



# bar business

March 2022

barblzmag.com

## EXPECTING AN *Experience*

— *Plus* —  
TALKING WITH  
DALE DEGROFF

## RETHINK & RENEW

HOW BARS ARE COPING  
IN UNCERTAIN TIMES.

## TRENDING NOW

WHAT'S POPULAR  
IN COCKTAILS.

*Bars meet the demand  
for a memorable experience  
alongside cocktails.*



# FROM THE EDITOR



**People are looking  
for experiences,  
especially [when]  
we're emerging in  
an unfamiliar post-  
COVID world.**



*- Manny Nieves, Corporate  
Beverage Manager,  
Pacifica Hotels*

**"T**hey're baaaaack!"

And no, we're not talking poltergeists. After a year, Bar Business Media is bringing back its magazine, and we're super excited to once again be providing content in this format. You'll recognize many of the same reader-favorite departments as well as some features that provide a deep dive into industry issues.

While we're not invoking any ghostly creatures, the opening line of this column could refer to a variety of other scary impediments bars have been haunted by over the last few years.

Take the labor shortage. The Great Resignation has seen workers leaving our industry in droves and owners scrambling to fill positions. On page 11, we provide you with some tips for recruiting and retaining workers in these difficult times.

In *Behind the Bar* on page 21, the bar owners and bartenders we interviewed also recommend some strategies for being more efficient with fewer workers behind the bar with the help of techniques like batching.

And in our lead feature on page 12, "Re-Think, Re-Organize, Renew," Contributor Elyse Glickman talks with bar owners and staff about the ways they are combating the labor shortage.

In that feature, Glickman also discusses strategies to banish other spectral entities plaguing bars like inflation, COVID-19 cases, and supply chain issues.

But it's not all doom and gloom. In the

era of the Experience Economy, where consumers deal in the currency of memories and experiences, bars are providing a much-needed escape from the day-to-day doldrums.

"People are looking for experiences, especially [when] we're emerging in an unfamiliar post-COVID world," said Manny Nieves, Pacifica Hotels' Corporate Beverage Manager, in our feature "Are You Experiential?" on page 15. "Everyone wants to bank in memories, laughter, and connection."

Providing a place to connect is what bars have always been in the business of, and we need that now more than ever. Read this month's feature to see some of the ways bars are providing escapism and a unique experience guests can't get anywhere else.

We look forward to continuing to provide you with top-notch content on the bar industry that you can't find anywhere else. You can expect quarterly issues from us in June, September, and November of this year.

In between issues, be sure to visit **[barbizmag.com](http://barbizmag.com)** for daily industry updates and online-exclusive features and interviews. 🍹



*Ashley Bray*  
ASHLEY BRAY, Editor



# RE-THINK, RE-ORGANIZE, *Renew*

**A**s we tiptoe toward the morning after the pandemic, bar/restaurant owners and managers now face additional challenges.

Safety is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg, and they now need to rethink their course to avoid hitting it.

"Covid can't be predicted, and human behavior, which impacts the restaurant and bar labor/guest pool, can be just as fickle," says Colin Geoffroy of G Hospitality, a hospitality management and development company with venues in the greater Boston/Metro Providence area. Amid this storm of activity and uncertainty, Geoffroy believes that COVID simply exacerbated these issues. Even as new practices are taught to employees, rules are being accepted by many loyal customers, and his team has become more cohesive, the way back is unclear and something he and his employees strategize about daily.

He is hardly alone.

Ivan Vasquez, owner of Madre Oaxacan Restaurant & Mezcaleria in Los Angeles, agrees, and says that in the last two years, inflation, compliance with local ordinances, and economic issues like minimum wage increases as well as extra expenses on PPE, propane, and outdoor dining equipment, have all added further strain. The recent spike in Omicron cases made consumers feel insecure and unsafe, tempering enthusiasm for going out. "All we can do is hope for better sales and Covid cases to go down," he says. "We will keep focusing on service and food so we can continue doing what we know how to do: run restaurants and bars."

While frustration is understandable on both sides of the bar, the good news is that swift and smart rethinking on the part of a bar/restaurant's leaders can ensure customers' and workers' spirits can make a

comeback, even in the face of intense economic and social change in the U.S.

