

SHANGHAI SURPRISES

The Evolution
of the World's Most
Exciting Cocktail Scene

Eastern refinement and innovation meets solid Western marketing and showmanship in China's design and culinary capital.



The Pudong-Shanghai skyline mirrors the adventurous, future-forward spirit of the cocktail scene. Photo courtesy of Elyse Glickman

By Elyse Glickman

Like a well-crafted cocktail menu, Shanghai's appeal as a destination lies in its balancing international sophistication with its colorful history. The first thing you see when you enter the city limits is the Pudong section's skyline, which evokes Disney's Tomorrowland – and is even grander than Walt himself could have dreamed it.

As you drink in the rest of Shanghai, you start to taste the other components: the refined European influences of The Bund and the former French Concession neighborhoods, the influx of varied expat populations, and the spice and smoke of neighborhoods rooted in the customs and traditions of mainland Chinese groups.

Is it any surprise, then, that the cocktail scene is both heavily influenced by the West but also unmistakably Asian in its execution?

In recent times (particularly over the past five years), Shanghai's beverage programs have shifted from a "me too" business model, imitating trends from elsewhere, to taking spirits and recipes from everywhere and merging them with local elements to make them as distinctively "Shanghai" as their now-iconic skyline (which itself has only taken shape in the last decade!). Furthermore, as the bartenders and managers perfect individual recipes and overall menus, there's also a forward vision that incorporates social media, apps and iPads.

"Because China is such a huge country, there will be many different and unusual things you can use to create cocktails," observes Yao Lu, a Texas native who owns and operates award-winning Union Trading Company. "There's always been an interesting, established eating/drinking culture in China that, combined with a new openness for new things from the West, has inspired a variety of ideas. Chinese people have been traveling more, seeing more, and bartenders are absorbing what they learn when they travel. When they come home, they combine it with things they like that they've grown up with."

Pascal Ballot, Director of Marketing at Three on The Bund (a former early 20th century insurance company building repurposed into a multi-story restaurant and bar wonderland), observes that the client base of Shanghai's fine dining scene is also compelling. He points out that increased numbers of Chinese-born, educated professionals as well as the large



Tianzifang, inside The French Concession, draws a young, fashionable crowd who are "in the know" about cocktail trends. Photo courtesy of Elyse Glickman

"Second Generation" (20- and 30-something Chinese heirs with money to spend and people to impress) have driven bar programs from expat-focused to locally-focused. While classic cocktail recipes abound, they get new twists. The bartenders are also big into developing original creations as dramatic as Pudong's skyscrapers.

An A-BUND-ance of Inspiration

"The scene is so exciting because everything is fresh in Shanghai, and not just the ingredients," Pascal continues, as we sip drinks on the rooftop patio of POP American Brasserie, the venue's American pop-culture inspired bar. Just six stories below us, literally millions of people fill up every spare inch of The Bund's promenade to celebrate Golden Week, China's equivalent to America's July 4th holidays.

"Everything is 10 or 15 years old, and that brings a new energy to the way people approach their work," Ballot continues. "This means we will have chefs and mixologists who have traveled the world but have their roots here. They look at what the foreigners are doing and learn from them. However, once they master a technique or recipe, they will take it in a whole new direction."

Ballot points out that international influences continue to pour in from Americans, Europeans, Japanese

and others opening businesses to tap into the young Chinese generation's thirst for new flavors. However, it does not diffuse local chefs' and bartenders' enthusiasm for local ingredients. This culinary culture, in fact, is propelled by change and increased diversity. Internationally renowned chefs – like New York's Jean Georges, whose restaurants anchor Three on the Bund, and Paul Pairet, whose Ultraviolet and Mr. & Mrs. Bund restaurants are on many global top restaurant lists – have created something new by incorporating French techniques with locally sourced ingredients. The bar programs follow suit, with remarkable flair and consistency, on every floor of Three on the Bund (with the exception of the property's serene art gallery floor), no matter what genre of cuisine takes shape in the kitchen.

Chi-Q's Korean menu, dominated by a light palate, dovetails into subtle but complex drinks incorporating soju and Korean whiskey. Mercado's Italian foods and



Top: The splashy interior of POP American Brasserie.

Far Left: POP's coconutty and decadent signature cocktail.

Left: Soju-based Passion Sour cocktail at Chi-Q.

Photos courtesy of Elyse Glickman



Above: A Negroni at Mercado's Italian.
Right: The interior of Unico.



cocktails are bold and flavorful, and yet they balance out the bitter flavors of Italian liqueurs with bright, citrusy fruits and floral hints.

