

May 6, 2010

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**Greg Boose**

Chicago freelance writer

Posted: May 4, 2010 10:46 AM

## **An Interview With the Tippling Bros., Master Mixologists Behind Chicago's Mercadito and Double A**

Tad Carducci and Paul Tanguay are on a mission to help the world drink better. But before you get all weepy and reach for your checkbook, I should say that this doesn't mean they're trucking barrels of clean water to the far reaches of the Earth or ridding grade school cafeterias of strawberry milk in West Virginia. Better known as the Tippling Bros.--or at least they are in the food and spirits biz--Tad and Paul are master mixologists who leave New York City on occasion to create ridiculously inventive cocktail menus for bars, restaurants and private events around the country. I caught up with Paul and Tad recently at the underground Chicago speakeasy, Double A, where the bar itself sticks out into the middle of the lounge and puts customers a little too close to the bottles of alcohol.

Tad Carducci and Paul Tanguay, the Tippling Bros.

**Greg Boose:** Tad, you've been bartending since the age of 14. When I was 14, I was working on the family farm packing corn into splintered crates. You were making Long Island Ice Teas and watching the tip jar fill up. How did you get so lucky? Or rather, how did you not get arrested and sent to work on my family farm as punishment?

**Tad Carducci:** Ah, yes, the old bartending-since-14 question. I probably should have thought better of ever mentioning this one publicly. Luckily the owner sold his joint years ago, so no chance for implication. I worked for my "uncle," a family friend who owned a catering hall. I was the utility player--busboy, dishwasher, etc.-- an ambitious kid who worked his butt off. One night the service bartender didn't show up, and I was moved up to the Show. I was handed a tattered old cocktail book and was told to keep my mouth shut. I became fast friends with the Manhattan, Stinger and Grasshopper.

By the by, the service bar was located in the back of the kitchen, far away from eyes that might have been curious. As regards the farm, best for all that I was never shipped off. I tended to get myself into situations in my youth. If there were cows involved, I might have become a Tipping Brother well before I became one who tipples.

**GB:** My family farm was all produce, so the only thing you'd be tipping over would be bins of butternut squash or peppers. But let's say that you did make it out to a produce farm knowing what you know now. What vegetables are finding their way into your cocktails lately? And do you have a recipe that could include butternut squash?

**Tad:** You name it, I've tried it. Everything from ramps and fiddleheads to baby purple avocados. Butternut squash is beautiful in late summer and autumn cocktails. I like it with aged rum and tequila.

**GB:** Paul, it sounds like you were a kitchen rat as a kid that forayed into a career in food as an adult. What was the factor that led you to turn your back on gastronomy and decide to move forward with spirits?

**Paul Tanguay:** Well I've never really turned my back on gastronomy or food--it's in the blood. In fact, I think I enjoy food and making food much more now than when I was paid to cook. I believe that being an astute beverage professional, and especially when you are in the restaurant industry, you come to realize that it's really all about great food.

What we do with beverage is elevate the whole "going out" experience for the guest. I think a bar with a good beverage program and awesome food is better than a bar with a great beverage program and bad food.

With that said, I much prefer being on the beverage side. Less cuts and burns on my hands and arms. And who doesn't like being given a boatload of free booze ever year? I'm much cooler at a party now than when I was a cook.

**GB:** I would think that telling people at a party that you were a master mixologist would be like a fortune teller revealing her occupation at a Doomsday Conference. Wouldn't everyone be asking you to make them a drink, and before long you're working more than you're relaxing on a balcony or couch?

**Tad:** Yes, we do tend to find ourselves on "busman's holiday" rather often. I never really mind, as bartending is really my favorite thing to do. Hospitality is hospitality, whether behind a bar or at a house party, and making people happy is what the Tiplers do best. Plus, folks seem to like to challenge us in those situations and will scour the kitchen looking for ingredients with which to stump us. I jumped behind the bar at a party in Aspen once and was immediately tasked with fashioning a drink from dry vermouth, carrots and those sesame-coated, Melba-toasty flat bread crackers. The end result was a tour-de-force, if I do say so myself. Paul usually lets me do it and then takes on the mantle of providing the entertainment. I recall being at a hacienda in the highlands of Jalisco in the wee hours with PT (Paul Tanguay), donning a sombrero and Mexican poncho, performing an interpretive hat dance for 3 or 4 hours straight.

**GB:** Interestingly, I don't think I want to try that tour-de-force. Have you ever come across an ingredient you couldn't make happen? And what's one ingredient that needs to be retired or sent back to the minors for a couple years?

**Tad:** Hmm... things I couldn't make work. Durian! Nasty.

An ingredient that needs to hang it up for awhile? Pomegranate juice could afford to go on hiatus.

