest and best established brands are run by women: Lisa Laird Dunn is the ninth generation of her family to run Laird’s, this country’s oldest legal distillery. Joy Spence has been the Master Blender for Appleton since 1997. Nicole Austin took over as distiller for

George Dickel last spring. Our neighbors in DC are making some excellent juice as well, and I'm especially enamored of Kat Hamidi's Capitoline Vermouths and spirits from Republic Restoratives, founded by Pia Carusone and Rachel Gardner. Choosing wines, ciders and beers for our list was only a challenge because we had so many options. It turns out woman-made booze is everywhere, all I needed was to look.

So, to address this mystery guest's fears, our menu is just as diverse and well-rounded as it always has

been. I'm not here to denigrate men or disparage their products; rather, ANXO has an opportunity to make a statement with our menu and this month we're celebrating exceptional women. Will we continue to eschew man-made drinks after March 31st? No, they'll make their way back on to our list — if we decide they're a good addition to our program. I'll probably be more partial to drinks made by women, but then again, I am one. And we make some damn delicious drinks.

La Maupin

0.75 oz Laird's Applejack
0.5 oz Mezcal
0.25 oz Simple Syrup
2 dashes of Aromatic Bitters
Anxo Cider

Build in a highball glass, add ice, top with Anxo cider, and stir to incorporate ingredients. Garnish with a lime wheel.

— Julia Ebell, *The Gibson*, 2019

In Defense of “Speakeasies”

A Speakeasy Takedown

BY JACOB HALL
GIBSON GENERAL MANAGER



Stop me if you’ve heard this one.

“You stand on the corner of an abandoned lot and wait for twenty minutes. Then an unmarked van pulls up and two people jump out and pull a hood over your face and put you in the van. They drive around for a few blocks, then take you out of the van, and when they pull the hood off you’re in the speakeasy.”

Of course you’ve heard that one. It’s 2019. ‘That one’ is the now prolific hidden speakeasy. Any mid-size city has a least a few of these low profile watering holes. Inexplicably, they traffic in prestige cocktails a bajillion times better than the bathtub gin that was sold in actual Prohibition-era speakeasies. Good luck enjoying them, though, because screw you if you can’t figure out the bizarre ritual of getting in. Sometimes

it’s not as bad as that; sometimes it’s worse. The kidnap scenario described above (though made up) would probably not be the most outlandish speakeasy foyer out there.

The age-old practice of hiding the entrance to an exclusive haunt began trending with the likes of New York cocktail bars Milk and Honey, PDT, and Death & Co. In the mid-aughts the cultural currents were ideally suited to this development. The “hipster” instinct to invert the cultural mainstream for the sake of doing something - anything - interesting had not yet blown up, and the internet was not ubiquitously accessible on your space-phone. Information like the location and dildo protocol of a bar could not be effortlessly summoned on FaceBoogle. Hidden bars had real cachet and probably even a bit of social

utility when it came to filtering out socially inept blowhards. In 2019 the internet has ruined that proposition, but the practice of opening difficult-to-find bars continues to captivate restaurateurs.

But let's call a spade a spade. What exactly were these bars ever hiding from? America's federal alcohol prohibition hasn't been in force for about three months and 86 years. Of course, there are unlawful ways to sell alcohol these days (after hours, without proper licensing, infused with THC, etc.), and if you want to run an illegal alcohol retail operation, all the power to you. Sales taxes are annoying and last call is an instrument of plebeian masses jacked up on FOMO. From what I hear though, the real fly-by-night operations hide in warehouses and sell substances far less acceptable to society than an Old Fashioned.

So why has the speakeasy returned as a gimmick for entirely lawful operations? Partly, I'd say, it fits a pattern of gamifying our bars around easily discernible tropes. It takes me back to a conversation with a friend who worked at Lyman's when it first opened, wherein I kept trying to tease out the new bar's concept.

"So it's a pinball bar?"

"Not really."

"Then what, like a neighborhood dive?"

"Nope."

"What's their thing then?"

"It's just a bar, dude."