"We have been trying to climb a slippery hill with buckets of water being dumped on us for the last two years," says New York City-based Consultant Christopher Bidmead, whose Bar Methods handles everything from programming nightclubs facing constant supply chain issues to smaller bars and restaurants struggling to find qualified employees.

"As a consultant and educator in the bar industry for the last 15 years, this is the hardest we've been hit since Prohibition," says Bidmead. "This is something plaguing several programs I'm working with now, and I find myself having to reengineer our beverage program to be able to operate with one or two leaders simplifying the execution side of things so that I can work with less skilled labor and work to educate them as we evolve the program."

## (SHELF) LIFE SUPPORT

Bidmead's recent consulting experience underscores the reality that supply chain glitches can be a particularly thorny problem in some areas.

"We have been putting a lot of time into modifying the menu and overall programming," says Bidmead. "We don't want to depart from what we are offering guests, but we also want to make sure they are getting a quality experience. The focus has been on simplifying the execution of the cocktails taking advantage of batching, bottled and draft cocktails, and other prep techniques and products. This gives us the opportunity to run service with fewer staff members and train up new staff."

Barry Prescott, general manager at The Landsby Hotel in Solvang, California, says some managers don't possess enough knowledge on costs of wine and spirits to make calculated managerial decisions, and

## HOW SOME ESTABLISHMENTS ARE COPING IN UNCERTAIN TIMES.

that most bars should pivot by, "revising cocktail-making and teaching standards and putting the right-priced spirits into those cocktails to keep production cost-effective and prices down."

"I think that the world is getting back to normal, but as new variants emerge, the uncertainty continues to grow," says James Flanigan, CFO of Old School Hospitality (including Quarterdeck Restaurants, nautical-themed sports bars around South Florida). He points out that his venues' management decided to remove lobster from the menus entirely because it became prohibitively expensive to sell. He had to make similar adjustments to their drink menus as well as leverage supplier relationships to ensure things came in a little more quickly and frequently.

On the other hand, bars in some regions, like those operated by Geoffroy's company, have rolled with the supply chain punches, underscoring the importance of continuous education and conversation in anticipating what adjustments will be needed, finding good substitute products, and educating staff. "While there have been slight differences in product availability, the situation posed nothing significant enough to impede our business," says Geoffroy. "We are grateful to have healthy lines of communication within our restaurants to make effective change less challenging."

To deal with supply chain issues affecting Nella Kitchen & Bar at the Fess Parker Wine Country Inn in Los Olivos, California, Bartender Chris Hewes has looked to local wine and spirits producers as well as farmers to fill in some of the gaps. Benefits of this strategy include giving staff practice on introducing customers to new products, helping to support regional businesses, and a more sustainable approach resulting in a smaller

carbon footprint.

"There will be times when I order thousands of dollars in wine and alcohol, and then, when I receive the order, there's only one case of something because everything else is out of stock," he says. "I have leveraged this situation to encourage the staff to apply their customer service skills by encouraging customers to try other comparable varietal wines, spirits, or cocktails with slightly different combinations of ingredients with a unique local spin."

## "TEAM BUILDING" HAS NEW MEANING

Of course, you need to have all hands on deck to have those conversations and recalibrate. Just ask Old School Hospitality's Flanigan, who argues his

biggest challenges at press time were related to labor shortages as well as inflationary pressures from both the supply chain and the labor force.

