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Tad went to France, and all we got was a lousy t-shirt

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### Big Fat Raindrops and '95 Chateau du Taillan: A Trip to Bordeaux

by Tad Carducci

This is the winter of my discontent. Well, OK, that's an overstatement. Today, specifically, I am discontented. As I steep in the gloom of a grey and raw January afternoon, I feel cheated. I was promised a snowstorm, and a good one. What I got was rain. Lots and lots of big fat drops of cold-ass rain. Don't get me wrong. I enjoy

a rainy day as much as the next guy, but today I was looking for a little winter wonderland action. At least I've got my fireplace and a big ol' glass of 1995 Chateau du Taillan to assuage my angst.

What was my point with all this? Oh, yes, the rain. Although it seems as far away now as it could possibly be, a month ago to the day, I was in Bordeaux, France, eating, drinking, carousing and shaking up cocktails, and it was raining. A lot. And I didn't mind.

I was one of four bartenders from around the country selected to represent the U. S. at the 25th Annual IBS Marie Brizard International Cocktail Competition. Our contingent was comprised of Mr. Raymond "Ray-Ray" Speight, Miss Debbi "Ingleesh" Peek, Miss Jennifer "Da Dish" Contraveos and me, heretofore respectfully known as "Tadduch". All highly decorated and accomplished mixologists and competitors, we descended upon the French landscape with one common goal in mind: return home victorious! Well, that and to consume as many grams of saturated fat as our bodies would allow, without requiring immediate coronary bypass surgery. Thankfully we were wise enough to counter with copious amounts of Cabernet Franc, to keep the blood lubricated and flowing freely. We were joined by eighty or so of the world's most talented professional mixologists and bartenders. There were teams from Japan, Taiwan, Russia, Sweden Bulgaria, Greece, Brazil, Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Peru, Germany, Ireland, Czech Republic, Norway, the list goes on. There was even a guy from the Maldives, a place I can confidently say I could not hit on a map with an M-16, however, judging by his tan and laid back attitude, a place I would most certainly like to spend some QT.

The smell of blood hung heavy in the air from our first collective meeting. We assembled in the lobby of the very charming Hotel Mercure Cite Mondiale, en route to the first of many lavish dinners. Looking haggard and bleary-eyed from a day's worth of travel, like a convention of so many laughing hyenas, we grouped into our respective packs, licking our chops, sneering and growling, instantly sizing up our field of competition. There were sly grins at every turn, subtle jibes in every



imaginable language, and I'm quite sure the Romanians were speaking in tongues, laying curses on what I believe was the Canadian team. Thankfully, we are a civilized species and know that there is a time and place for everything. Realizing that the time for battle was not yet nigh, we laid down our arms, relaxed our scowls and were swept into the streets of Bordeaux to revel and make merry.

Our hosts, a team of ambassadors from Marie Brizard International, ensured that hospitality ruled the day. Their leader, the inimitable Lucien Dambreville(sp), the quintessence of *bon vivance*, showed this UN of barmen Bordeaux by whirlwind. For four days we were whisked about the city and surrounding hillsides, eating breakfast on a rooftop overlooking the majestic Garonne river, taking a walking tour (in the rain, of course) of the breathtaking city. We passed three hours having lunch in the cellars of a legendary local winery, had a fascinating jaunt to the Brizard distillery, and were treated to sumptuous feasts and tastes of nightlife on the Right Bank.

A note on Bordeaux. It's a truly magical place, steeped in ancient history, dressed in magnificent examples of classical and neo-classical architecture and alive with art, music, culture and passion. The Bordelaise know a thing or two about *joie de vivre*, and it's infectious. Within minutes of being unleashed upon the unwary city, the eighty-five or so globe-trotting adversaries were becoming fast friends, exchanging handshakes and business cards and awkwardly learning to toast in an array of foreign languages. By trip's end, it was hard to remember who was from where, as nationality melted away and camaraderie ruled. Brits shared glasses with Turks. Slavs laughed arm in arm with Swedes. The Canucks loved everybody, quite literally, but that's a different story. And yours truly has open invitations to stay in just about every possible place I could ever imagine wanting to visit. T'was not all fun, games and debauchery, however, lest we forget why we were all there. Back to the wars. Day five, the competition.

