

Passion Meets Practice

At Gunshow in Atlanta, cocktail director Mercedes O'Brien shows off her culinary skills

Mercedes O'Brien always wanted to be a chef. "I spent my formative years pinning over cooking shows, writing down recipes and techniques," she says. O'Brien worked various restaurant gigs while in college, but changed career plans when she discovered cocktails. "It was lucky that my coming-of-legal-drinking age coincided with the cocktail scene resurgence in Atlanta," she says, recalling early experiences at some of the area's top cocktail bars. Local mixologist Jerry Slater put her behind the bar at his now-closed venue H. Harper Station. "On my first day, he sent me home with Dale DeGroff's *The Craft of the Cocktail*," she says, joking that she studied that book more than her college reading materials.

In her current role as cocktail director at Gunshow—owned by local celebrity chef Kevin Gillespie and heralded as one of Atlanta's best restaurants—O'Brien's dual passions are on display. "My cocktail style is food-focused—the ingredients and techniques found in our



Mercedes O'Brien, cocktail director at Atlanta restaurant Gunshow, cites creativity and teamwork as key components of the venue's success.

kitchen play a major role in the way I develop drinks," she says (cocktails are \$11-\$14; punch bowls are \$35). Her Avocado Margarita (\$12) is an example, as it blends Arette Blanco Tequila, lime juice, Cocchi Americano aperitif, Ancho Reyes Verde poblano chile liqueur, house-made papalo-tomatillo syrup, and fresh avocado. Her Toasted Old Fashioned (\$11)—served tableside from a bar cart—mixes Old Forester Bourbon, house-made burnt sugar syrup, Fee Brothers Old Fashioned Aromatic bitters, and a blend of Fee Brothers West Indian Orange bitters and Regans' No. 6 Orange bitters. The drink is garnished with a sugared cinnamon stick that's been drizzled with Hamilton 151 Demerara Overproof rum and lit aflame.

"My philosophy is to be as creative as you are humble," O'Brien says. "Don't let limitations or pride get in the way of trying something new, and reach out to those around you for help," O'Brien says.

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Sally Kral

PHOTO BY (TOP) MELISSA HOUSTON

Mercedes O'Brien's Recipes



Toasted Old Fashioned

INGREDIENTS:

- 2 ounces Old Forester Bourbon;
- 3 controlled top dashes of Fee Brothers Old Fashioned Aromatic bitters;
- ¼ ounce burnt sugar syrup¹;
- 4 controlled top dashes of orange bitters blend²;
- Drizzle Hamilton 151 Demerara Overproof rum;
- Sugared cinnamon stick³;
- Orange peel.

RECIPE:

In a rocks glass, combine Bourbon, syrup, and bitters. Add ice and stir until slight sheen coats outside of glass. Place the sugared cinnamon stick across one edge of the glass, drizzle with rum, and light on fire. Express the orange peel over the flame and cook until sugars bubble. Blow out the flame and nudge the cinnamon stick into the glass using the orange peel. Wipe the orange oils on the rim of the glass and place perpendicular to the cinnamon stick.



Avocado Margarita

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 ounce Arette Blanco Tequila;
- ¾ ounce Cocchi Americano aperitif;
- ½ ounce Ancho Reyes Verde poblano chile liqueur;
- ¾ ounce papalo-tomatillo syrup⁴;
- 1 ounce lime juice;
- ¼ of an avocado;
- 1½ cups ice;
- Lime wheel;
- Mint bouquet.

RECIPE:

In a blender, combine Tequila, aperitif, liqueur, syrup, lime juice, avocado, and ice. Blend until smooth, then pour into a salt-rimmed large rocks glass and garnish with a lime wheel and mint bouquet.

¹Cook 8 cups sugar in a pot over medium-high heat until a dark liquid consistency is achieved. Take off heat and let cool for 10 minutes. Slowly add 4 cups of water until well-incorporated. Put back on heat and cook until well-integrated and rich. Let cool.

²Combine 2 bottles Fee Brothers West Indian Orange bitters and 1 bottle Regans' No. 6 Orange bitters.

³Add cinnamon sticks to bowl and lightly coat with Bourbon. Layer a cookie sheet with sugar and place the damp cinnamon sticks on top, gently burying them. Cover with another layer of sugar and let sit overnight in a cool, dry place.

⁴In a blender, combine 1 quart tomatillo juice, 20 grams papalo leaves, and ¼ teaspoon ascorbic acid. Pulse until papalo is well-integrated. Fine-mesh strain and combine with equal parts sugar.