

BarMagic of Las Vegas'  
Amanda Gager.



PHOTOS: SKY CASSIDY/RED DAWN MEDIA

# Social Mixology Is Born in Vegas

Bartenders  
and artisan  
brands gather  
to celebrate  
real cocktails

by Jenny Adams

When one thinks about drinking in America, Las Vegas is a city that pops to mind instantaneously. For true cocktail connoisseurs, however, the city caters too heavily to an imbiber of a different sort, with Vodka Redbull a far more common call than a Cucumber Collins.

"I've been in Las Vegas for nine years now, and it has always struck me as odd that there is so much marquee talent but such a small cocktail culture," says Tobin Ellis. Ellis is the President of BarMagic and a bartender since 1989; he and group of industry insiders are working to widen the city's drinking culture to include something new and noteworthy for fans of the handcrafted cocktail. The lounge at The Artisan is now home to Social Mixology, a weekly, Tuesday night event that celebrates crafted cocktails brought forth by a different artisan brand every month. The first month of Social Mixology was March with Hendrick's Gin.

"We want Las Vegas to have experiences on par with some of the great cities with renowned cocktail scenes like London, Seattle, Sydney, New York and San Francisco," Ellis says. "Social Mixology isn't about my company. We are just facilitating the experience. It is a weekly 'dose of cocktail truth,' and at least one member of my staff goes behind the wood and bartends with the staff at The Artisan and the brand ambassador.

"Guests are presented a range of artisan cocktails around the spirit. We want to build a community, an organically-built group, who can come and get into cocktails. It's very important for us to separate this from being a speakeasy, though. It's sexy, social

and fun—not a pretentious lecture about distillation. We want this to evolve naturally and have a fun sense of soul."

Social Mixology is partnering with the USBG and Wirtz Beverage of Nevada, and on the fourth Tuesday of the month, there is a finale party. The usual free cover also includes food on this night, some complementary cocktails, and clever extras—like a speakeasy room that requires a password to access.

"That night, it was 'Jim has a long mustache,'" laughs Ellis. "Guests walked into a secret room, with Anthony Alba and Alex Velez of the USBG working up molecular cocktails with Grand Marnier dust."

One challenge to Social Mixology will be the group's ability to market it to the right crowd. Fighting against mainstream partakers of Jack & Coke, the pre-mixed frozen drinks crowd and the multi-million dollar budgets of the major casinos is no small task. Hotel marketing, evites to the industry and reviews with *Las Vegas Weekly* have been a means to building a solid reputation thus far.

"In the coming months, we hope to be showcasing Leblon, Milagro, Plymouth, Castries, Domaine de Canton, Yamazaki whisky, Kübler absinthe and other select artisan brands," Ellis says. "I think the biggest immediate goal is to get the word out to the cocktailians and mixologists of the world so they know they have a home when then come to Vegas. Right now we want to build credibility for cocktail culture here. We didn't create it. But it's here, and we want people to celebrate it." ■■



**Tony Abou-Ganim**  
(The Modern Mixologist),  
**Marie Cobin** (Bartender  
at Encore), **Gaston  
Martinez** (Milagro Brand  
Ambassador), **Diego Loret  
De Mola** (President,  
BevMax) and **Michael  
Berkoff** (CEO, BevMax).

# St. Maarten Showdown

A dozen of America's best behind the bar fight for the title of Domaine de Canton Bartender of the Year

by Jenny Adams / photos by Jenn Farrington

From the heavy offshore breeze, guests took in both sight and smell during the Domaine de Canton "Bartender of the Year" finals this March.

"We wanted to have a French tropical theme, something a little West Indies to inspire the mixologists. I don't know about you guys, but I wish this would go on forever," laughed John Cooper, founder of Domaine de Canton. With the help of emcees Tad Carducci and Paul Tanguay of Tippling Bros., the consulting duo hired to devise the entire competition, finals commenced on the island of St. Maarten with a backdrop of sunset-sliced ocean waters and a table laden with the vodka-to-vermouth essentials, as well as items like turbinado sugar, hothouse cucumbers, basil, cilantro, tarragon, allspice, four different raw chili peppers and a plethora of bitters.

The competitors, whom Carducci rightfully labeled "some of the best in America," included John Lermayer and Robert Ortenzio of Miami, Adam Seger and Peter Vestinos of Chicago, Clif Travers and Bob McCoy from Boston, Damon Dyer of New York City, Todd Thrasher of Alexandria, Virginia, Daniel Hyatt and Marcovaldo Dionysos from San Francisco and Alex Velez and Kristen Schaefer of Las Vegas. Each earned a spot behind the stick in St. Maarten after a series of regionals in 2008.

There was a strong wind and nervous energy that night, with no rules or guidelines given until a few moments before the competition began.

"Because we had 12 of the best, we really wanted to push them," says Carducci of this decision. "With most competitions, you get the rules a month in advance. We wanted to put them on the spot and inspire them to make the product sing."

Each competitor was equipped with secret ingredients from home and the incentive of a \$10,000 grand prize. Damon Dyer's station included four homemade simple syrups. Alex Velez employed dried jasmine

## Earth, Wind and Ginger

by John Lermayer, *The Florida Room, Miami*



2 oz. Domaine de Canton  
5 oz. passion fruit juice  
5 one-inch cubes of fresh pineapple  
fresh sage leaves  
Angostura bitters

Muddle the pineapple thoroughly in a mixing glass. Add 5 dashes Angostura bitters, the passion fruit juice, 5 sage leaves and the Domaine de Canton. Shake violently for 15 seconds; strain into a chilled cocktail glass. Garnish with a sage leaf across the middle and 2 dashes of bitters on either side of the sage.

petals, while Kristen Schaefer spritzed hand-crafted falernum and John Lermayer uncapped a jar of pumpkin butter.

The first round whittled the 12 down to six (Lermayer, Thrasher, Hyatt, Seger, Dionysos and Vestinos) and unlike the broad first-round rules requiring Domaine de Canton be the base or co-base spirit, with the use of at least two table ingredients and a theme of tropical sophistication, the second round became particularly strict. For this round, the competitors had to create a libation featuring Domaine de Canton as the sole spirit, bitters and fruits from the table.

The awards dinner at Le Tastevin found John Lermayer of the Florida Room in Miami holding the \$10,000 check and the prestigious title for his cocktail: Earth, Wind and Ginger. ■■



**Domaine de Canton 2009 Bartender of the Year competitors (left to right): Max Bibrac, Todd Thrasher, Peter Vestinos, Adam Seger, Robert Ortenzio, John Lermayer, Alex Velez, Bob McCoy, Kristen Schaefer, Daniel Hyatt, Damon Dyer, Marco Dionysos and Clif Travers.**