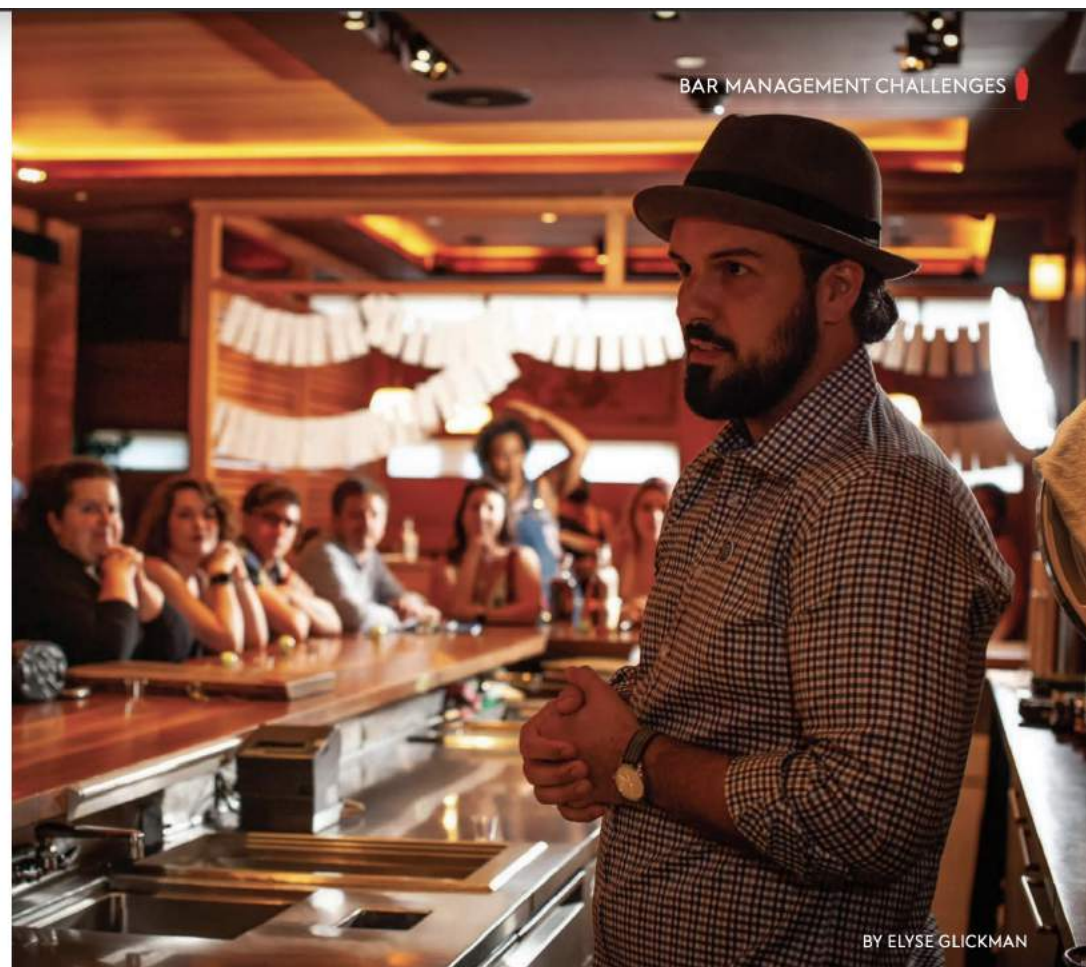
"It is very difficult to find qualified people," agrees The Landsby Hotel's Prescott. "I believe many senior bartenders, and staff in general, retired when the pandemic started. Many of them never rejoined the workforce. There are some qualified bartenders to hire, but unfortunately, they are looking for the highest hourly wage, have very little loyalty, and jump ship as soon as someone offers them a dollar more."

Prescott recently started hiring younger, less experienced people who are willing to learn. While he notes that it is hard on

payroll at the present, it will be a good investment in the future.

"We're basically looking for that kind of all-around [employee]; somebody who will be able to bartend or take on managerial tasks in a pinch but also can be a food runner or wash dishes if needed," says Hewes of Nella Kitchen & Bar. "In this situation, super versatile people are learning first-hand how to run a restaurant from back [of the house] to front. Once an employee masters certain tasks in the kitchen, opportunities open up for him or her to jump up to higher positions with greater responsibility. There are people who, with fair pay, will be willing to work that much harder if they can earn valuable work experience as well as money."

Photo: Anthony Nader, 52 Chiefs.



BY ELYSE GLICKMAN





Despite the challenges of COVID, the labor shortage, and supply chain issues, swift and smart rethinking on the part of bar management has led to a comeback even in the face of intense economic and social change in the U.S.

Hewes adds that this allows him to tap into employees' strengths and function more effectively as a team. For example, there may be an employee who really knows Pinot Noir but not the computer system, while another employee may be good with the computer but not selling wine. "This dynamic creates a better support system for all of the employees when they can help each other with different skills."

Bidmead, in his consultation work for bars in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Yonkers, reports having a similar experience over the past two years with people leaving the industry, moving away, no longer working at multiple venues, or having overall health and safety concerns.

