

BARTENDERS TO WATCH



CELEBRATING EIGHT BARTENDERS AT THE FOREFRONT OF
ESTABLISHING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP BEHIND THE BAR

TEXT BY JACK ROBERTIELLO

PORTRAITS BY ANDREW KIST





Speed Rack founders Ivy Mix (left) and Lynnette Marrero originally met through the organization Ladies United for the Preservation of Endangered Cocktails; the first Speed Rack was staged in 2011. // Above, this year's champion, Haley Traub, works at two cocktail-centric NYC venues, Dutch Kills and Fresh Kills. // Right: 16 finalists competed at Revel Fulton Market. // Below: Ace Hotel Chicago's Waydown bar.

One of the sometimes overlooked but significant changes wrought by the blossoming of Cocktail Culture across the country has been the surge of female bartenders at every level of the business.

It's no longer really a phenomenon as an entire new generation of bartenders, male and female, know no other environment except one where mentors, bosses, brand ambassadors, bar owners, educators and bar stars are as likely to be female as male. Still, given the recent #MeToo spotlight glaring on what many women have endured across industries including the bar and restaurant world, it seemed time to revisit the annual Speed Rack competition to gather our 2018 Bartenders to Watch.

To be sure, we don't celebrate and profile these bartenders because they are women; rather, *Beverage Media* decided that the eight uniquely qualified finalists in the immensely successful annual Speed Rack competition deserved attention because it takes top-class skills to get through the nerve-racking, speed-focused heats to finish in the top eight.

Speed Rack just completed its seventh annual season in the spring, visiting seven cities in heats for the coveted title of Ms. Speed Rack USA. More than 200 women threw down along the way, with

a higher level of scrutiny introduced to narrow down the participants to the last eight standing, wrapping up with finals held in Chicago at Revel Fulton Market. (Space for individual bartender portraits and group cover shot for this issue was graciously provided by the Ace Hotel in Chicago, at their rooftop Waydown Bar.)

Co-founders Lynnette Marrero and Ivy Mix started the Speed Rack challenge in 2011 as a charitable platform for female bartenders, and have since raised more than \$850,000 for breast cancer prevention, treatment and awareness.

"When we had the idea, we wanted this to be a platform for females behind



"IN MANY WAYS, WE'VE ARRIVED. BUT WE CONTINUE TO GROW AND WE DEFINITELY PLAN TO RAISE A LOT MORE MONEY."

— Lynnette Marrero

the bar," says Mix. "It still is, but seven years later, there are so many more women in the world's best bars. There's now a sense of sorority, and celebration that is showcased at our events."

The sense of sisterhood proved so organic and powerful in fact that this year three local hospitality pros organized "Chicago Style," a four-day conference of lectures, panels and workshops surrounding the actual Speed Rack finals. One of the Chicago Style founders, Caitlin Laman, had actually won Speed Rack in 2014 while living in San Francisco.

"In many ways, we've succeeded in our original mission. We've arrived, but we continue to grow and we definitely plan to raise a lot more money," Marrero adds.

Speed Rack's vibe of camaraderie was mentioned often by this year's competitors, with many citing a sense of community that continued long after competing in previous events. Marrero says the relationships among the women have developed over time as they share ideas and career advice. Some of this year's contestants even cite the competition videos as career inspiration, which also has helped make the event more competitive, entertaining and widely-supported. ■



JULIA GORDON

CITY: CHICAGO, IL

BAR: LOST LAKE

Unlike many of this year's bartenders to watch, Julia Gordon had an inkling she'd ultimately be involved in food and beverage one way or another: "My educational background is primarily focused in the anthropology of food—its influence and importance to human civilization. All I have ever really wanted to do is eat everything, so it makes sense that I started making cocktails to accompany that!" In fact, she'd love to be hosting a food travel show on the Discovery Channel.

That interest in food and drink as cultural phenomena translates to her spirit choices as well. "I really love clairin, a sugarcane distillate from Haiti, and mezcal,

an agave distillate from Mexico, because they are both produced in such unique ways that are still so deeply rooted in the history and culture of the people that consume them."

