

LEISURE & ARTS

Mastering the Bar in Harvard Yard

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Being a Yale man, it has long been my belief that Harvard graduates contribute nothing of value to the world. I now realize this is not entirely true. Harvard, it turns out, certifies more bartenders than you can shake a Martini at. I know this because I just became one of them.

Yes, venerable Harvard, no longer hooked on classics, is also a professional bartending school. Ads in Boston's subway dangle the school's famous name in front of the hoi polloi with the slogan "the practical Harvard education" above a photo of liquor bottles and a shot glass. As a member-in-good-standing of the hoi polloi, I enrolled in the course; it was a way to keep up with my wife, who is studying for her MBA at Harvard Business School.

The bartending course offers many advantages over her conventional Harvard degree. The MBA costs about \$52,000 in tuition and takes two academic years; my degree cost \$50 and took three nights. Business-school admissions are fiercely competitive; bartending is offered to anybody who shows up. My wife studies late into the night; my final exam consisted of mixing four Kamikazes. Best of all, the two degrees produce the same result, more or less: a diploma with a crimson (Bloody Mary?) border and *Veritas* seal. My degree appears in big letters at the top: "Master of Mixology." The fine print affirms that I am "graced in the fine art of mixing drinks."

On the first night of my course, I take a seat in a classroom in ancient Sever Hall in Harvard Yard along with 14 others, all of us new Harvard students. In the adjoining classroom, a professor in a tie is lecturing earnestly about civil damages. My professor, too, has the poise of a scholar—no easy feat when your lectern is occupied by seven bottles of liquor and a pile of limes. Often in his lecture, he pauses

thoughtfully, places his fingertips together as if about to expound the proof of a particularly difficult theorem, and then says, "Anybody ever have a Harvey Wallbanger?" or "The difference between a splash and a dash is enormous."

The instructor, Adam Tocci, clad in shorts, sneakers and a striped shirt draped over a modest beer belly, begins by telling us he's "got a very strong background in franchise restaurants"—a highfalutin way of saying he has poured drinks at Chi-Chi's and Pizzeria Uno. The Harvard Bartending Course, which Mr. Tocci himself com-



pleted in 1985, dates back to the 1970s and was, like many schools' bartending courses, meant as a lark for undergraduates who wanted to tinkle. But when the drinking age went up to 21 in the 1980s, it was closing time for most on-campus bartending courses. Harvard, however, turned to the outside world, selling the proud name to people who really do want to be professional bartenders. With the university's blessing, the course is run by Harvard Student Agencies, and profits go back to Harvard, presumably to subsidize less lucrative lines of study.

There are a couple of drawbacks. For one, the diploma is not, technically, a real Harvard degree, so it won't get me into the Harvard Club. And because of the drinking-age thing, all the booze in the class is really just colored water, so there is little opportunity to enjoy the fermented fruits

of one's labor. More serious bar schools diss the Harvard course because it, being Harvard, relies on book learning rather than doing. The Boston Bartenders School of America calls Harvard's claim to teach the mixing of 200 drinks in six hours without any alcohol "a little suspect." "You can't just crack a book every time a drink is ordered," says Frank Coyle, the school's education director. Take a B-52, for example, or a Brain Hemorrhage. "You have to be shown how to build these drinks or they don't come out right."

Before this class, I didn't know a Gimlet from a Jigger, much less a Buffalo Sweat (it involves wringing the bar rag into the glass). But Mr. Tocci, whose animated delivery sounds a bit like Jay Leno's, sets us at ease from the start. "This is not brain surgery—it's bartending," he says, over and over. "This is one of the simplest things in the world." It is charming and self-deprecating the first time. Eventually, it begins to sound like a put-down of his pupils, who do not appear to find this simple at all.

He demonstrates the "three-count method" of "speed-pouring" and its little brother, the "quick two count." The lesson takes on the sound of an aerobics class. "Coffee brandy, three count, now the vodka, quick two count," he says, then later, "one-two-one, dump, one-two-two, dump, one-two-three, dump," as he pours jiggers into a metal mixer. He plunges into the Martini lesson, detailing the fine distinction between dry and extra dry. Faux-alcohol is spilling all over the dark wooden desk. Mr. Tocci pauses. "Any questions?"

Only one hand is raised. "Is there a bathroom?" a classmate asks.

A number of my fellow students, all but a few of whom plan to tend bar for money, admit they were drawn to the course by the prestige. "This will be my first Harvard degree," says Geoffrey Connie, a loan officer who hopes to open a bar. He plans a bit of deception with his diploma.

"People will see it on the wall: University of Illinois, Cambridge College, U.S. Navy, Harvard." They won't read the fine print, he figures. Another classmate, Roger Pallan, fresh out of Wesleyan University with a degree in comparative religion, will use his bartending degree in Colorado, where he plans to be a ski-bum next year. In the lodge, he says, "there's not going to be much demand for comparative religion."

Some past graduates have written to say that they hang their diplomas behind the bars where they're employed, much the way a doctor displays his credentials.

Night two introduces us to frozen drinks, and the instructor draws on the blackboard a diagram of proper rim-salt technique, not far from where an instructor earlier in the day had written notes about bond pricing. Soon we move into garnishes, and learn that a Tom Collins demands cherry and orange. Mr. Tocci is momentarily disabled when, in the middle of his lemon-cutting demonstration, he sprays himself in the eye. But he quickly recovers and then lectures us about the dangers of beer. He lifted a full keg once, he says, and "got a hernia the size of Montana."

Night three is "lab night," the equivalent of our final exam. The desk is lined with testing implements: VS juice, ice, fruits, sour mix and lots of phony booze. We can all recite the order of the "speed rail" common to all bars (vodka, gin, rum . . .) as if conjugating foreign verbs. Still, our exams are less than perfect. Irene Hough, a secretary who is taking the course along with her daughter, stirs her White Russian instead of shaking it. When Mr. Tocci asks her what's in a Black Russian (Kahlúa and vodka) she replies, "Chocolate milk?" Mr. Tocci records that astonishing lapse on his clipboard, then asks the class to correct her.

"Whiskey?" someone volunteers.

"Is it rum?" another ventures.

"You're scaring me," Mr. Tocci says.

I'm the last to be examined, and I have a sinking feeling when he orders up four Kamikazes: I have forgotten the recipe. But prompted with the ingredients, I leap into action. I pour the vodka and triple sec with an even three count, splash the lime juice with authority. I shake with abandon. I strain. I spill colored water everywhere. But I manage to produce four fairly even Kamikaze shots, and Mr. Tocci is pleased. Soon I am walking home, my Master of Mixology in hand.

The next day, I rush over to Woolworth to get a frame for my certificate—only the best for a Harvard diploma. It can now be said, to invert President Kennedy's famous remark, that I have the best of both worlds: a Yale education and a Harvard degree.