

# The silent influence of bartenders on party hunters

Behind every memorable cocktail stands a bartender whose choice of spirit quietly shapes the entire experience. By selecting one label over another, they curate identity, influence perception and introduce guests to brands they may never have known.

BY TONY MUSHOBOROZI

You can always tell how good a bartender is by how they make you feel. You might be visiting for the first time but a bartender worth the name will make you feel like they know exactly what you want. They make you feel welcome and well taken care of. The drink, no matter which one, will somehow taste exactly the way it was meant to taste. But few things separate fantastic bartenders from regular ones like a cocktail.

There is a lot that goes into crafting a well-designed cocktail. It takes passion and time to nail down which ingredients that complement each other to deliver a great cocktail. Which syrup is complimented best by mint but not lemons? Which herb makes a tequila cocktail extra flavorful? What is the right balance of sugar and a particular liquor? What garnish fits which kind of occasion?

Behind every memorable cocktail stands a bartender whose choice of spirit quietly shapes the entire experience. By selecting one label over another, bartenders do more than just mix ingredients. They curate identity, influence perception, and introduce guests to brands they may never have encountered otherwise. They are craftsmen, guiding palates, building loyalty, and giving each spirit a stage on which to shine. Which is why they get their day on the calendar.

On February 24, every year, the world celebrates the World Bartender Day; shining a light and honoring the skill, creativity, and hospitality of bartenders worldwide. Established in 2018, by The Perfect Blend, this day recognizes the artistry of mixing drinks and the dedication required for the profession. It is a time to applaud bartenders for their service, artistry, and expertise.

## Passion

Noel Arinaitwe, the head bartender at Labanor Bistro in Butabika says that he chose to become a bartender because he wanted to create and experiment

taught barista who enjoyed observing the bartender at work.

"Because bartenders do something that many people can't do. Not everyone can craft an original cocktail," he says.

That curiosity is what slowly pulled Arinaitwe from the coffee machine to the bar counter. He began studying classic recipes, understanding spirits, experimenting with syrups and infusions after hours. What many customers see as a few swift movements of the shaker, is, for him, the result of years of practice, countless failed mixes, and a deep understanding of balance.

Over time, he developed a signature cocktail he calls Summer Tea, a layered creation built on The Singleton 12, bay leaves, and tea leaves, as the main characters. He says that Summer Tea is a relaxing and refreshing beverage which is supposed to be easy on the person.

"I wanted something that is a health-

ier option for a cocktail; calm on the surface, but complex underneath, I've not seen anything like this on the market," he says. "When guests taste it, I want them to experience a journey, not just a drink."

Yet, despite the skill involved, bartend-

## WHAT PEOPLE ORDER

A great bartender increases customer retention. They influence what people order, how they appreciate it, and whether they return. When Arinaitwe introduces a guest to a smoky serve made with a Cragganmore, he is not simply making a cocktail; he is shaping that guest's perception of single malts. In this way, bartenders encourage consumers to appreciate quality over quantity. That shift has a direct impact on revenue for bars and on brand equity for beverage companies.

A bar attendant adds some ice cubes to a cocktail. PHOTO/ TONY MUSHOBOROZI



ing remains one of the most misunderstood professions in the nightlife economy.

For many, the image of a bartender is unfairly simplistic: someone who drinks excessively or spends their nights casually pouring alcohol. Others assume the job is easy; measure, mix, serve, repeat. Arinaitwe laughs at that perception.

"People think we are always drinking," he says. "But most professional bartenders taste, not drink. We have to stay sharp. We are responsible for the experience and the safety of our customers."

He also says that most Ugandans believe cocktails are supposed to have a lot of alcohol, forgetting that the whole point is to create a balanced, enjoyable drink, by combining a base spirit with other ingredients to enhance flavor, aroma, and presentation.

"A cocktail is a toned down alcohol," he says. The modern bartender is part chemist, part storyteller, part host, and part brand custodian. They manage stock, understand margins, track consumer preferences and, perhaps most importantly, read the room. In a busy venue, like his current workplace, Arinaitwe is constantly gauging moods, recommending drinks based on taste, occasion and even personality.

A great bartender increases customer retention. They influence what people order, how they appreciate it, and whether they return. When Arinaitwe introduces a guest to a smoky serve made with a Cragganmore, he is not simply making a cocktail; he is shaping that guest's perception of single malts. When he suggests a refreshing gin and tonic built on Tanqueray, he is elevating what might otherwise be seen as a simple drink into a curated experience.

In this way, bartenders encourage consumers to appreciate quality over quantity. That shift has a direct impact on revenue for bars and on brand equity for beverage companies.

According to Simon Lapyem, the Brand Manager, The Singleton East Africa, World Bartender Day is about recognising this invisible influence.

"Bartenders are the bridge between our brands and the consumer. They are the ones who translate the craft, heritage, and tasting notes of a whisky into an experience in a glass. When a bartender recommends The Singleton, it's not just a sale; it's a moment of discovery for the consumer."

That authority at the bar counter is built on trust. Guests often rely on bartenders more than advertisements. A single recommendation can introduce someone to a new spirit category, from a sipping tequila like Don Julio 1942, to a bold gin expression.

Melanie Kaita, UBL's Reserve Ambassador echoes this sentiment, emphasising the educational role bartenders play.

"Bartenders shape how consumers appreciate our portfolio. Whether it's helping someone understand how to sip Johnnie Walker Gold Reserve properly, or explaining the botanicals that make Tanqueray distinct, they are educators. They promote responsible consumption and help build a culture of appreciation rather than excess."

This educational role is especially critical in a growing market like Uganda's, where consumer tastes are evolving and premium brands are increasingly accessible. As the music swells across many bars every night, the bartenders stand steady behind the counters, shaker in hand. They are not just mixing spirits; they are curating experiences, shaping tastes and quietly powering a spirits industry.



Bar Talk with Tony Musho