

All shook up

Want to know where to find the West's finest cocktails? Folio editor – and Cocktail World Cup judge – **Laura Dixon** tells all



don't usually drink this early on a Thursday afternoon. We journalists might be characterised as utter lushes, but at this time of day, I'm more likely to be buried under paperwork than sipping cocktails. But this isn't any normal day. It's the big one: the South West heat of the 42 Below Cocktail World Cup, where the region's top makers and shakers get together to decide who is going through to represent the UK in the final shake-off in New Zealand.

I've been asked along because, well, I'm not really sure why, but I think they needed a lay person to judge too, alongside Mark Drew, who represented the UK in the 2004 competition, and Josh Ivanovic, who led last year's winning team. What these two don't know about cocktails isn't worth knowing.

MIXING MY DRINKS

The event is sponsored by 42 Below vodka, so all the cocktails we'll be tasting will be vodka based. In round one, the 10 contestants make their signature drinks while explaining what they're doing and why. In round two they have to make an 'honest drink' – that's using just the bar tools and spirits you'd find in any bar to make a twist on a classic cocktail.

The contestants come from as far as Plymouth and Oxford and, notably, there are no bartenders from Bath here – they just didn't make the cut. At the call 'Ready, steady, shake...' they step up, two by two, to the bar to start their work.

Cat from Raoul's in Oxford is the first out, with a bomb-inspired cocktail served in a rounded glass with a fuse-shaped straw coming out of it. It's certainly a visual treat, but isn't as explosive to drink as it could be.

Justin, from Severnshed, loves the audience and is full of banter. He creates a confident calvados-based cocktail with a nod to the South West's cider heritage, served in a kitsch Babycham glass. Sarah, next to him, from The Rummer, is quiet but very controlled. Her complicated eastern-inspired cocktail uses lemongrass, green tea and plenty of other tricky ingredients. It looks like limoncello but tastes divine.

I'm feeling shaky already and unsure about how I'm going to fare with another 16 cocktails. "Just take a couple of small sips and drink loads of water between each one," advises Mark, who's done this before. Twenty cocktails in one afternoon is a tall order...but someone's got to do it.

BEE POLLEN AND BASIL LIQUEUR

Next, Matteo from Raoul's and Matt from the Refectory Bar in Plymouth get busy at the bar with a host of ingredients I've never seen before. Matt whips out a set of honey jars – which he's going to use as glasses – and a tub of bee pollen, while Matteo brings out a Greek basil liqueur made to his father's recipe for his light version of a Bloody Mary. Matt's honey vodka-inspired drink is delicious, garnished with a sprinkle of bee pollen on the outside that tastes of flowers.

Richard from Kukui in Oxford is the next contestant, and starts mixing a watermelon-themed cocktail, while Milton, from the King's Arms (formerly Stark Bar on Whiteladies Road) seems to have a touch of the shakes. He's been thinking about his cocktail a lot, and embarks on a story about drinking Bramble Sours in Edinburgh and how they have inspired the celery cocktail that he's mixing today. He certainly seems to know his technical stuff and he's hot on →



The West's Best Cocktail Bars

The bars that made the competition's shortlist

Haus 52 Upper Belgrave Rd, Clifton, Bristol, 0117 946 6081, www.hausbar.co.uk

King's Arms 168 Whiteladies Rd, Bristol, 0117 973 5922

Kukui 42-43 Park End St, Oxford, 01865 240020, www.kukuioxford.com

Manos 55 Queens Rd, Clifton, Bristol, 0117 929 4323

Raoul's 32 Walton St, Jericho, Oxford, 01865 553732, www.raoulsbar.co.uk

Refectory Bar Plymouth Gin, Black Friars Distillery, 60 Southside St, Plymouth, 01752 828988, www.refectory-news.co.uk

The Rummer Hotel All Saints Lane, Bristol, 0117 929 4243, www.therummer.net

Severnshed The Grove, Harbourside, Bristol, 0117 925 1212, www.shedrestaurants.co.uk





R-L: Winners Harry, Sarah and Milton; below: Milton and his Mainland Sour; Harry's Runcible Buck



presentation – the three cocktails arrive at the judging table on a slate tray, in the mould of a Michelin-starred chef.

LOOKS REALLY MATTER

“He’s getting full marks from me on presentation,” says Josh, before he even tastes it. I raise the glass for a sip and totally agree. I could drink a gallon of the stuff.

The final two for this round are roving bartender Ken, from Manos and Severnshed, and Harry from Haus. Harry looks cool and composed, with a black shirt and tie, and puts his drink together neatly, garnishing with a large flower made from three types of melon. Bewigged Ken seems to be doing fine, but just as he pours out his peach-flavoured beverage he realises that he’s forgotten the lemon juice. Hastily, he pours it back into the shakers and starts again. “Ballsy,” says Josh. Ken just about makes it in time, slipping a slice of caramelised peppered peach on to the side of the glass. Round one is over.

TWISTED COCKTAILS

The second round begins and the bartenders get to work on their twisted classic drinks. Sarah makes a feminised beer by adding Campari and vodka to a bottle of beer. Mark and Josh go wild for it,

although not being a fan of beer, I’m not so sure. Surely if you want a beer, you order beer, and if you want a cocktail, you order a cocktail...? But I’m no expert. Matteo’s beautifully presented strawberry cocktail gets my vote, but the other judges don’t think it’s got enough of a twist to it. Ken and Harry wind up proceedings – Harry’s cocktail is amazing, while Ken’s seems to have red wine in it, is served with a pie and is more of a miss than a hit.

I’m feeling slightly less steady on my feet and certainly not in a condition to judge anything as we head outside to compare marks. Our top five are pretty similar and we decide on three winners from the South West to go through to the next round: Milton, from the King’s Arms, is way out in the lead; Harry from Haus takes second, and by a whisker, Sarah from The Rummer comes third.

There’s an honourable mention for Ken, whose peach cocktail was the best the other judges have seen in a long time, and we’re all sad that he let himself down in the second round. But overall, it’s been a great way to see the West’s cocktail wizards work. More importantly for me, anyway, I know where I’m going to be drinking next. Cheers!

Ffi www.cocktailworldcup.com

Make these at home

Bristol’s Milton, Harry and Sarah are going through to the national finals in London next February after mixing up these three drinks.

**Mainland Sour
(Milton Haworth, King’s Arms)**

- 50ml 42Below Feijoa vodka
 - 20ml fresh pineapple juice
 - 20ml fresh lemon juice
 - 10ml sugar syrup (2:1 ratio)
 - 1/2 an egg white
 - 3ml Bitter Truth Celery Bitters
- Shake and fine strain into empty sours glass. Garnish with a thin slice of celery.

**Runcible Buck
(Harry Glocker, Haus)**

- 42ml 42Below Feijoa vodka
 - 10ml Poire William
 - 15ml Bramley & Gage quince
 - Ginger ale
- Put four ice cubes and two squeezed lemon wedges in a sling glass, add other ingredients except ginger ale and stir. Top with ginger ale, garnish with a physalis, cherry, pineapple leaf and star fruit.

**Japanese Feijoa Infusion
(Sarah Messamer, The Rummer)**

- 50ml 42Below Feijoa vodka
 - 10ml ginger cordial
 - 15ml lychee liqueur
 - Drizzle of green tea and some infused leaves
 - Few drops of lemon juice
 - Lemon peel
- Shake and double strain in a frosted coupette.

For more information on cocktails in general, visit www.miltonsbarguide.com, a distillation of everything Milton knows about mixing, shaking and working behind a bar, including more cocktail recipes.

