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# ULTIMATE BARTENDING

LEARN THE SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES  
OF THE WORLD'S TOP BARTENDERS  
AND COCKTAIL MIXOLOGISTS

PAUL MARTIN



ROBINSON

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## INTRODUCTION

# The DNA of an Ultimate Bartender

*Contrary to popular belief, mixing and serving great drinks barely scratches the surface of the characteristics and skills that define a world-class bartender. In order to become truly great at what you do, you first need to understand the multitude of interpersonal skills, techniques and abilities that are brought to bear by the very best of the mixology industry. Whether you are a bar owner, manager or individual bartender, in this book, I will help you to understand those skills and help you to become the Ultimate Bartender.*

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So, if you had to rank yourself out of 10 as a bartender, what score would you award yourself? Interestingly, whatever score you have decided upon, I can tell you that it is almost certainly not a true reflection of your abilities but more a case of how you rank yourself against what you perceive to be a perfect 10. It's all about perception. In all the years that I have been running bartender training courses and seminars, people rarely, if ever, are able to accurately rate their abilities in the context of what the perfect bartender actually looks like. This is ultimately because their view of perfection is limited by their own

experiences. They may be striving for perfection, but only their own personal view of perfection. Indeed, when we set ourselves limits, those limits in turn define the levels to which we progress.

If you have ever been into a gymnasium, you see this phenomenon in action. A guy who has decided to get fit walks in to a gym on day one and among other things notices a rack of dumbbells ranging in weight from 1kg through to 20kg, rising in 1kg increments. In trying to establish a good weight with which to start training he picks up the middle weight of 10kg and gives it a go. Depending upon how he gets on, he may decide that he needs to start with something a little lighter, or possibly a bit heavier, but eventually he will settle upon his starting weight. Over the coming weeks and months as his fitness and strength develop, he will gradually increase the weight with the ultimate goal being to work up to the limit, the big 20kg dumbbells. In fact, psychologically, 20kg becomes the summit, the final goal, the target that he will strive for. It also becomes his perceived limit. In time, he may not get to 20kg but he will certainly improve. Possibly reaching an impressive 18kg.

However, had that same guy walked in to a different gymnasium on day one and found that the dumbbells in the second gym began at 5kg and went up to 50kg he would have achieved very different targets. In this case, his perception of the summit would be much higher (50kg) and as a consequence he would have that higher goal as his motivation for development and

improvement. Over time his level of improvement would not be limited by the 20kg goal established in the first gymnasium, and as a consequence, while most people would not get anywhere near the level of strength required to use 50kg dumbbells, he would almost certainly exceed the 20kg weight that he would likely fail to achieve in the first gym.

In fact, in tests, it has been demonstrated that people consistently achieve greater gains when exposed to the second scenario as opposed to the first. When their perceptions of limits change! And this phenomenon is repeated time and again throughout every aspect of our lives. Join a table tennis club where the members are all national-standard players and your level of play will develop much faster and to a higher standard than if you had joined a local club with average players. Join the best music school in the country, surrounded by some of the country's finest talent, and you will become a better pianist than had you simply remained at a standard comprehensive school under the tutelage of the local music teacher. Work with the most highly skilled bartenders in the world and you will become a much finer bartender than had you simply worked in an average bar alongside low-skilled mixologists.

And just to be clear, this is not simply because you are being exposed to greater skills; it's because your view of what is achievable is far greater and therefore you are not limited in your own development by restricted perceptions of what is achievable.

My job as a trainer is not simply to improve a bartender's skills but, more importantly, to change their perceptions of what perfection could actually be. You'll never reach the summit if you fail to realise that it's beyond the cloud line.

So, let's think about how you may score yourself right now. Imagine that your view of the perfect bartender was someone who could pull a pint of beer, tell the difference between a red and white wine and was able to mix five different cocktails from memory, then you could quite easily give yourself an 8 if you could do 80 per cent of that. However, if your view of the perfect bartender was someone who had amazing product knowledge to the extent that he could mix more than 1,000 perfectly served cocktails from memory, could identify any wine, including the year, from a blind taste, was an amazing communicator, an entertaining host, etc., you may then consider yourself a 2 based on the fact that you are 20 per cent of the way to achieving that level of expertise. However, out of the two scenarios, which one is probably the better bartender? The one who scored himself an 8 or the one who scored himself a 2?