The Midwest regional wild card entrant makes a point important to many of the Speed Rack women this year: "One significant movement in our industry that I'm really excited about is bars switching to be more conscientious about the waste they produce, like composting, recycled garnish, and using paper straws (or none at all)."

As for the Speed Rack competition, she believes the camaraderie that develops between the women that compete has had a major impact on the industry and



the participants. "Women bond not only with their peers that season, but also with former participants who offer their advice and precious free time to help train anyone looking for help," notes Gordon.

And the advice and help she offers novice bartenders reflects that: "Wear sensible shoes! Drink lots of water! Don't go out to a late bar after closing—go to sleep!"

HALEY TRAUB

CITY: NEW YORK CITY

BAR: DUTCH KILLS AND FRESH KILLS



This year's U.S Speed Rack champion, New York's Hayley Traub, has seen her career take off rather quickly. Originally moving to the big city to study drama, like many actors she found the hospitality business offered a way to survive. "Though I had some initial success in the acting world," she recalls, "I quickly realized that bartending afforded me a different creative outlet that brought me so much more joy and satisfaction."

Her command of cocktail knowledge helped her enormously in the Speed Rack competition, she says: "I come from a bar family that focuses on Prohibition-era classic cocktails and modern variations on them."

Like many younger bartenders, she strives to find a work/life balance. "Mental health is extremely important to me as well and something that often

gets overlooked in the service industry. I used to be ashamed to talk about the mental health issues I've struggled with for years, but it's now a dialogue I openly engage in," she notes.

Traub, who works at two of the better-known cocktail-centric bars in NYC, says pushing to learn when entering the bar world is crucial today: "Go to that tasting that's happening earlier than you'd like to start your day. Attend the event where you're not going to know anyone. Sit at that new bar you've been hearing about by yourself. Don't let the fear of feeling slightly uncomfortable keep you from taking advantage of the multitudes of learning opportunities."

Animal welfare is a passion, and the Minnesota native has a secret professional yen: "There are these places back in the Midwest called pizza farms where they make pizzas for guests using whatever ingredients were ready to harvest that day, and I would love to create a similar concept for cocktails. In fact, if any pizza farms back there are looking for a cocktail program..."

"DON'T LET THE FEAR OF FEELING SLIGHTLY UNCOMFORTABLE KEEP YOU FROM LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES."

JESSI WEINSTEIN

CITY: WASHINGTON, DC

BARS: HANK'S OYSTER BAR ON THE WHARF AND HANK'S COCKTAIL BAR

Jessi Weinstein, when asked about how she stays fit, healthy and sane, replies with a classic bartender retort: "I'm pickled from the inside."

That kind of acerbic wit is an under-appreciated attribute for many young bartenders, but Weinstein, a self-described art school chick, says she's definitely "the weird kid; my senior year self portrait was a lifesize rag doll. I brought her all over the place and took pictures with her. Eventually, I moved to DC to be young, dumb and with a boy. I started studying psychology. Regardless of what I was studying, I wanted to talk about and further understand humanism."

"YOU EITHER BLEED HOSPITALITY OR YOU DON'T."

She loves the challenge of Speed Rack: "It's really special to see how much you can do when you challenge yourself and others around you to be their strongest, smartest, most strategic, fastest selves."

As for issues of sexual harassment, Weinstein says, "Unfortunately, sexual harassment is something most of us have dealt with. Over the years my approach has changed. When I was younger, I allowed certain things, making excuses for coworkers' or operators' behavior, but now as an operator I vow to never turn a blind eye, to always confront disparity and give all resources I have to ending unsafe work and life environments."

But no matter how open the business is to women now, she reminds young



entrants that a proper service mentality is essential: "You either bleed hospitality or you don't, and I really care, regardless of if you want a beer and a shot or a Ramos Gin Fizz."

Cooking and eating her way through Peru is a dream, but meanwhile she consoles herself with her favorite tipples: a citrusy gin Martini or Death's Door Gin on the rocks; "The second one on dirty rocks will change your life!"