**GB:** You guys first met in 2006 as participants of the first ever B.A.R. Course (Beverage Alcohol Resource), the premier spirits & mixology organization in the country, and you both finished at the top of your class. What exactly was this course about and how often were you buzzing during a lecture?

**Paul:** The class was quite rigorous and intense. At the time, the class was four days long (the last day being the test) with several tastings and lectures. A day would consist of approximately 30-60 spirits tasted blind with in-depth lectures beforehand by some of the country's foremost experts in the beverage industry.

Spitting is always recommended in these types of settings; however, some of the spirits we were presented with were rarities, products that you would rarely, if ever, get to taste. So, occasionally, I didn't spit. Might even have helped me with the final. Who knows.

**GB:** Paul, you were the former Corporate Beverage Director for the SUSHISAMBA folks and you were stationed in Chicago from 2004 to 2007. Now that you and Tad are overseeing the drinks at Mercadito and its basement speakeasy, Double A, have you noticed any changes in Chicago's drinking scene? Any trends that are starting or ending here?

**Paul:** If my memory serves me right, we opened the Chicago SUSHISAMBA location in 2004. Back then, my cocktail program was heavily rum and cachaca influenced--mojitos, flavored mojitos, caipirinha and the like. We also had some cool shochu cocktails, but they

never sold because not many people knew what shochu was. However, everyone in Chicago was still into the *Cosmo/Sex in the City* thing and not so much into rum cocktails like NYC was. It's ironic now that we sell more mojitos at Mercadito than some of our specialty tequila drinks. (And I'm quite certain that if we did have shochu cocktails on our menu, they still wouldn't sell.)

It is certain that Chicago has caught on, like the rest of the country, to the whole cocktail craze. But, I cannot say I that I see something truly "Chicago" in the whole movement--like in San Francisco we see the use of organic and fresh produce, homemade syrups, a very Alice Waters approach to cocktail making, while NYC has been very much exploring the Old School, if you will. I guess there's still the huge influence of New York on what is happening Chicago.

What I do see that is different in Chicago than most places is how strong the cocktail community is, how people all know each other and mostly help and support one another. You take for instance the USBG chapter in Chicago--one of the strongest in the nation. They partake in events, go on trips as a group, etc. In NYC, it's hard to get two members in a room together. It's much more, me, myself and my cocktail shakers in NYC.

**GB:** So I take it that the Chicago mixologists don't see you as invading on their turf with Mercadito and Double A. Can one of you explain the concept behind Double A and the location of its bar?

Double A and its inside-out bar.

**Paul:** Exactly, it wasn't so much that we were coming to take over their city, but rather them wanting to come work with us. They wanted to see what the Tippling Bros. were doing. When we first opened in Chicago, many industry people commented on how we had assembled the best bartenders they knew in Chicago.

The idea behind Double A was to build this cozy basement lounge. In our brainstorming sessions, Tad and I had the idea of building a "chefs worktable" for bartenders, thus removing the bar all together (or barrier, if you will) between guests and mixologists. What we ended with was the inside-out bar.

And what we got was a serious case study in sociology. It's quite amusing to see the first-time patron. They're not sure how to proceed or where to order. On the other hand, once they do get it, it does pose some logistical problems for service. In the parlance of our times, some patrons are "all up the bartender's grill." This has led us to closing off an area by the bartenders, thus creating "off limit" areas during our busier times. The good thing about it is that we now have the Super VIP space.

**GB:** Tad, what is Paul's best cocktail?

**Tad:** Paul's big gun is one called the *Chu-cumber*. Divine. While I have gleaned that it contains shochu and cucumber, Paul is a man of intrigue and mystery and has yet to divulge the remaining ingredients. I have wondered about his frequent trips to the mountains of Tibet.

**GB:** Paul, what's the best cocktail Tad has concocted?

**Paul:** You never come across a dud with him. Let me put it this way: I don't really try to work on creating cocktails anymore, not when your business partner is *the* master mixologist. If you can't beat them, they say. I'll only chime in when asked.

After three years of working together, Tad still amazes me with his skills. He's able to create recipes for cocktails, with exact measurements mind you, in his head using the oddest combination of ingredient for can possibly imagine and they taste balanced and flavorful. Maybe this is the reason why he does his best work last minute.

I personally like to be prepared and try have my work done as far ahead as I can. So if we are working on a project that has an extensive cocktail list, I'll pester him for weeks about cocktail recipes. To this day, he's never handed in a single recipe till hours before they are due to a client. I can tell you he definitely was the kid in school who wrote all his papers the night before they were due and still got A's, though he refuses to broach this subject whenever I bring it up.

And don't get me started on his other bartending skills: effortlessly charming and a true master

of hospitality.

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