

Arizona Cocktail Week 2014 Ups the Ante for Culinary Events in Metro Phoenix

If you chose to devote your time to Beer Week events this past weekend rather than taking advantage of the impressive lineup of seminars and mixers put on by Cocktail Week, you messed up and we're sorry.

There are several days left before Cocktail Week comes to a close, so you still have time to right your wrongs, but last weekend's events, mostly held at [Hotel Valley Ho](#), were an exciting mix of informative, passionate, historical, fun, and delicious that pretty much knocked our socks off.

Dale Degroff talked bitters, nine different mezcals were sampled, the tiki bar made its comeback, and then the nation's top bars put out some great cocktails -- although our two favorites actually came from Phoenix-area mixologists.

So we'll be honest. Before Sunday, mezcal wasn't high on our list of cocktail obsessions. After one sip of **La Vida Buena cocktail**, handed out upon entering the mezcal seminar, that all changed. The Negroni-like cocktail of mezcal, Campari, Aperol, and bitters had unique smoked and herbal flavors that were immediately addicting.

Sip after sip of different mezcal samples soon revealed the agave-based spirit to be something we never really thought we'd call liquor -- sexy. One standout mezcal (it's actually a sotol, but we won't get into the difference right now) that we recommend you try immediately is the **Ocho Cientos Sotol Blanco**. The name alludes to the fact that mezcal distillates have been discovered dating back to 800 AD, though recent excavations may prove that mezcal variations distilled by Native Americans were the first spirit.



Heather Hoch

The roasted flavor, rich history, and labor-intensive handmade distillation in Mexico makes mezcal a fascinating topic, especially when explored by experts like **Steve Olson** and **Charles Simmons**. That's exactly where Arizona Cocktail Week succeeds. Every seminar is an in-depth

look into up-and-coming trends in the cocktail world, as discussed by industry veterans and trailblazers. It's almost like school -- but with way more drinking.

One seminar-goer said that he learned more in Dale Degroff's bitters seminar earlier that day than he had in his decades of bartending. We certainly found a new love in mezcal to say the least, and we expect the spirit will blow up in mixology bars soon.



Heather Hoch

A crash course in mezcal tasting was led by Steve Olson.

Another trend of Cocktail Week that we expect to see in local bars soon is the resurgence of the tiki bar. **Martin Cate** of San Francisco's **Smuggler's Cove** led the audience through a trip from rum's history in navy punches to Prohibition-era Havana cocktails to the very birth of tiki bars, which was in California. The best part of the presentation for any escapist imbiber had to be the outstanding tropical cocktails, which featured a Sundowner with Galliano and Bols, a spiced **Jamaican planter's punch**, and a take on a scorpion bowl with edible flowers.

Cate explained that tiki cocktails were all but pretty much destroyed with artificial ingredients and a lack of knowledge of their real recipes, but the tasty drinks in their original form are making a comeback. The "mystery, danger, intrigue, and escapism" of tiki drinks in presentation, flavor, and name is an "affordable luxury" in a time of economic hardship when folks can't just jet off to Hawaii, as was the case in the 1930s when the first tiki bar opened. It makes sense now why cocktail enthusiasts are turning to \$10 to \$12 drinks to get away again, plus the kitschy midcentury décor definitely is entertaining.

After one more seminar about Japanese whisky, Cocktail Week-ers got dolled up for the Top Bars of the Nation event at [Crudo](#). With the main dining room lined with pop-up bars from across the country, we got the unique experience of nationally barhopping without walking more than 10 feet. Though we assumed New York's **Employees Only** would win us over, it was actually [Jade Bar](#) and [Mix Up Bar](#) that crafted our favorite drinks of the event.

Mix Up's briny and in-your-face **Stuck in a Pickle** drink is great for people like us, who tend to down pickle juice. But if that's not your thing, you're in luck because it isn't actually made with pickle juice. Jade Bar's **Aquatiki** was a subtly spicy multi-dimensional drink that just danced on your tongue with Asian flavors, Aquavit, and **Aviation Gin**. Crudo's foggy punch bowl drink called the Smoke on the Water of Life also deserves honorable mention for its throwback concept with modern flavors.

Arizona Cocktail Week's lineup of exciting competitions, insightful seminars, and decadent cocktail and dinner parties definitely won us over this year. Each event we attended had a little something for everyone, whether they were already a liquor expert or completely new to the world of craft cocktails. With drinks as plentiful as they were delicious, it's probably good news for our livers that Arizona Cocktail Week only comes around once per year, but we can't wait to see what's in store for the event in 2015.