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Annual Orinda cocktail competition goes virtual

By Sora O'Doherty



In the past, the Art of Mixology competition has attracted crowds of 300 attendees each year to Theatre Square, however, like so much else in 2020, the popular annual cocktail competition that is the biggest fundraiser for the Lamorinda Arts Council is going virtual this year to protect people from the risk of COVID-19.

But just because the competition is virtual doesn't mean that people can't taste the cocktails. The difference is, they will have to make them at home from kits concocted by the five mixologist finalists.

The kits will contain all the ingredients to prepare the cocktails in the competition, except the alcohol, which will need to be purchased separately. Participants can order the kits and follow along as the competitors prepare the drinks via videos on the Lamorinda Arts Council website. The kits are non-perishable and do not contain any fresh items. A couple of recipes call for citrus, which is included as crystalized citrus.

The 2020 Mixologist of the Year will be announced during a live Awards Show at 7 p.m. Friday, Oct. 16. The show will be emceed by Justin Cole of Joy in Motion and the finalists will mix their craft cocktails. Second and third place mixologists will also be named, as well as an award for audience favorite. Winners will get trophies or certificates and cash prizes. Audience favorite voting starts Oct. 1. The competition will be judged by Diablo Magazine President Barney Fonzi, Aziza SF Creative Beverage Director Megan Abrams, and Bull Valley Road House Beverage Director and General Manager Mourad Tamir Ben Shalom.

The competition this year has been co-chaired by Denise Nomura, president of Lamorinda Arts Council and co-curator of the Art Gallery at Wilder and Samantha Spector, who owns Saloon Box, a craft cocktail monthly subscription service. Spector's company has made cocktail kits for about five years, and she has been an Art of Mixology judge three times. Saloon Box, a sponsor of this year's events, is making all the kits, with all proceeds going to LAC. The company is also donating the packing supplies and some of the ingredients.

Spector said that the sponsoring spirits that the competitors chose from were Tahoe Blue vodka, El Major tequila, George Terrior gin, St. George Breaking & Entering American whiskey and Banks 5 Island rum. Each finalist's recipe features one of the five spirits.

Spector mentioned that the cocktails can also be prepared with non-alcoholic spirits, such as those by Seedlip.

Nomura says that the mixologist award is coveted among bartenders, who advertise that they are award winners. She also said that sponsors have embraced the event, seeing it as a great activity during these difficult times. The process was very long, starting back in July with applications from bartenders. Spector described it as essentially like planning two events.

The 2020 finalists and their cocktails include Hailey Coder of Bar Cava in Martinez, whose cocktail is called Two Faced and offers the best of both worlds - a refreshing fruity concoction with a kick! This drink features El Mayor Tequila, combined with the contrasting flavors of jalapeno and pineapple, cranberry bitters and lime juice, and rimmed with something a little different on each side.

Ben Dimond (from Bardo Lounge in Oakland) features the cocktail Smog in the Noggin, inspired by the bartender's thousands of interactions with strangers passing through who asked him to surprise them with something special. This drink features St. George Terrior Gin, combined with honey syrup, Meyer lemon shrub, and absinthe, topped off with sparkling soda and herbs.

Brian Gamble, an independent mixologist, offers the cocktail Fall'ifornia Dreamin' which kicks off the season with an autumn flavor bonanza! This drink features St. George Breaking & Entering American Whiskey, combined with St. George Spiced Pear Liqueur, apple cider, rich chocolate bitters, and cozy spices.

Mike Whipple of Canyon Club Brewery in Moraga concocted the Chipotle Bloody Mary, which breaks with tradition and starts your day off with some heat. This drink features Tahoe Blue Vodka, paired with tangy tomato, bright citrus, and smoky chipotle.

Sadé Stamps of Sobre Mesa in Oakland created her cocktail, Betty's 7pm, which captures the essence of cocktail time at the bartender's family celebrations and the merriment that ensued. This drink features Banks 5 Island Rum, paired with Meyer Lemon shrub, pineapple syrup, two different bitters and a pineapple garnish.

Art of Mixology kits are available for shipping or pickup during designated times at sponsor Orinda Theatre Square in front of Starbucks. Kits and will be available until the end October. Each kit, which makes from six to 10 drinks, sells for \$50 each or all five kits can be purchased for \$200. Pickup is free; shipping is an option at \$15 per kit. Pickup will be from 5 to 7 p.m. on Thursdays and from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays.

All details about the event can be found at the Lamorinda Arts Council website: <https://lamorindaarts.org>

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