

Acts Of Service

At The Cottonmouth Club in Houston, Michael Neff wants to brighten your day

Michael Neff was fresh out of the Navy and looking to start the next chapter of his life when bartending piqued his interest. He was living in Seattle at the time and a bartender he knew was kind enough to show him the ropes and also pointed him in the direction of a bar that was hiring. “The first time I walked behind that bar was the first time I had been behind any bar,” Neff says. “From that moment, though, it felt like the perfect place for me—it was clear that the best way to do the job was to show people the best time possible. That hooked me more than anything else, and keeps me in the business still, 22 years later.”

Now with an impressive resume of bartending stints in major cities across the country, Neff lives in Houston, where he co-owns and runs the beverage program at The Cottonmouth Club, which opened in April 2018. “We honor classic cocktails while adding simple, house-made components to put our own stamp on them,” Neff says. “It was important to me that the drinks were accessible enough for the general public to enjoy them without



Drawing on two decades of experience, Michael Neff (pictured) of The Cottonmouth Club in Houston makes bespoke cocktails for his customers.

feeling judged, but forward-thinking enough to engage the imagination of the cocktail set.” The menu showcases all types of flavors and cocktail styles, from the lighter side with Neff’s Terminally Pretty (\$10), comprising marigold tea-infused Macchu Pisco, fresh lemon juice, and a house-made pineapple-pink peppercorn gomme syrup, to his bolder Long Lost Pal (\$14), featuring an equal-parts blend of Jack Daniel’s Rye and Shackleton blended malt Scotch, Dolin Dry vermouth, St. George Bruto Americano aperitif, and simple syrup.

Neff adds that while he doesn’t have any one defining style as a bartender, he’s known for his “bespoke” cocktails—those that are custom-made for people individually. “It requires a strong foundation in flavor, a thorough understanding of the structure of a cocktail, and the ability to drill into people’s thoughts so you can make something that will have a big impact,” he says. “I often say that curiosity and compassion are the two hallmarks of a great bartender.”

mw
Sally Kral

PHOTOS BY (TOP) WEI ZHENG; (BOTTOM RIGHT) QUY TRAN

Michael Neff’s Recipes



Terminally Pretty

INGREDIENTS:

2 ounces marigold tea-infused Macchu Pisco¹;
 ¾ ounce fresh lemon juice;
 ¾ ounce pineapple-pink peppercorn gomme syrup²;
 Pineapple wedge cut to look like a parrot.

RECIPE:

In an ice-filled cocktail shaker, combine Pisco, lemon juice, and syrup. Shake hard and strain into a coupe glass. Garnish with a pineapple parrot.



Long Lost Pal

INGREDIENTS:

1 ounce Jack Daniel’s Rye
 1 ounce Shackleton blended malt Scotch
 ¾ ounce Dolin Dry vermouth;
 ¾ ounce St. George Bruto Americano aperitif;
 Dash simple syrup;
 Lemon peel;
 Cherry.

RECIPE:

In an ice-filled mixing glass, combine whiskies, vermouth, aperitif, and syrup. Stir until very cold, then strain into a coupe glass. Express a lemon peel atop the drink, then discard. Garnish with a skewered cherry.

¹ Steep two marigold tea bags in a 750-ml. bottle of Pisco at room temperature for an hour, then strain.

² Combine 1 quart water with 1 quart sugar in a pot over medium heat. Stir until sugar dissolves, then reduce heat to a simmer. Peel and cut half a pineapple into small chunks. Lightly crack 2 tablespoons pink peppercorns with the back of a wooden spoon or a mortar and pestle, making sure not to completely crush them. Add pineapple and peppercorns to sugared water. Simmer for 10 minutes, then turn off heat and cover. Let steep for at least 3 hours and up to 5 hours. Separately, heat ¼ cup water to a near-boil, then slowly stir in 4 tablespoons gum arabic powder. Stir together until the powder is integrated, which will take some time, then let sit until the other mixture is done steeping. After the first mixture had steeped, strain out the solids and add in the gum arabic mixture, plus 2 ounces vodka (any brand) to preserve. Let cool, then store in the fridge for up to one week.