And consider this also: the one who scored an 8 is also under the impression that he only needs a small improvement to become the perfect bartender. After all, based on his own perceptions of perfection he is already 80 per cent of the way there. On the other hand, not only is the bartender who scored himself a 2 probably a better bartender already, he can also see that there is a far greater opportunity for development and improvement

based on the fact that he has ranked himself so low. In this scenario, not only has he already surpassed the first bartender, but based on his very different perceptions of perfection, he will continue to strive to improve long after bartender number one has decided there is nothing else he needs to know!

As a consequence, the key to becoming an *Ultimate Bartender* is first being able to see what skills and knowledge the perfect 10 is likely to display and then to mark yourself in relation to that. Not simply to score yourself based on your own impression.

Therefore, if, through this book, I am going to help you on your way to becoming the very finest bartender you could become, I'm first going to have to change your view of what that looks like.

So, what skills in my opinion does the Ultimate Bartender possess? First and foremost, he or she would need to be a great communicator and people person. In my experience, the world's most engaging and entertaining bartenders don't necessarily mix the best drinks. Or, if they do happen to mix great drinks, that is far from the main appeal for their guests. However, an ability to connect with their guests, build instant rapport, demonstrate empathy, expertly use humour, express themselves both passionately and articulately, take their guests on an unexpected journey, and communicate across the age ranges, gender types and social and cultural groups is the absolute cornerstone of everything that they do. It lays the foundations for every element

of the Ultimate Bartender's craft and in doing so opens their guests up to a service experience beyond anything they have become accustomed to.

The Ultimate Bartender has a service mindset and is always seeking to exceed his guests' expectations. There is a thirst (pun!) for knowledge that drives continual improvement throughout their career. At no stage does the Ultimate Bartender rest on his laurels. He has an innate understanding of the power of teamwork and is never motivated by self-promotion or ego. In fact, our Ultimate Bartender thrives on an ability to contribute to a team dynamic and help to bring out the best of himself by helping others to get the best from themselves.

Our Ultimate Bartender is able to work at speed and with efficiency, without it detracting from his main focus, connecting and engaging with his guests. To this end, his head is always 'up' with his eyes on the game. In fact, eye contact is one of his major weapons in the delivery of great service: with it he is able to read the guests and gather information that he skilfully uses to help develop rapport. He has a perspective on his guests that allows him to engage with them and redirect their experiences, enabling them to experience drinks and combinations they would never have discovered without him. He is a skilled influencer with a grasp of the psychology of decision-making. As a result, he's able to influence decisions in the guests' favour, helping them to overcome any lingering insecurities about experimentation and new experiences.

He's the perfect professional, able to separate the professional self from the personal self. This empowers him to deal with negative situations, challenging guests or general 'bad days' in a considered, service-orientated manner. He doesn't get personally involved or upset; he becomes professionally engaged, viewing every negative as an opportunity to develop a more profound positive. Likewise, our Ultimate Bartender has the tools and understanding to identify the triggers for stress and then employ techniques to help dissipate that very stress. He's empathetic in a fundamental way, understanding situations from the perspective of someone who wants to understand, rather than defend an opposing position, and as a result is an expert in connecting with the most demanding of guests.

Bartending for the Ultimate Bartender is more than a service: it is entertainment, which can be seen in the way he holds himself, handles the equipment, pours a glass of wine, shakes a cocktail or even stands. By doing so, he feeds into the involuntary response of guests who experience this level of bartending supremacy and who in turn lead to the spreading of his reputation. Our Ultimate Bartender is not afraid to accept that he is human and fallible but also understands that he has this in common with all of his guests, and by delivery of Ultimate Bartending standards is more likely to be supported by them when busy or if something were to go wrong. For our Ultimate Bartender, all the world is a stage and he continues to do everything in his power to make his stage show the most impressive his guests have experienced.

And of course, they will continue to develop and hone their drink mixing/serving skills so that their delivery of exceptional service is indeed brought to fruition through the vehicle of a fabulous drink. This is our perfect 10, our *Ultimate Bartender*.