The teams awoke to one last river view breakfast, carbo-loading and filling their pockets with potential last minute cocktail ingredients. We received our orders the day before during a classroom session. We were to create one original long drink and one cocktail. We'd have fifteen minutes backstage to prepare our garnishes and assemble our ingredients and then have seven minutes on stage to prepare several portions of each. We'd be judged on technique, adherence to the written recipe, aroma, flavor and garnish. Two competitors per team, two teams per country. Ray-Ray, Da Dish, Ingleesh and I decided to unify and collaborate; feeling a victory for one would be a victory for all. We spent our free time the day before feverishly scouring the city for tangerines, red currants, sage and the like. We drilled each other on proper technique. We experimented with over the top, fanciful garnitures. After breakfast teams scrambled back to their rooms to polish shakers, press their shirts and practice their drinks one last time.

The battleground was a cavernous auditorium in the substructure of the hotel. Two very basic and brightly lit bars were set up on stage, with an amphitheater of stadium seating surrounding them. The combatants would be on display and in full view of their opponents and audience. I wondered where was the gate from which the lions were released. Two by two the participants made their way to the stage, some trepidatiously, others with conviction. They took a minute to setup, had their seven minutes in the sun, cleaned up and exited, passing the next team up and nodding *bon chance*.

The team of Speight and Peek were somewhere around 5th or 6th on the roster. Contraveos and I would have to wait until the middle of the pack for our turn, giving us ample time to gauge the competition. We saw the good. We saw the bad. We saw the ugly. But mostly we saw the great, the amazing even. From neophytes to seasoned veterans, we witnessed some truly world class performances and vastly different styles and techniques. Diamond-honed precision from the Japanese. A healthy dash of working flair and sense of humor from the Slavic teams. Impossibly ornate and gravity-defying garnishes from the Polish teams, and, most surprisingly, really freaking cool old-school, pre-Prohibition American style from the Russians! Yes, the Russians. Although I had a tremendously good time with these guys, drinking shots of chilled Sobieski vodka throughout the trip, the only words I'm certain I understood out of their mouths were "Jerry Thomas, 've love Jerry Thomas".

Peek and Speight performed beautifully, with a dose of stateside attitude. When it



came time for Da Dish and I to do our thing, we were already about three hours into the competition. A bit weary, we took our place on stage and went to town. Jennifer rocked it with panache like a true champion. I, admittedly, came up short, or long, rather. With a bit of New York bravado and maybe a little overconfidence, I thought I had all the time in the world. I muddled methodically and languidly. I took care to stop and reflect and go over my steps. I shook my signature shake perhaps a second or two longer than necessary, for full effect. Then I heard the thirty second warning and was nowhere near done. I scrambled to finish on time, frenetically straining, garnishing and presenting my offerings. I could feel the judges' eyes poring over every detail and misstep, their breath on the back of my neck. The seconds ticked off thunderously in my head. My heart beat so hard, I could feel my teeth vibrating. I picked up my glass, flicked my serviette over my arm, flashed my pearly whites as broadly as I could, and the clock stopped. Thirty-eight seconds later than I needed it to.

But goddamn if I didn't give 'em a show, and a mighty tasty long drink, if I don't say so myself!

Lessons learned; don't muddle for a competition, and that a little real time practice might prove beneficial.

Suffice it to say that the Americans didn't bring home any trophies. In fact we pretty much ranked according to our roster numbers, but we stood our ground in a huge field of exceptional talent, and we represented in high style. As a sidebar, I should mention that we, as a team, accidentally and unwittingly pissed off the judges at dinner the night before. A little squabble over some prime restaurant real-estate, but I shan't elaborate as I'm sure the incident had absolutely nothing to do with the way we were scored.

Ultimately the Japanese won the day, and deservedly so. They were brilliant. A Swiss team took second with their elegant style and presentation, and a mixed team of old-guard Latin American barmen rounded out the honors in third place with two beautiful and delicious drinks.

An awards ceremony and gala ensued, as did a well-deserved and devilishly long night of drinking, dancing and general debauchery. The next morning we said good bye to Bordeaux and left, as haggard and bleary-eyed as we arrived. This time not so much from the travel. Yours truly hopped a train (in the rain) and headed north to Paris, to spend a couple of decidedly sunny days gallivanting around the city, before heading back home to the states.

I raise my glass of '95 Chateau du Taillan in a toast (a bit of a souvenir smuggled back in a suitcase with some black market perfume and incredibly stinky cheese). A toast to the good people at Marie Brizard for perpetuating such a noble tradition. A toast to my teammates and travel companions for giving their all. A toast to Bordeaux herself. I hope to return again soon. And finally, a toast to these big old drops of cold-ass rain that inspired me to pick up my pen. All you budding competitors out there, I urge you to start working on some recipes. A word to the wise; take an origami class and leave your muddler in your kit, (oh yeah: and don't piss off the judges!) Salut!

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