"The days of simply interviewing an applicant are over," agrees Vasquez. "The labor pool is shrinking exponentially because people seem to be using this time to explore new avenues of employment. We've been working hard at adjusting our recruitment and employee retention efforts to position ourselves as a premier employer."

On the positive side, Vasquez notes existing teams at his Madre restaurants are very cohesive and working extremely hard to keep everything on the menu and to open on time. They are also taking longer shifts to cover sick people and fill the staffing voids, while Madre is working breaks into each employee's schedule.

"Our management team has become very strong and reliable," says Vazquez. "Tighter, more streamlined communication and arming our staff with the tools to properly perform their jobs are paramount to our continued success. We've always been nimble and creative problem solvers. However, COVID has pushed our team exponentially in this area, and we are much better for it."

#### NATIONALLY GEOGRAPHIC

"While bars and restaurants, by nature, are in the business of managing, identifying, and exceeding customer expectations, one of the biggest and most recent challenges is doing so in the context of COVID-19," says Robert Castellon, general manager for KOJO, a modern Asian concept in downtown Sarasota run by Hi Hospitality Group. He says his restaurants' challenges are rooted in the transient nature of hospitality in places like Florida, where tourists' notions of having a good time during COVID clashes with that of locals.

"We are looking at this in the same way we would any other challenge we have faced or will face. We ask ourselves three golden questions when making decisions: Does this do right by our staff? Does this do right by our guests? Does this do right for the company?" says Castellon. "Most times, we will find a solution that checks all boxes."

Every once in a while, that decision will still rub a small percentage of our guests the wrong way, at which point our hospitality instincts kick in and we do our best to meet this particular guest's expectations."

In contrast to the hospitality landscape in Florida, Geoffroy says that in the greater Boston/Metro Providence area, most businesses, including hospitality, share a concerted focus on mitigating the risk of COVID spread, even if this region has its fair share of tourists from elsewhere.

"Part of this may be a result of being in an area with many major hospitals and universities devoted to medicine and science," he says. "We're in a much colder environment, so cold and flu season is making people much more cautious."

"After nearly two years of repeat outbreak waves and ever-changing regulations, I would be lying if I said I wasn't waiting for the next shoe to drop," admits Bidwell, back in New York City. "Unfortunately, I think we are still years away from COVID no longer being in our daily lexicon and returning to some version of normal staffing and business. New talent may take more time to gain the experience a seasoned bartender has, especially with the modified service that we are running. However, I think the solutions that we have found are [opening up] more opportunities to be a stronger industry on the other side of this."

Photos (clockwise from left): Bill Burkhardt for Nello Kitchen & Bar; The Landis; Jakob Layman for Madre.



## Are You EXPERIENTIAL?

BY ELYSE GLICKMAN

WITH GUESTS LOOKING FOR MORE INCENTIVE TO GO OUT, IT'S TIME TO OFFER A FULL-ON SENSORY EXPERIENCE.

Will the '20s of this century be as roaring as that of the previous one? The simple answer is that it depends on how quickly bars, lounges, and restaurants with bar programs can adapt and shift their paradigms.

For the first two decades of the 21st Century, the bar scene was steered by a "build it, and they will come" philosophy and a solid formula: Take a spirits or

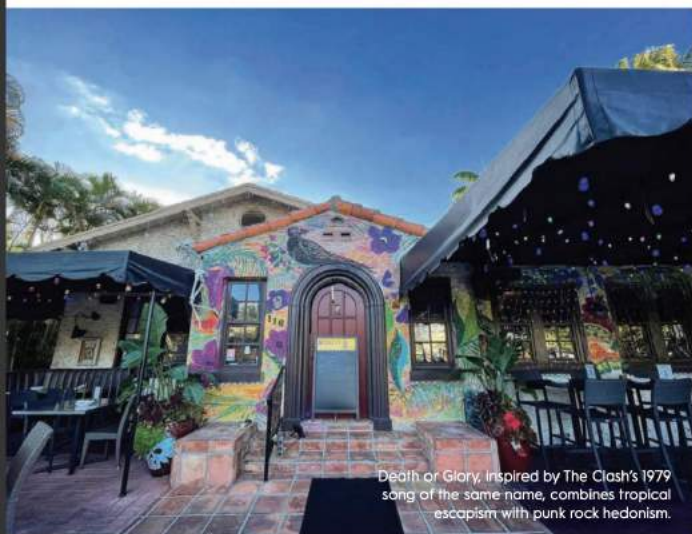
bartending trend, have your bartenders master the skills and recipes, decorate accordingly, and open the floodgates. "Mixology" became an exciting buzzword, and the increasing use of social media added voltage to the electrical charge that powered word of mouth to spread and new customers to come and join the fun.