Now mark yourself against this. Where are you now? If you are honest with yourself you will have marked yourself much lower than when I posed this question at the opening of this chapter. But whatever mark you have awarded yourself, consider that to be your starting point. In the chapters that follow I will introduce you to the skills and techniques that will enable you to climb the Ultimate Bartending ladder. And while you won't become a perfect 10 overnight, you will be on the right track to achieving that immense perfect 10 goal. And as you do so, remember this: If you only become a 4 or 5 on this new scale, you will almost certainly be well in excess of a 10 on any regular bartender's scale and will be delivering to your guests an experience far beyond that enjoyed by the vast majority. Thereafter, you can simply continue to hone your skills until you reach the summit you seek.

## CHAPTER 1

# Laying the Foundations for Ultimate Bartending

*This chapter addresses the importance of mixing and serving great drinks from the perspective of laying the foundations on which to further build your skills.*

*While mixing great drinks tends to be the sole focus of many bartenders, for the top performers, the standard of drinks is seen as the foundation upon which they build their other skills. It sets the tone for the service experience. In itself, mixing great drinks is about bringing a range of practical skills to bear on your approach to every libation, whether it's a glass of mineral water or a sophisticated cocktail. Here we will outline and define the approach required to get you on the right track to establishing a solid foundation from which to deliver your amazing service experience.*

I know some truly great bartenders. I also know some incredibly skilled drink-makers. And yet it's not always the case that the second group are able to deliver an exceptional guest experience. Neither is it a given that the first group necessarily mix the best

drinks. In fact, some of the best drinks that I have experienced have been mixed by a couple of the most unengaging characters that I have ever seen working a bar. In truth, their self-obsessed sense of importance ruined the entire experience for me and left me with no desire to visit their bars again. However, it's also true to say that a number of my most memorable and enjoyable experiences have been delivered by incredibly engaging bartenders who mixed decidedly average drinks. In these cases, I have always been happy to return, regardless of the drink quality. I simply enjoyed myself so much.

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The point I am making here is that quality of service, engagement and entertainment is far more valuable in the eye of the guest than the skill of mixing great drinks. And yet, when it comes to the very finest bartenders they realise one important fact: these skills are not mutually exclusive. That they can live in perfect harmony, with one embellishing the experience of the other, resulting in the delivery of the Ultimate Bartending experience for their guests.

Indeed, this is one of the characteristics of the Ultimate Bartender. They assign equal importance to both elements of their bartending skills. Why be good at one, at the expense of another? Why not mix the finest drinks possible, all wrapped up

in an unsurpassed service experience? View the skill of mixing great drinks as the foundation of your craft rather than the entirety of it.

So, in this section I am going to share a number of tips and directions to help you develop your drink-making skills and lay the foundations on which to continue building.

## Achieving consistency

Being consistent is the sign of a great drink-maker. There is nothing worse than enjoying a drink, ordering another and it being even slightly different to the first one. Whether it's a simple spirit and mixer, a pint of beer, a glass of wine or a sophisticated cocktail, once you have established a standard you need to be able to replicate it time and again. Make no mistake, if there are differences your guests will spot them. You need to consider every drink-making action so that nothing is random.

## Delivering the perfect serve

This is the principle of trying to serve each drink perfectly, at its zenith, so that it couldn't be any better. In this regard, it is important to establish precisely what your perfect serve standards are. You are looking to create a defined set of standards for each of your drink types or categories. In terms of categories think beer, wine, spirits (straight), spirit and mixer, cocktails, etc. It's worth remembering that we charge significantly more for a drink than it would cost our guests if they made it for themselves at home. In some cases, it's dozens of

times more, and so we need to ask ourselves, ‘What are they getting from us that they don’t get at home?’ And is what they are receiving value for money?

