

BEHIND THE BAR

Holly McKeown

The Jay Village Inn & Restaurant

'Where the Real People Come'

If there's a word that best describes the atmosphere at the Jay Village Inn and Restaurant, it may be 'genuine.'

This northern Vermont establishment serves the best of what the Green Mountain State has to offer — outstanding generosity, warmth, enthusiasm and top-notch hospitality. The mission here is to make sure everyone is comfortable.

Just one tip before stopping by: don't try putting on airs.

"I always like to say that this is where the real people come," says owner Holly McKeown. "Our clientele is absolutely amazing."

McKeown and her husband, J.R., have operated the iconic inn for nine years (though she's been a part of the place for nearly 13 years), and Holly runs the intimate, comfortable bar. The restaurant and dining room is on the first floor and the inn's 15 rooms are located on the

second floor. Ask a knowledgeable local, however, and you'll be directed to a highly sought-after spot just inside. Call it an insider's tip.

"We have a wood burning fireplace that's the most popular seat in Jay from December until April," McKeown says.

The building itself is iconic. A renovated farmhouse, wide barnboard wraps the entire structure, giving it a classic Vermont ambience. But it's what's inside that sets this place apart. There are certain requisite skills someone who wants to work at the Jay Village Inn and Restaurant must have.

"It's not like I hire just anybody that comes through the door" McKeown says. "It has to be a special person to work the bar here. Not just any schmo can do it. It has to be someone who gets along with the clientele and can read them."

The variety of guests that frequent the Jay

Village Inn and Restaurant makes having a keen sense of character an important skill.

"You can have someone who's been to prison in one seat, and then the person next to him could be Father O'Malley," McKeown says. "You have to be able to speak to any person who walks through that door."

"Like I said, this is where the real people come."

What do you like most about bartending?

"I like to live vicariously through people. And I enjoy the stories and the banter that goes back and forth over the bar. I make people happy for a living, so there are a lot of different things



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to like about the job. I love hearing about people's travels, what they've done and seen in their lives. I like to hear the good, the bad — everything. I think it's mainly about seeing people happy."

What's the philosophy of your bar program?

"I think it's the quality of our drinks. The fact I think I've been making drinks in the area for as long as I have, word has gotten out that people get what they pay for. That, and the recipes I'm using. I'm still trying to come up with new recipes or make recipes better."

Share a behind-the-bar secret.

"A lot of what we do is smoke and mirrors. If you do it well, it looks like you're great at your job. And I think a lot of it is recognition. It's just not working with your blinders on. You have to keep your head up and your head in the game."

What's your favorite cocktail to make?

"I'm really proud of the way we do our Moscow Mules — only we call it the Mountain Mule. Instead of using ginger beer we do a fresh ginger puree. I do 30 pounds at a time — I peel

it, I cook it, and then we add a few different things to it. The puree ends up looking a little like horseradish and it takes all day to make it. We use a healthy scoop in every drink we make. It is definitely the healthiest drink we make. We also do a fall one with apple cider, Captain Morgan Rum and instead of lime we use fresh orange wedges and then land it in the stainless with club soda. We make an Island Mule with rum and triple sec and throw bitters in it."

If you weren't a bartender, what would you be?

"I'd like to think I'd be something along lines of a psychologist. It's all about balancing people's personalities — getting to know about them and reading them. You have to be able to read your customer — there's just no other way around it."

What advice would you give to aspiring bartenders?

"You know those crazy-busy nights when it feels like you can't get your head above water? Those are the best nights to work. If you feel like you can't handle it, just remember that the end of the night comes at some time." ☺

1078 Vermont 242 • Jay, VT
802-988-2306 • thejyvillageinn.com



The Mountain Mule

courtesy the Jay Village Inn and Restaurant

- 2½ ounces vodka
- 1 healthy scoop of ginger puree (in place of ginger beer)
- Fresh lime juice
- Club soda

Mix the vodka, ginger puree and lime juice in a shaker and shake it up. Pour into a copper mug and top with club soda. Use lemon-lime soda for a sweeter version.

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