

# Self-Taught Star

The Madera Group's Charity Johnston is proof that hard work pays off

At 19, Charity Johnston was working the 4 A.M. front desk shift at a Los Angeles gym, hoping to make a living as an actor. One of the gym's members, Matt Erickson, appreciated how chipper she always was, even at that early hour. He was senior vice president of restaurant operations for the hospitality group SBE at the time, and he invited Johnston to interview at SBE's Hollywood restaurant Katsuya. She agreed and was hired as a hostess.

When she turned 21, Johnston asked her bosses if she could be promoted to bartender. "They looked at me like I was insane—I didn't even know what a Gin and Tonic was," she says. "But they took a chance on me." She learned quickly and discovered a love for mixing flavors and experimenting with ingredients from the kitchen.

Johnston went on to work at various other Los Angeles venues, but her break came in 2016 when she was made bar manager at Innovative Dining Group's Roku restaurant and created her first cocktail menu. It was then, at the age of 27, that she earned a spot on Zagat's 30 Under 30 list. Simultaneously,



Self-taught Charity Johnston, beverage director for The Madera Group, has achieved major success, earning a spot on Zagat's 30 Under 30 list in 2016.

she appeared as the mixologist on celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay's television show "The F Word" and as bartending expert on "Bar Rescue." Johnston's growing notoriety caught the eye of Tosh Berman, co-founder and CEO of The Madera Group, and in 2018 he hired her as beverage director, charged with bar menu creation and training for the group's Tocaya Organica and Toca Madera Mexican restaurants.

Tocaya is a fast-casual concept with locations in Southern California and Scottsdale, Arizona. The menu focuses on simple and fresh Margarita-style drinks in the \$5-\$7 range, such as Johnston's Tamarind Margarita (\$7; recipe below).

West Hollywood's Toca Madera is where refined craft cocktails (\$15-\$42)

shine, such as Johnston's Alma de Sol (\$17), featuring the venue's own private-barrel Avi6n Reposado Tequila, chile de 6rbol- and turmeric-infused St-Germain liqueur, Zucca Rabarbaro amaro, passion fruit pur6e, lemon juice, Azu6ia Organic agave syrup, and a Benzinger Merlot float. "My bartending style is truly my own because I'm self-taught," Johnston says. **mw**

Sally Kral

PHOTO BY (TOP) EMILYNNROSE

## Charity Johnston's Recipes



### TAMARIND MARGARITA

#### INGREDIENTS:

1½ ounces Azu6ia Blanco Tequila;  
1 ounce Liquid Alchemist Tamarindo syrup;  
¾ ounce lime juice;  
1 thyme sprig, plus more for garnish;  
Edible thyme flower.

#### RECIPE:

Express one thyme sprig and place in a cocktail shaker. Add Tequila, syrup, juice, and ice. Shake and strain into a bucket glass over fresh ice. Garnish with thyme sprigs and an edible thyme flower.



### ALMA DE SOL

#### INGREDIENTS:

2 ounces Toca Madera Select Barrel Avi6n Reposado Tequila;  
1 ounce chile de 6rbol and turmeric-infused St-Germain liqueur<sup>1</sup>;  
½ ounce Zucca Rabarbaro amaro;  
¾ ounce passion fruit pur6e;  
¾ ounce lemon juice;  
½ ounce Azu6ia organic agave syrup;  
Float Benzinger Merlot;  
Dried edible flower petals.

#### RECIPE:

In an ice-filled cocktail shaker, combine Tequila, amaro, liqueur, pur6e, juice, and agave. Shake and strain into a rocks glass over a large ice cube. Top with Merlot and dried edible flower petals.

<sup>1</sup>For each bottle of St-Germain add 5 dried chiles de 6rbol and 3 bar spoons of powdered turmeric. Let infuse for 24 hours, then strain.