The most ambitious destination for cocktails at Three on the Bund, however, is Unico. While its interpretations of Latin American food by two-Michelin Star Chef Mauro Colagreco are clean and vibrant, the cocktail program takes center stage ... or two, to be exact. There's a cocktail lab open until 10:30 p.m. with what Executive Chef Franck Salati describes as

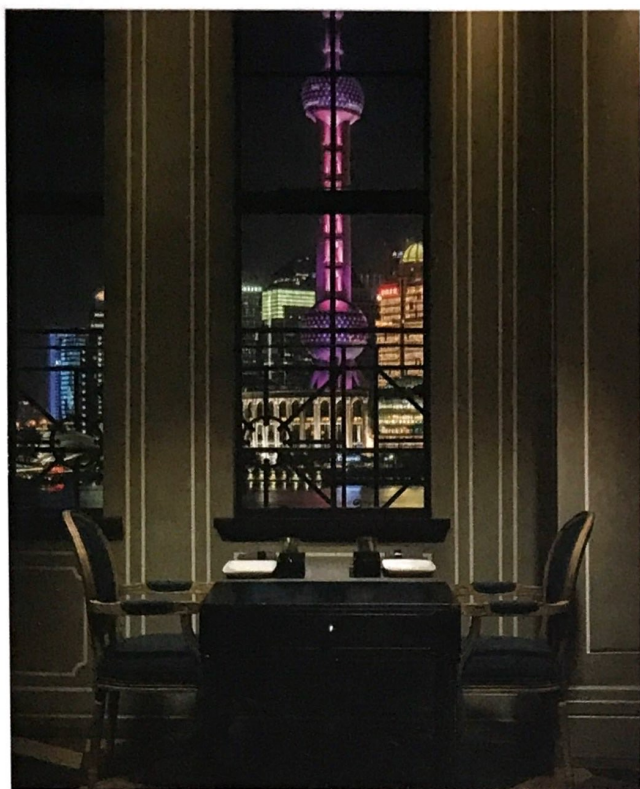
"high concept culinary cocktails." However, he bristles when I innocently drop the term "molecular." "It's experimental, and culinary in its focus," he corrects, with a broad smile. "I worked for the most avant-garde chef in the world and was his right arm for seven years, and I can tell you from experience that 'molecular' does not exist. We need to stress this for the simple reason that when you're cooking, and you're mixing different things, it's 'molecular' by its very nature, with chemical, textural and other things changing shape, form and flavor. Chemical reactions are just a part of cooking and not a marketing gimmick."

Unico's main bar, meanwhile, operates for the entirety of the restaurant's hours and heats up when its late night live music gets cranking. That crew, under the current leadership of Chilean Guilherme Valdivieso-Jimenez, puts together drinks designed for high volume crowds that still manage to have that "craft cocktail" sensibility. They even have mini-coffee table books that add artistic mystique to the process of picking a cocktail. The general restaurant menus are housed in vintage record covers and feature "records" with food and drink specials, which can readily be switched out.



Left: Unico Mixologist Guilherme Valdivieso-Jimenez serving a Negroni cocktail.

Photos courtesy of Elyse Glickman



Above:
A view of Shanghai
from a table at
Mr. & Mrs. Bund.

Left:
Mr. & Mrs. Bund's
Pimm's Cup.

*Photos courtesy
of Mr. & Mrs. Bund*

Over at Mr. & Mrs. Bund, the drink list is as much a culinary-driven experience as the food menu, with options that let the customer in on the mixology fun. Drinks are not only split up by spirits category (Vodka, Gin, Rum, Tequila, Whiskey), but also by different brands and levels of quality of each spirit at different price points. In some cases, you can even interchange one spirit for another.

Five Senses ... and Then Some

The bar programs throughout the Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group adhere faithfully to their Hong Kong roots, and the bartenders at the original Mandarin Oriental flagship and neighboring Landmark Mandarin Oriental are internationally recognized in many competitions and trade events. However, the Mandarin Oriental Pudong-Shanghai's Qi Bar has its own brand of flair and innovation, with American Martin Kovar anchoring the program there. Tony Chen, Assistant Lounge Manager, delights in infusing his own life experience and reverence for teas and herbs into his recipes and presentation, to end up with something that will genuinely surprise and delight locals as well as expats and business travelers.



Top: The interior of the Qi Bar inside the
Mandarin Oriental Pudong.

Bottom: Qi Bar Terrace

Photos courtesy of the Mandarin Oriental



Above: Life cocktail by Tony Chen of Qi Bar.
Photo courtesy of Elyse Glickman

"The flavor is not classical even if the idea came from the West," Tony says, as he describes his latest cocktail, Life, which is modeled after a Cosmopolitan. The wash of bitter, sweet, salty and smoky flavors indeed lets you know he's traveling into undiscovered territory and this is not the Cosmo you remember from college. His subtle Tea Mojito, meanwhile, is beautifully presented in a traditional Chinese tea service format, and perfectly reconciles the Latin sensibility of the drink's origins with Chinese ingredients.

