

BEHIND THE BAR

Ivy Mix

The Road to Leyenda

A Q&A with Celebrity Mixologist and Vermont Native Ivy Mix

When Ivy Mix was growing up, the cocktail culture in the tiny, central Vermont town of Tunbridge wasn't exactly cosmopolitan.

Yet it didn't keep this entrepreneur/philanthropist/mixologist from making her mark on the industry – though her rise to prominence did take a circuitous route. Her journey began in Tunbridge, took a turn into Bennington, where she went to college, and then made an unexpected and lengthy detour to Latin America – a destination that would inform her career in dramatic ways.

"I told my mom that after growing up in Vermont, I wanted to go somewhere that was not Vermont," Mix says. "Guatemala was the first place that came my way, so I said, 'OK, let's go.' I went for two months and totally fell in love with it."

It was that move that jump-started her career behind the bar. A cursory look at her recent accomplishments since then – in an industry traditionally run by men – shows a remarkable trajectory. Mix took home the coveted Spirited Award for Best American Bartender of the Year at the 2015 Tales of the Cocktail Festival; she worked at several renowned hot spots in New York City, including Fort Defiance, Flat Iron, Lani Kai and the Clover Club, before opening her own bar, Leyenda, in the Cobble Hill neighborhood of Brooklyn. She's also the cofounder of Speed Rack – a bartending competition that raises money (more than \$700,000 to date) for breast cancer research, awareness and prevention.

"I wasn't having the easiest time becoming a bartender," Mix says of her early days in the industry. "They told me to be a cocktail waitress.

They said, 'it's not really your thing.' I said, 'yeah, I'm pretty sure it is.'"

That's when the first seeds of Speed Rack began to grow.

"I wanted to create a platform for women to stand on," she says. "It's really been amazing. More than 1,000 women have competed all across the U.S. and even more internationally. But it's different now. There are a lot more women working in bars. The cocktail industry has changed a lot. It's not so exclusive and snobby. There are more chances for women and minorities.

"Speed Rack is a great thing to be a part of because the stakes are higher than they've ever been, but there's also more of a feeling of camaraderie among the women. The competition is



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fierce, but the camaraderie is also stronger. And given the current climate in the world, women supporting one another is necessary."

What was your first night behind the bar like?

"I was living in Guatemala at the time and I was a regular at this bar (Café No Sé.) I spent all my time there, and one night they were really, really busy, so I hopped behind the bar. That was when I realized, hey, this is pretty fun. After a while I realized that I had to pay my bar tab off – something I had acquired over the course of a few months in Guatemala, so I started working there to pay it off. I came to the realization that it was something I could do to make money, not just a way to spend money."

What is your favorite cocktail to make?

"A lot of the time they're all the same to make – a drink is a drink is a drink. It depends on how busy it is. If it's not busy, then OK, let's hang out and make you this drink. That's my favorite – the one where I can be creative and fun. Sometimes in a busy cocktail bar, you become a drink-making machine, just churning them out. You can lose the part of bartending that I love the most

– being creative and making cocktails and communicating with people.”

What’s the best cocktail you’ve ever tasted?

“There are so many out there and so many that are weird and bizarre – but there are a few different ones that are memorable. I tend to like savory cocktails – they’re super delicious and lend themselves to Latin cuisine. We have a drink on our menu made by my head bartender, Shannon Ponche, called the Daiquiri al Pastor. It uses pineapple and pork and cilantro, but in a cocktail. So she does a fat-wash of a rum, which we make from pernil, a classic Puerto Rican dish. She took the fat from that brined pork, added pineapple chili syrup, lime with cilantro, salted the rim – it’s really complex and really unique.”

Share a behind-the-bar secret.

“If you are the type of person who’s trying to get super-duper clear ice, you can get it this way: Get a tiny cooler, like a Coleman cooler, fill it up with water and stick it into the freezer. Because it’s insulated, it will freeze on top first and all the impurities will rise to the top. When you take it out, it will be frozen, and you just chip off this layer of white ice – underneath that you’ll have a perfectly clear block. It’s great if you want to do punches that have perfectly clear ice. I do it in the summer when I’m hosting at home, or even during the holidays when I have people over. People always underestimate ice, and it’s always what people are most excited about.”

What’s your best advice to someone interested in getting into bartending?

“Keep working. When I started, it wasn’t a feasible job. Then the economy collapsed and it was. It’s a craft and a skill that you can take wherever you want. It’s not just a deadbeat job – not that it ever was – but it’s not just something you can fall into anymore. If you want to make a living doing this, then you need to be perfecting your game, and that takes work and dedication. If you’ve got that, then do it. I was at a seminar for Singani in Vermont, and there were 45 bartenders there. It’s a totally different scene than it was even five years ago. People go to classes and seminars and they’re meeting people – these things are important if you’re trying to further your career.”

At the end of a shift, I...

“I usually have a glass of wine as I’m closing down the bar. Then I bike home and walk my dog. He’s a mutt named Sampson and he’s the best little guy in the world.” ☺

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