

“Bartenders Become Multitaskers During Economic Downturn”

By **FREDRIC KOEPEL** | *Special to The Memphis News*
Monday November 23, 2009

On a Thursday evening at 6:30, the bar at Interim is packed. Every seat is taken, people stand behind the patrons sitting at the bar and every seat at the high tables is taken too. The clamor and hubbub are tremendous.

Most of the people fortunate enough to have grabbed seats at the bar are not just sipping cocktails, wine or beer. They're eating, and they're not nibbling cashews and Goldfish crackers, they're diving into appetizers and main courses from Interim's dinner menu.



BUSY BAR: Lisa Gradinger, bar manager at Majestic Grille, said a full menu adds to the bar's appeal. -- PHOTO BY BOB BAYN

All of this means longtime Interim bartender Ben Rhea is working hard. Of course, he takes drink orders, makes cocktails, pours wine, delivers the drinks and looks after the stock and cleans glasses. He also sets places with napkins and cutlery, explains the menu, takes food orders, replenishes water and clears the plates. Clearly, a bartender's job isn't just about shaking martinis and slicing lime wedges anymore.

“Serving the whole menu at the bar complicates things a little,” Rhea said. “But one way of looking at it is it's similar to waiting tables but you can be more casual with the guests. There's more responsibility, more elbow grease, you could say, but it's more enjoyable too. You get a better handle on the scene.”

One of the pioneers of the full-service bar was Jimmy Bradley, owner of two popular restaurants in Manhattan, The Red Cat in Chelsea and The Harrison in TriBeCa.

“One of my thoughts,” said Bradley, “was often in restaurants, the bar is a sort of a holding cell or area if people are waiting for a table. Why not give them a choice? Why not say, ‘You can eat in the bar with a full menu,’ instead of waiting however long for the table to clear. And then they can stay in the bar for the whole evening.”

The issues involved in the full-menu bar came down to these questions, Bradley said: “How do I get people into the restaurant and make people happy and increase revenue?”

The advantage to the bartender is increased tips. The person who will lay down a \$2 tip for a cocktail will generally tip full service for a meal eaten at the bar.

“There's definitely an increase in tips,” said Rhea, who previously worked at the bar at Texas de Brazil, a bar where food was not served. “I was making \$7 an hour at Texas and I'm making \$4 an hour

at Interim, but the tips more than make up the difference in the scale.”

“Serving the full menu at the bar definitely helps the tips for the bartenders,” said Deni Reilly, co-owner of Majestic Grille. “There’s more work involved for the bartenders, but the job is more lucrative. Eating at the bar is very popular. We have a bar menu, but we offer the full restaurant menu at the bar too. We supply newspapers. We have a lot of Downtown businesspeople who eat at the bar for lunch. It’s really informal, so the bartenders have created their own regulars.”

Lisa Gradinger, bar manager at Majestic, said serving a full menu at the bar didn’t add stress to the job, though she mentioned she has only worked at bars where meals are served.

“It adds to the whole dynamic of the job,” Gradinger said. “It’s a relaxed atmosphere, and it’s easier to meet people. The bartender should know what’s going on in the whole restaurant, anyway.”

Speaking to the trend of eating meals at the bar, she said, “I don’t expect people to just come in for a drink. A lot of the time it’s flatbreads and sandwiches, but businessmen will come in, sit at the bar and order a steak and a glass of wine.”

The increased revenue doesn’t accrue just to the bartenders who serve full meals as well as cocktails. Obviously there’s money to be made in serving full meals instead of giving away bar snacks.

“Absolutely,” said David Henkes, a vice president at Technomics, a restaurant industry consulting firm in Chicago. “Restaurants are trying to do more with less. Employment in restaurants is down nationally, dining rooms are not as lucrative, and owners are looking for revenue streams. The bar has become a destination, a place to grow and enhance revenue.”

Henkes noted that recent restaurant design and construction is resulting in smaller dining rooms and proportionately larger, full-service bars.

“The problem is that this situation places more burden on the bartenders, and it speaks to the need for more training and education for bartenders,” he said. “Once, all they needed to know about was how to make a lot of cocktails. Now, they have to know about food and menus and service.”

Jose F. Ancona, vice president for the North American chapter of the International Bartenders Association, agrees that the burden on bartenders is more severe.

“It’s indeed a sign of the times and of management saving a dollar and not giving customers the best service,” Ancona said. “Bartenders are being asked to perform beyond their capability. They shouldn’t bear all the responsibility for the whole restaurant.”

Bradley, of The Red Cat and The Harrison, mentioned that bartending now is akin to “performance art.” Certainly, watching Rhea carry out his responsibilities behind the bar at Interim – taking drink and meal orders, making cocktails, serving, talking, sending drinks to the dining room, clearing tables and always maintaining a pleasant attitude – seems like a performance.

“You just get in there and make it happen,” he said.