My inane focus on the 'it' of it laid bare for me that we've probably gone too far with x-bar, and speakeasies often take their gimmick and run it out to whimsical lengths. We are endlessly barraged by a narrative that millennials consume experiences more voraciously than products. I suspect this factors in

the prominence of speakeasies, concept bars, pop-ups, and the gimmicky rendering of "adult" spaces in general. Undeniably, a speakeasy's air of exclusivity is an experiential feature. You know a secret of which lesser mortals know not, the nondescript entrance whispers to visitors, because you're special.

People speak of the shift to experiential consumption approvingly. It heralds a more authentic and/or communal age of consumption. But with speakeasies popping up in countries that never even banned alcohol, it seems obvious that experiences can be every bit as vacuous as possessions. A hidden entrance that serves no actual filtering or hiding function is an experience that corresponds to exclusivity or lawlessness the way pre-torn jeans correspond to the attire of rugged blue-collar labor: as a simulacra and nothing more.

Admittedly, the Gibson has been a moderately bad offender on this point. The bar certainly opened its unmarked doors just before the speakeasy shtick went truly national and not so many years before it became baroque. In ten years of aping exclusive attitudes, its staff failed as often as they succeeded at not being too aloof toward paying customers. For every three or four people who rave about their experience, there's one who scoffs at what pretentious dicks we've always been. Lots (but definitely not all) of that critique is deserved. I myself have been an unforgiving agent of that pretension for years. But alas, our revolution is over.

Speakeasies have simply not been cool (if they ever even were) for years now.

Where does that leave us in general and the Gibson in particular? Is it time to open our shuttered window, put a sign out front, run happy hour, and fill our space with TVs? No. This is a defense of speakeasies after all, not an abdication of them. It turns out the hidden speakeasy's deeply rooted flaw of performative exclusivity is conducive to social goods that are benign and even redeeming.

See, being in a hidden space really does do strange things to the mind. It's peculiar. In the case of the Gibson, the bustle of 14th street is a mere glass window, drawn curtain, and closed garage door away. In some cases you're seated physically closer to the crush of 14th street traffic than the actual bar. Nothing about this should be calming, but it's visually impossible to be reminded that 14th street or anywhere it leads to even exists. The whole world beyond the bar is not only barely visible, but entirely hidden from you and you from it. The illusion alters perception every bit as much as the alcohol.

"Sure, sure. You can't see a crappy intersection. At the end of the day it's still just a bar," quoth the skeptic.

Indeed it is. But the visual context changes your reality. In the way the vantage from a skybar elevates you out of routine urban life, the vantage from a hidden speakeasy negates the idea of anything beyond that space. The result is greater emotional distance from the world's troubles--the very thing people are seeking in third places like bars. Does everyone feel that way? No, probably not. A willingness to take things as they seem certainly matters, and some people are too beholden to the matter of fact, which is ok.

But even they might find something worthwhile in a space that, whether for performative exclusivity or not, doesn't telegraph its presence. An inescapable fact of hidden entrances is that people tend not to find

them unless inducted into them. This is perhaps the hidden speakeasy's best accidental feature--the shtick forces a social consensus at the outset because so few people end up there by accident.

And it's the combination of these elements that makes the magic. In a secluded space, emotionally removed from the hardship of the world, you relax in the company of intimates. The bond you share, even with total strangers, is the improbability of any of you being there in the first place. It's practically home, but it's not and somehow that makes it even better. But with this semi-magical seclusion comes a quality that--though generic to hidden entrance speakeasies--manifests itself uniquely from bar to bar.

Having witnessed it for seven years, I can assure everyone that the convergence of emotional distance from the rest of the world and the social consensus of the participants intensifies whatever experience a bar otherwise represents. I get shitty service from tattooed bartenders and moody candlelight for dates at dozens of bars in the city, but only at a bar with hidden entrance does that become "hipster douchebags" or "fuck bar" (two common reactions to the Gibson throughout the years).

Ultimately, the most accurate thing you can say about speakeasies in 2019 is that they're not so bad when they're not so bad, but when they're good they're so much more.