ARAYA ANDERSON

CITY: SAN FRANCISCO, CA

BARS: RYE AND HORSEFEATHER

San Francisco-based Araya (Raven) Anderson loves wine so much, it was once her shooter of choice.

Making wine, in fact, is still her dream job: "Working in a vineyard, owning a vineyard, working with my hands to create something magical and delicious. I also really like the idea of working towards something that's not really necessary for the world to survive, but that still brings people together. I've always said if had to drink one thing for the rest of my life, I could easily give up everything for wine. It's so mysterious and complex. It's versatile, it pairs amazingly with food. And it tastes so good!"

As a student at UC-Berkeley, Anderson chose to study sociology for its versatility, although in hindsight, "the



versatility is both a blessing and a curse because it didn't help narrow down career ideas very much. I always joke that bartending is a pretty appropriate

use of my degree, since I'm forever observing how people behave out in the real world."

She believes acting on issues of sexual harassment in a systematic way is crucial today. "We run a program at my bar called 'Ask Angela,'" she explains. "We've mounted posters in the restrooms encouraging women (or anyone really) to approach any bartender if they are feeling under threat and ask for 'Angela.' Our staff is trained to know that means the individual needs help getting out of the bar discreetly and safely and we are there to aid in that process. My mom's name also happens to be Angela so I love that it feels like my mom is out there helping women everywhere to be safe."

If Anderson weren't bartending (or making wine) today, she'd likely be working on a Master's in psychology to become a therapist: "Which is funny since most people joke that talking to your bartender is like the cheap form of therapy. But I've always enjoyed helping people and I really value the emotional connection between individuals."

BARTENDERS TO WATCH



KAYLA HASBROOK

CITY: NEW YORK CITY

BAR: SCAMPI

Former psychology and communications major Kayla Hasbrook always knew she liked learning about different personalities and what makes people tick, which fits her life now: “I still get to use a lot of that training behind the bar, but it was the combination of hospitality and creativity that I found in bartending that really made me fall in love.”

But she’s ever mindful of the pitfalls this sort of career presents. “Bartending is extremely demanding both physically and mentally. In order to be successful in this line of work I have made self-care a priority,” says Hasbrook. “I hit the gym three or four days a week with friends, which makes me accountable in the morning and less likely imbibe post-shift, and I practice yoga or run on my ‘off’ days. At my best I eat mostly a plant-based diet, but I have a huge sweet tooth which I give in to all the time. It’s about balance, right?”

Also important is the company a young bartender keeps, she says:

“START PAYING ATTENTION TO HOW EVERYTHING TASTES. WATCH GRANDMA COOK.”

“Surround yourself with strong women you look up to—women who will not only challenge you to work hard and be better professionally, but who can be a sounding board and a haven for courageousness.”

She advises novice bartenders to range beyond drink in training their palates: “Start paying attention to how everything tastes. Watch grandma cook.”

Lately, aperitivo and lower alcohol drinks are starting to develop a bigger following, Hasbrook notes. “It looks like Americans are starting to realize that drinking culture doesn’t have to mean getting super drunk. You can also see it in the increased popularity of things like session beers and availability of delicious vermouths, Sherry and amari.” She’s also seeing the return of frozen drinks—“And no one is upset!”

MADELYN KAY

CITY: CHICAGO, IL

BAR: BEATNIK

Madelyn Kay, though based in Chicago, won the Southeast regionals, and she saw an entirely different sort of bar in her future when at college. “I have a degree in political communication from the University of Texas because I used to want to be a lawyer, much against the advice of every lawyer I know. I’m happy I finally listened and chose my passion instead.”

Kay, like most other women, has some thoughts for younger bartenders about harassment. “I’ve dealt with my experiences by sharing them with others. It can be uncomfortable and sometimes scary, but telling your truth and allowing yourself to be vulnerable is an important part of the path to acceptance and healing,” says Kay. “Don’t ever let anyone make you feel like they are more important or powerful than

you, or that they can offer you something if you either give in to their unwanted advances or stay silent about them.”