Some bar owners and managers, however, decided to build their bars into a full-on, immersive adventure that transports guests to a completely different

world. While you can still find bars in most major U.S. cities rendered in time-tested themes using curated decor (Tiki, Prohibition speakeasies, English and Irish Pubs), theme bars getting attention beyond their respective cities transcend the nostalgia wave and tap into a variety of special interests, pop cultural phenomena, and even the interesting lives of some owners through attention to detail.

High-profile bars established as bona fide escapist destinations rather than





Death or Glory, inspired by The Clash's 1979 song of the same name, combines tropical escapism with punk rock hedonism.

neighborhood watering holes include The Lovecraft (Portland) and Donny Dirk's Zombie Den (Minneapolis), focused on horror movies and Halloween-all-year themes; Gotham City Lounge (NYC) and Villains Wicked Heroes (Atlanta), celebrating comic book culture; spy-themed Safe House (Milwaukee); film noir-inspired Noir Lounge (San Francisco); and journalism-themed Local Edition (San Francisco).

"People are looking for experiences, especially [when] we're emerging in an unfamiliar post-COVID world," notes Manny Nieves, Pacifica Hotels' Corporate Beverage Manager, regarding Lilly Rose inside the Wayfarer Hotel in Downtown Los Angeles.

Nieves describes Lilly Rose as a "whimsical and wonderful basement parlor where the bizarre meets the beautiful." Even with its "Alice in Wonderland" flavor, it is still adaptable for different events to keep customers coming in regularly. "Everyone wants to bank in memories, laughter, and connection, which is exactly what we aim to provide at Lilly Rose—and with a drink in their hand," says Nieves.

#### DRINKING IN THE AMBIENCE

The Chicago Magic Lounge is devised as

an experience with surprises around every corner. Guests enter through a laundry room and emerge into an Art Deco-style lounge—a mysterious, magical setting that is both retro and fashionable. The requisite attention to detail can be found in the lush 1930s interior design and electro-swing ambient music as well as the pre-Prohibition inspired cocktails with names like "Sleight of Hand" and "How Houdini Died." A mini-stage is built into the bar where close-up magic is performed every night.

"As a theater and speakeasy lounge dedicated to the history and experience of close-up Chicago-style magic (also known as bar magic), we specifically wanted to center the guests and make them the hero in the story of their visit," says Chicago Magic Lounge Marketing Director Cynthia Ferkol. "The discovery of the speakeasy entrance, the optical illusion floor in the bar bathroom, a library full of magic ephemera, and their participation in the magic make for very Instagram/TikTok-able moments where every customer is the star. Our concept is deeply rooted in magic history."

Another bar deeply rooted in history is New Orleans' Arnaud's French 75 Bar. The bar starts with speakeasy decor as its thematic foundation, but Head Bartender

Christoph Dornemann notes what makes this spot a destination bar is its mix of French and Big Easy sensibilities. However, as time has progressed, management found it needed to keep the concept relevant by staging special events that complement the identity of the bar, such as a James Bond-themed martini happy hour, a *Thin Man* (1930's detective film series) party, and tropical cocktail hour.

"The identity of our bar was originally built on early 1900's escapism," says Dornemann. "While the bar itself is historic, the decorations and design were changed over time to further immerse the guests in 1920s Parisian safari aesthetic. While this setting was put in place more than 20 years ago, we continue to build on the experience with classic cocktail offerings, modern classic interpretations, and elaborately garnished tropical cocktails. We also offer cocktail specials that celebrate local and national holidays."

Cocktail bars celebrating past decades have also proven popular. Although the '90s and '00s fashion aesthetic and nostalgia are poised to return to the pop culture universe, the '70s and '80s nostalgia is alive and well at establishments like JoJo's Beloved in Atlanta, The Smoking Gun in San Diego, Fable Bar in Nashville, Death & Glory in Delray Beach, and Rosemallows Bar in Long Beach.

