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Kate Rockwood/Medill Reports

At left, Peek's "Now and Zen" cocktail, made with Zen, a green tea liqueur, and garnished with lemongrass. Spectators sampled competitors' cocktails throughout the day-long competition.

Chicago bartender uses "Zen" to snag first in National Cocktail Competition

by **KATE ROCKWOOD**

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"Shake it baby!" might not be the first phrase that comes to mind when encouraging a coworker, but then you probably aren't a bartender.

As each of five bartenders competing in the National Skyy Spirits World Cocktail Competition stepped behind the bar at ChiBar in Chicago on Saturday, the roar from the small crowd of friends, family and fellow bartenders inevitably included at least one instruction to "shake it!"

Bartenders were quick to comply, raising shakers filled with everything from muddled tangerines to orange bitters to egg whites above their heads. Some shook the drinks with quick, sharp jerks of the elbows, others with a dance-like grace that called to mind the rumba.

Debbi Peek seized the national title, just hours after winning Illinois' first regional competition. She'll compete in the World Cocktail Championship in Taiwan on November 20, against contestants from 54 different countries.

With the U.S. having last captured world laurels in 1967, she'll be looking to quench a forty-year championship drought.

"It's so exciting to be here with all of the people in the guild, who are all my friends," Peek said

The Illinois chapter of the United States Bartenders Guild opened a little more than a year ago and currently has 40 members. Fourteen of its members competed in the regional championship, including John Kinder, who won second place, and Jennifer Contraveos, who won third.

Bridget Albert, a former member of the Las Vegas chapter who once placed second in the world championship, started the Chicago chapter shortly after moving to the city.

"We've come a long way in a year," Albert said, tears in her eyes as she presented Peek with the first place trophy.

"Now and Zen," a deep red cocktail made with Zen, a green tea liqueur, and garnished with lemon grass, is the cocktail that took Peek, a mixologist for acclaimed Chicago chef Rick Tramonto (Avanzare, Pump Room, Charlie Trotter's), to both the regional and the national title.

"I'd used Midori a million times, but I'd never used Zen before," Peek said, speaking of the contest's rules that require they use either Zen Green Tea liqueur or Midori, as well as a base spirit from the Skyy Spirits portfolio.

"I wanted to give myself a challenge so I researched Zen and found out it had lemongrass in it," Peek said. "I decided to stick with that."

But don't think Peek's careful research means she's been practicing the drink for months. Like many of the Chicago bartenders that bellied up to the competitive bar, she'd been toying with an idea for a while but hadn't actually practiced making the drink until the night before.

Contraveos, a mixologist for River North's Graze restaurant, also waited to practice until the last minute.

"To be honest, I first tried making the drink last night," Contraveos said. "I came up with the idea two weeks ago, but I was using a different type of lime. It wasn't bitter enough so last night I switched to key lime." The idea for her drink, she said, came from a fruit-flavored Starbucks frappuccino that she's particularly fond of. She mixed tangelo, oranges and key limes with Aperol and Zen.

For John Kinder, a bartender at De La Costa restaurant in Chicago who placed second in the regional competition, a good drink stems from focus.

"The best creativity comes when you give yourself parameters," said Kinder, who studied music theory composition in college. Building a Japanese drink around the Zen Green Tea Liqueur, Kinder replaced the traditional bar tongs with chopsticks during competition, and used Japanese soda, wine and single-malt whisky. He tied a white headband around his forehead as well.

"The headband relaxed me," Kinder said. "My whole thing is laughter and that helped me not get nervous. I was fine the whole time I was shaking and pouring but then when I had to use the chopsticks to put the garnishes on the drinks, my hands started shaking. It felt like the hardest one thing I could ever hope to do."

Bartenders had just seven minutes to make five cocktails. Drinks were judged based on the appearance, aroma and taste of the drink, while special national awards were given for the best garnish (a hollowed out lemon filled with raspberries, banana and loose-leaf tea, by Gaston Martinez of Las Vegas) and best technique behind the bar (won by New York mixologist Tad Carducci).

"The biggest thing is to have a sense of balance in the flavors," said Sonja Kassebaum, a judge in the national competition. "You want a drink that's interesting and complex and not too sweet."

The United States Bartenders Guild "is really trying to raise the bar of professionalism in the industry, to show that there are bartenders who want to be behind the bar, and who can do more than just pour you red bull and vodka," she said.

While the regional judges had the difficult task of sampling cocktails well before noon, Kassebaum, who owns North Shore Distillery, was careful to drink only water with lunch to cleanse her palette for the afternoon national judging.

Those in the audience, meanwhile, were happy to dip straws into competitors' cocktails that had been set out for spectator consumption following the competitions and by the afternoon's end even those who had not placed were in high spirits.

"It's a good time to be a bartender in Chicago," Albert said.

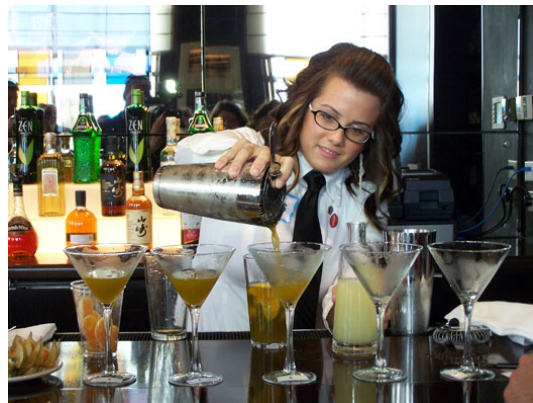
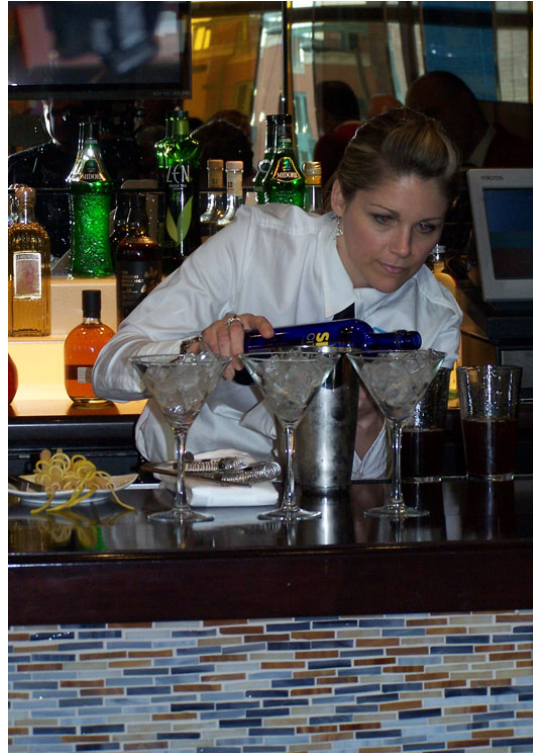


Photo by Kate Rockwood

Jennifer Contraveos, a mixologist at Graze in Chicago, snagged third place in the regional competition with her cocktail based on a tangerine-flavored Starbucks frappuccino.