She notes that sometimes younger bartenders hit the party-hearty route and cautions that their time will come: “Don’t make fun of your older friends for getting hangovers. Karma is real, and girl, those hangovers are coming for you.”

To avoid that fate and to stay fit she hits the gym, does yoga and tries to eat well, “But I also enjoy going out for drinks and eating freshly made pasta. It’s all about balance. A lot of it revolves around making intentional choices to take care of yourself and being comfortable with saying no when you need to,” she adds.

Among current bar trends, Kay cites the return of the Scotch Highball and an overall focus on health, wellness and promoting a work-life balance as important today.

If she weren’t tending bar, Kay has some wanderlust ideas: “I would love to be a travel blogger and photographer. I want to see and experience every part of the world, and getting paid to do it under my own creative direction would be the ultimate dream.”



KATIE RENSHAW

CITY: CHICAGO, IL

BAR: DRUMBAR

Katie Renshaw meandered her way along, as many do, before heading behind the bar a couple of years ago: “Before I was a bartender, I was a web developer, a coder. Before that, I was a musical theatre actress. However, I had always been interested in flavors and all things culinary, starting with my watching *Top Chef*, no less. Where I was from, that kind of food didn’t exist.”

She started teaching herself to cook when young, and had considered dropping out of theatre school in favor of culinary school. “Near the end of college, I became a huge cocktail and spirits nerd,” she recalls. “When I grew tired of constantly auditioning and being told “No,” I went to a one-year program



where I learned to code and got an apprenticeship right out of the program that led to a job. I did that for a couple years but I was creatively starving, and my love for cocktails and spirits was growing every day.”

Once insecure about her inexperience, she hesitated to become a bartender before making the plunge. “I wish I had spent less time doubting myself! I feel so incredibly lucky to have had the opportunity to do the things I have in such a short amount of time,” notes Renshaw.

Juggling two types of jobs (she reps a brand as well) means creating a life/work balance is important: “I try my best to get enough sleep, drink enough water, and do yoga when I can. I also try to be adamant about my schedule at the bar, and how many shifts I can realistically handle and stay healthy and rested.”

Her favorite part about Speed Rack is the camaraderie with the other women: “The Speed Rack finalists become this amazing support group throughout the trials of the competition; not only do you get to meet kick-ass women from around the country, but we all become part of this family that constantly lifts each other up.”

CHELSEA DeMARK

CITY: WASHINGTON, DC

BAR: HANK’S OYSTER BAR

Like Weinstein, Chelsea DeMark slings drinks at Hank’s Oyster Bar, albeit this one on DC’s Capitol Hill. The Mid-Atlantic winner of the Speed Rack regionals puts the value of the competition in perspective. “As bartenders we’re never done learning, and I know there is so much to glean from the amazing humans that participate in Speed Rack,” says DeMark. “The fact that everyone keeps an open mind and doesn’t hesitate to share their experiences and knowledge shows a real evolution of female competition. Women can be so aggressively competitive, so it’s nice to see the support even though we’re up against one another.”

Like so many other young bartenders, making drinks for a living wasn’t an early goal. “I studied math and philosophy and then realized I had no idea what I

“WORK FOR PEOPLE WHO RESPECT YOU, AND WHOM YOU RESPECT.”

wanted to do with my expensive degree,” she recall. “All I knew is that the things that made me happiest were using my creative talents and having meaningful conversations.”

If she had known what lay ahead, she would advise her younger self: “Be smart but unassuming. Explore your palate,

learn to describe it. Work for people who respect you, and whom you respect.”

She’d love to move to Paris to become a craft cocktail bartender at a chic discotheque “and eat fromage for my breakfast by the Eiffel Tower every morning,” but less poetic possibilities include event-planning, “or perhaps a botanist; plants are interesting.”

Her drinks? “Tequilas in the summer, whiskies in the winter. Their versatility for use with seasonal ingredients speaks to me.” ■