All of these bars have each found a unique way to allow Gen-X customers and others enamored with the era to escape to that simpler time, or as Fable Bar Co-Owner Erick Erickson explains it, "When arcade games, bell bottom jeans, and viewfinders were all the rage."

Design elements like a bright green bar and retro-orange-and-yellow-striped walls that pop out as soon as you enter help to evoke the bygone era. Cocktail recipes also call back to a time when the Long Island iced tea, amaretto sour, espresso martini, and anything with blue curacao was at its peak.

However, as the drink recipes need to be translated for modern palates, Erickson (and other bar owners and managers interviewed for this story) says this is accomplished by swapping out old, artificially sweetened ingredients and well spirits with fresh ingredients and higher-end spirits. Erickson says his bartenders have found ways to make the cocktails

fresh, exciting, and almost unrecognizable except for presentation. Guests even have a unique way to view the menu—through old-school red viewfinders.

Other Fable bestsellers are themed, including The Golden Girls, made with Wild Turkey Rye, vanilla, honey, lemon and black walnut bitters; and The Karate Kid, with Suntory Whiskey Toki, blood orange amaro, and pecan bitters.

At Rosemallows Bar, guests can expect a, "tropical/Tiki '80s themed bar with some Miami Vice vibes and a hidden Tiki bar in the back," says Owner Jimmy Han.

"The '80s theme brings a lot of the fun neon and tropical design elements to compliment our fruit-forward cocktail and Tiki program," says Han. "Aside from the rad drinks, I think the greater appeal to the '80s is a throwback to the nightlife back in the day before technology ruled our lives. No cell phones, no constant internet and social media, no distractions, and only partying with the people in front of you."

Death or Glory, inspired by The Clash's 1979 song of the same name, was devised as a bar where tropical escapism meets punk rock hedonism.

"Escapism was alive and well in the '80s (many thanks to Jimmy Buffet), and tropical drinks were all the craze," says Bar Manager + Lead Bartender Kristen

Shaneyfelt. "As a bar specializing in tropical drinks and thriving in creativity, we're constantly looking for ways to take popular drinks from the past and put our own quirky, contemporary spin on them."

Meanwhile, Chris Reece, owner of The Pike Restaurant & Bar in Long Beach and former drummer of Social Distortion, dug into his life experience as a musician during the '80s and beyond to shape the guest experience at his bar. "The pandemic made people realize how much they enjoy live music because they had to do without it," he says. "To add that extra edge, however, we are constantly adding rare and unusual items to our decor to make us unique and harder to imitate. People appreciate interesting decor more than ever, as bland corporate restaurants are becoming more common."

#### MAINTAINING THE EXPERIENCE

Despite COVID-19, labor shortages, and supply chain issues, owners and management are making sure that any changes or adjustments they make don't greatly alter the guest experience.

For example, although drink and food prices continue to rise, the managers and owners maintain the value proposition for theme bars has always rested in quality over quantity. This goes for not only cocktails,

but also the small details and interesting, conversation-starting surroundings that add up to a great escape customers will want to return to regularly.

Ferkol says that in spite of COVID-19 forcing certain changes to live entertainment, the Chicago Magic Lounge's clientele has been supportive and enthusiastic since it reopened in August 2020. "We believe that interactive live experiences that encourage socialization are the future of bar entertainment," she says.

During Chicago Magic Lounge's closure at the height of the pandemic, the management added new elements to the lounge's collection of magic ephemera. It also installed ionizers in the air conditioning to purify the air and implemented a vaccine-only policy for all guests. Staff members check for proof of vaccination at the door, and the bar requires all staff and magicians to be fully vaccinated and boosted. Stage magicians need to wear masks when not performing.

Lilly Rose also made adjustments to keep the "wonderland" safe without compromising the theme. "We have taken standards for cleanliness very seriously and regularly enforce our hygiene and daily cleaning and disinfection procedures for the bar," says Nieves. 🍹

Photos: (left) Death or Glory, (right) James Murphy Trainman Photography for Chicago Magic Lounge.



The Chicago Magic Lounge is a theater and speakeasy lounge dedicated to the history and experience of close-up Chicago-style magic.