"First, I learned how to balance cocktails in Amsterdam at Ketel One, and then I found ways to integrate Eastern palates with Western styles," he continues. "My experience in Amsterdam was not so much to learn the recipes, but to learn how to balance cocktails between the spirits and the other ingredients. It was also critical to learn the importance of intuiting what the guests will want based on their food and wine preferences. It is important to ask guests about their preferences in food and drink; it's important to pay attention to what they order. The ingredients in different dishes will inform the kinds of cocktails I will recommend for the guests. Sometimes, if customers express an interest in one cocktail they drink all the time but I see them ordering a different mix of things at dinner, this presents me with the opportunity to convince them to try something new that will make the overall experience even more balanced."

The Peninsula Shanghai's cocktail program, even with the hotel's international "Grand Hotel" spirit and staff, is keenly attuned to the tastes of the local Shanghai-ese, which favors those with a sweet tooth. Keeping locals coming into Sir Elly's and the rooftop

bar is important, especially with this property being a favorite among high-worth executives, according to Jonas Zehnder, who has come from Lucerne, Switzerland to assume the Beverage Director position.

"While the modern cocktail is Western in origin, we follow those techniques and we add a local aspect to it, including locally grown fruits, spice and herbs," says Zehnder.

Vantage Point of The Peninsula
Shanghai – The rooftop bar at the
Peninsula Shanghai, Sir Elly's.
Photo courtesy of The Peninsula





*The lobby of the Peninsula Shanghai.
Photo courtesy of The Peninsula*

"Shanghai is in a particularly advantageous location for this, so we're working with a lot of locally and house-made products, from fresh juices, syrups made in-house, nectars, purees and infusions using herbs, to spices like star anise. In terms of following trends, we do that, but we do it using all the local influences as well.

Zehnder, who draws professional inspiration from local bars, acknowledges that he has changed as much as the local customers he hopes to bring in. "I myself was not a cocktail drinker – more interested in beer and wine than spirits," the Lucerne native admits. "By seeing how independent bars in Shanghai have improved their cocktail programs, I have come to be more adventurous. These days, I can walk into a cocktail bar not yet sure if I will have a cocktail or a glass of wine, whereas a few years ago I assumed most cocktails would be badly done, so why bother? People are getting away from this 'go with what you know' mindset."

■ The American Way

The French Concession neighborhood is also the professional home to American entrepreneurs Kelley Lee and Yao Lu, who have found inspired ways to introduce Chinese customers to the U.S.'s diverse culinary flavors, while keeping expats and visitors buzzing with their original cocktail creations and selections of craft beers.

Los Angeles native Lee now owns Liquid Laundry, Cantina Agave and Boxing Cat Brewery, all successful, decidedly American restaurant concepts. While they draw a good number of expat regulars, homesick for their stateside favorites, she takes pride in the fact that she's expanding the flavor vocabularies of the locals.

"I came to Shanghai to open a restaurant because I felt that everything had been done in America already," she says. "When I graduated from culinary school, based on the competition in the States, I figured it would take me less time to save up the money to open up a restaurant there."

That was 11 years ago, and as Lee's reputation grew, starting with Alchemist Cocktail Kitchen, so did Shanghai's cocktail universe. She recalls that as recently as 2009, most of the mixology action was confined to the hotel bars. Most bars were, up until then, focused on Whiskey and Japanese cocktails. Getting the craft cocktail scene percolating at Alchemist and elsewhere was an international group effort. However, once the effort sparked, the Shanghai scene caught fire.



*A Blasting Fuse cocktail from Liquid Laundry.
Photo courtesy of Liquid Laundry*

"We brought in a well-known bartender from Australia, and he did a fantastic job creating imaginative cocktails that opened up people's minds as to what could be done." She went on to say, "In the years since, we've seen an explosion of creativity, with (bartenders and chefs) creating their own infusions, bitters, fogs and all that stuff. A lot of this (success) has to do with the mindset of the people here. The pulse of the city and its modern outlook have attracted people from all over the world to open bars. People who live here, meanwhile, want to see new ingredients, new things being done, new flavors and textures and putting things together."

While Lee observes Gin is the spirit of the moment in Shanghai, many categories are represented. However, she does lament that certain spirits, like Tequila and Mescal, have a ways to go before catching on, especially



A wildly original and seasonal cocktail from The Union Trading Company. Photo courtesy of Elyse Glickman

since the distribution channels are more limited than in the States. However, Lu embraces this as another excuse to innovate and push the Shanghai scene forward. He got his start at Houston's renowned bar, Anvil. He then got to Shanghai through Marriott Group to spearhead their beverage program. After a stint as a brand ambassador for a major spirit company, he was tapped by Lee to



An attractive cocktail being prepped by Yao Lu at The Union Trading Company. Photo courtesy of Elyse Glickman

join her team of mixologists. He has since propelled his success into The Union Trading Company, which looks like your unprepossessing New England pub but features an expansive cocktail menu that is the stuff of international cocktail conference buzz.

