

BEHIND THE BAR



Bennington's Madison Brewing Co. Keeps it All in the Family

Entrepreneurs, quite often, will say their business is like a family. For the Madison Brewing Co., in Bennington, it's not just a marketing slogan.

The popular spot, which sits on Main Street just a few steps from the four corners intersection, is a partnership between four members of the Madison clan: Michael W., Michael J., Marilyn and Mel. But it takes more than a handful of Madisons to keep the place humming —

something this group of restaurateurs is keenly aware of.

"My family has been in the business for a very long time," Mel Madison says from the restaurant's busy rooftop bar. "And because we're a family business, we respect everyone on our staff. We have 58 employees who work here, and we value every single one of them. Without our staff we'd be pretty much nothing."

The clientele includes many who are on a

first-name basis with staffers. And though that familiarity has created a comfortable feel that draws a large number of Bennington regulars, the room will often be filled with thirsty guests who have come from far away to sample Madison's fare. Located near the border of Massachusetts and New York, the renowned brew pub draws a tremendous amount of people from the nearby Capital District and the Berkshires.

"The Vermont brew scene is incredible right now and it forces you to up your game," Madison says. "We even had a family from Germany in here that was told that if they were going to travel through Vermont, they had to come to Madison Brewing Co. So it's not just local."

"After 22 years, we're more than that. We're a destination."

What was your first night as a bartender like?

"It was the night from Hell. The most stressful night of my life. We had just opened and the bar was four deep. I was running around like a chicken with its head chopped off just trying to pump it out. We learned our lesson. We always have extra staff available to help out — especially now, making craft cocktails, which take a little longer to make. You need a good solid bar staff to handle that. It's like having a good chef in the kitchen."

What's the philosophy of your bar program?

"We keep things as creative as possible. We do about nine different kinds of Moscow Mules. We do sangria of the week — we're always changing it up. My chef makes most of the sangrias and he's really good at it. We keep things simple. Try to use the best spirits we can, and we're integrating Vermont spirits as much as possible. Vermont distilleries are killing it. Places like Barr Hill and Vermont Distillers and Smugglers' Notch are doing incredible work right now. We're focusing on using more Vermont-based spirits because when people come to Vermont, they want to taste Vermont."

What's your favorite cocktail to make?

"I like to make cosmopolitans because my wife loves it. She doesn't like normal cosmos, but she loves mine because I use Citron, Cointreau, a light squeeze of fresh lime juice and my secret — a splash of lemonade and splash of cranberry juice, takes away the bite of the booze and makes it really, really smooth. I got the idea in Central Park at the Boathouse. I watched him make it and asked, 'did you just use lemonade?' He told me that it's the secret



Blueberry BeerJito

Courtesy Madison Brewing Company

2 ounces Smugglers' Notch Vodka
 1 ounce fresh squeezed lime juice
 1 ounce club soda
 Simple Syrup
 Bennington Blueberry Ale
 2-3 mint leaves
 4-5 blueberries
 Lime wedge

Muddle 4-5 blueberries and 2-3 mint leaves in a 16 ounce mixing glass. Fill mixing glass with ice, add the vodka, simple syrup, lime juice and shake. Top with club soda and finish with the Bennington Blueberry Ale. Garnish with a sprig of mint and lime and serve.

to a great cosmo. It's not bitter from the cranberry juice, and it takes away the booziness and smoothens it right out. I've been doing it ever since and it comes out awesome every time."

What advice would you give aspiring bartenders?

"Learn, educate yourself and get involved. Don't just sit back on your heels and go with the flow. Expand your horizons, find a new drink, stick with today's trends, educate yourself. There's a difference between a bartender and a mixologist. In the bartending world, being a mixologist is like being a chef where you're constantly creating. What's great about that is you can really make a name for yourself. People will want to come in because you're known for making great, original cocktails."

If I wasn't a bartender, I would...

"I'd be a gym teacher and track coach. I'm into fitness. Right now I'm in the midst of training for the Mohawk Hudson River Marathon." ☺

Madison Brewing Company

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