

Bar Talk / Weekend getaway

Lessons for Kampala bartenders

Back to class. **What it takes to be the best bartender.**

BY TONY MUSHOBOROZI

If you still think bartending is about flair and fast hands, you're already behind.

At a recent Tanqueray Masterclass in Kampala, the real lesson had little to do with spinning shakers or stacking glasses. Instead, it focused on something less visible but far more valuable: thinking.

More than 30 bartenders stepped away from their stations and into a full day of recalibration, one that reframed their role from drink makers to decision makers. Because behind every cocktail served is a quiet equation: taste, cost, speed, and experience all competing in a single glass.

The shift starts with language. Terms like "serve" and "pour," often thrown around casually, were broken down and rebuilt with intention.

A "serve" is not just what is in the glass—it is the entire performance around it. The choice of glassware, the garnish, the temperature, even the way the drink arrives at the table. Change the serve, and you change the story of the cocktail without touching the recipe.

A "pour," meanwhile, is discipline. It is the difference between a profitable bar and a leaking one. Free-pouring might look impressive, but without consistency, it becomes guesswork—and guesswork is expensive.

From there, things got practical fast.

Bartenders were pushed into real-world scenarios: a drink comes out too sweet, what's your fix? Too strong, how do you rebalance without starting over? The goal was not perfection; it was recovery. In a busy bar, mistakes are not rare, they are inevitable. What matters is how quickly and effectively you correct them.

Then came the techniques that stretched curiosity.

Fat washing, which means infusing spirits with oils like coconut or butter, then stripping the fat away, adds unexpected depth. Rice washing does the opposite, softening aggressive edges in spirits to create smoother finishes. These aren't everyday tools in most Kampala bars, but they hint at where the craft is heading: more experimental, more refined, more deliberate.

Still, skill alone isn't enough anymore.

One of the more pointed conversations of the day



had nothing to do with cocktails. It was about visibility. Today's bartender is not just working behind the counter; they are building a presence beyond it. Social media, once optional, is quickly becoming part of the job. A strong online identity can open doors that technical skill alone cannot.

And then, the pressure test.

The final challenge was simple on paper: make three cocktails in two minutes. In reality, it exposed everything: hesitation, poor planning, wasted movement. Most participants didn't come close. Speed, it turns out, isn't just about working faster; it's about thinking ahead.

What made the moment stick was not just who won, but how.

One bartender, given a late chance after initially missing out, stepped up and delivered all three drinks within the time limit.

No panic, no rush, just control. It was a reminder that composure often beats raw speed. Others stood out for different reasons. One competitor's drink impressed judges not because it was flashy, but because it was balanced. In an environment that often rewards spectacle, restraint proved just as powerful.

There was another quiet shift happening in the room, too. More women are stepping into bartending spaces and not just filling seats, but competing, experimenting, and leading. The energy reflected an industry that is slowly broadening, even if unevenly.

By the end of the session, the biggest takeaway was not a new recipe or technique. It was a mindset.

Bartending is evolving. It's no longer just about what you can make, but how you think, how you adapt, and how you present yourself, both to the guest in front of you and the audience watching from afar.

In Kampala's growing nightlife scene, that evolution is not optional. It is already underway.

Bartending is a skill that requires precision.
PHOTO/TONY MUSHOBOROZI



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