"At the time I arrived, the craft cocktail thing was really coming to life, as it did in the States 10 years earlier," Lu notes. "It was a period of time during the energy crisis in the U.S., which led to people to caring about what they were eating and where the ingredients came from. The next natural step is caring about what you drink, which launched the cocktail revival in the U.S. Five or six years ago, the Chinese began to ask the same questions American asked in the years before. While all this is going on, the mainstream media had been picking up on bartenders as individuals, so I felt it was a good opportunity to come to the motherland and be a part of the exciting things going on."

Just as Lee gave him a platform to show off his skills, Lu is now paying it forward with his Union Trading Company staff, getting them involved in adding new things to the menu every season. "It helps them

develop their confidence and connect with customers in meaningful way. In the past, and also in Chinese clubs, you have head bartenders and everybody else below him. I never liked that system, so what's important to me is empowering my staff and giving them a sense of ownership within what they do in the crafting of the menu. It pushes them to create and come up with drinks, which makes them feel like a part of the business and, in turn, creates conversation with the customers."

The Right Connections

While the Chinese government restricts access to popular sites like Google, Facebook and Twitter, the smartphone app WeChat has not only connected trend-conscious young people, but also holds the potential to help bars and restaurants market their menus and scene to users more effectively. "WeChat brings together elements of Twitter, Facebook and Instagram," explains Ballot. "Users can scan the QR code to pull up our menus, access the photos and see what we are doing in our restaurants. People can not only decide what they will possibly want to order ahead of time, but can also instantaneously share what they enjoyed with their friends, who may be considering coming to our restaurants. We are always trying to be ahead of the curve in terms of technology and connecting with our customers, and WeChat (has) become the biggest and most effective way for us to communicate with our customers."

WeChat evolved over a two-year period from a relatively simple chat app to a multilevel platform that holds a lot of promise for marketers on a global scale. By releasing its APIs to third party developers, including Shanghai's bars and lounges, WeChat also spawned an entire universe of integrated apps ranging from those providing information on menu items or products on the bar, to booking tables and creating word of mouth for new promotions and loyalty programs. WeChat also helps the Three on the Bund's restaurants

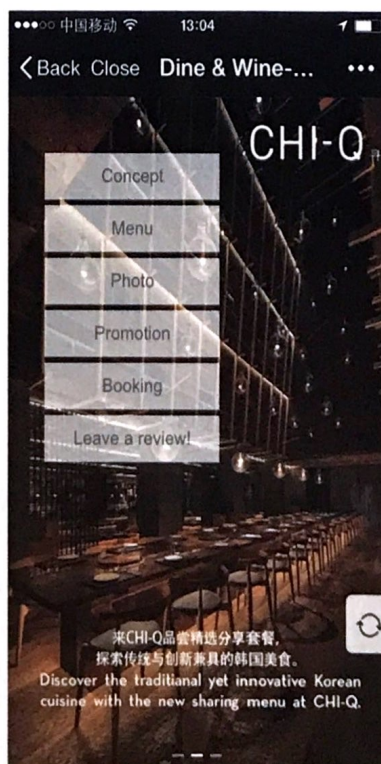
and other establishments collect information, opinions and comments from customers, to stay up on the trends.

With distribution of different wines and spirits from overseas being a constant concern, Mr. & Mrs. Bund used an iPad-based digital menu solution to keep their inventory up to date for the staff and the customers. While the iPad menu adds an interactive component for the consumers, it also provides the staff a way to regularly keep tabs on what's available. Additionally, it can be changed at a moment's notice. This is important when you're dealing with 32 wines by-the-glass and selections from around the globe that pair with Paul Pairet's abundance of a la carte items and degustation menus. On a more practical level, it saves a lot of paper, ink and time.

"It's hard to define what makes a cocktail or a bar uniquely 'Shanghai,' but I would say it is definitely an interesting cocktail culture, especially as people literally go out seven nights a week," sums up Kelley Lee. "This is in sharp contrast to many U.S. cities. I notice when I go back to Los Angeles, the scene is comparatively sedate and many don't go out on 'school nights.'"

Indeed, from the looks of things, Shanghai's nightlife is a constant flow of education – for bartenders, owners and customers alike.

Photos courtesy of Elyse Glickman



A screen shot of WeChat mobile app.



The iPad wine list at Mr. & Mrs. Bund.