As we progress through this book, we will address all the other elements of Ultimate Bartending service that impact the overall sense of value for money. But for now, with specific regard to the drink itself, we need to consider the following:

### **Using the perfect glass**

I’m a great believer that the style of glass that you serve a drink in influences the guest’s perception of its quality. For example, consider the timeless beauty of a classic martini cocktail served in an iconic martini-style glass. The clarity of the gin and vermouth mixture displayed in a sublime conical glass with a speared olive conjures images of class and sophistication. And yet, if you served the same 75ml of liquid in a pint glass it would be an entirely different proposition. It’s easy to see how the experience of the drink could be quite different. So, which glass do you use for which drink? Think about the drink type and ask yourself how enticing it looks. Challenge yourself to ‘frame’ your drinks so they look desirable and once you have selected your glasses make sure you stick with them. For example, if it’s a 12oz highball for a G&T, make sure it always is. Don’t get lazy and serve it in a 10oz highball or a 12oz rocks. It just looks unprofessional and demonstrates a lack of care in the bartender’s attitude.

## Understanding the importance of ice

Think about ice. We use ice to keep our drinks cold. The more ice you use, the colder the drink remains and the less it dilutes.

Remember: ice keeps itself colder for longer and it's always battling against the slightly warmer temperature of the drink. If you use less ice, the temperature of the drink itself will overpower the temperature of the ice and it will melt faster, hence diluting the drink quicker. So, decide how much ice is the perfect amount for your drinks (usually between three quarters to a full glass) and make sure it's the same every time. Also, if you serve your ice from ice buckets rather than ice chests, make sure you continually drain the old ice and keep it topped up. Nothing's worse than putting half-melted ice into a drink along with the water that gathers at the bottom of the bucket.

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**Nothing's worse than putting half-melted ice into a drink along with the water that gathers at the bottom of the bucket.**

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## Garnishing your drinks

We use garnishes in drinks for a number of reasons. Firstly, for aesthetics. It makes the drink look pretty and of a higher quality. Next, it adds flavour (if dropped into the drink), and finally aroma, especially if it sits atop the drink or glass. Whether it's a wedge of lime in a G&T or something more elaborate for a cocktail, give it the attention it deserves. Keep the garnishes uniform and of the same quality, making sure they are fresh. If using fruit and it is old or dry, just don't use it. Also, don't be mean when cutting fruit into pieces. You should be getting six wedges from a lime and not

twelve plus. Trying to make a piece of fruit stretch too far communicates a clear message to the guest. Namely, that you are more focused on saving as many pennies as you can than thinking about making the drink the highest quality possible.

When storing pre-cut garnishes, keep them dry and preferably chilled, definitely in airtight containers. This will keep them at their optimum throughout the shift. DO NOT LET THEM SIT IN WATER. This washes away all flavour and aroma and results in them turning soggy! And finally, at the end of a shift, if there are any pre-cut garnishes remaining THROW THEM AWAY. There is nothing that you can do to store them overnight and have them remain fresh and fragrant the next day. You should be preparing new, fresh garnishes every day, ideally for every shift. Even better, in an ideal world (I know what you're thinking: 'Who lives in an ideal world?') you would prepare them fresh each time you mixed a drink!

## Nailing the final serve

Have you ever been in to a fast-food restaurant, seen the images of perfectly formed, symmetrical burgers layered with vibrant juicy tomatoes, dollops of 'special' sauce and a slice of geometrically perfect cheese melted '*en pointe*'? Have you then ordered one only to discover that in reality, when your burger arrives, it looks like it had been dropped on the floor just before being packaged? Yes? That's because advertisers and marketing companies are employed to sell the dream, to create imagery that represents (in this case) the burger in its perfect

incarnation, so that you buy in to the offer of perfection. Of course, the reality is somewhat different!

However, in the bar industry, the Ultimate Bartender has a distinct advantage over his burger-producing cousin. Because, with the correct care and attention, by simply bringing all the above considerations together, he is able to produce real-life drinks of perfection that accurately mirror the imagery that the most creative marketers can produce for advertising campaigns.

Take for example the iconic poster image of a Gordon's gin and tonic. It is an image that has been used to promote their brand the world over. It's a tall, clean 12oz highball glass, it is filled with ice, has a measure of gin topped with tonic and filled to within 10mm of the top of the glass (note that it is not served half-poured with the tonic by the side waiting for you, the guest, to finish it off yourself), and is garnished with a freshly cut wedge of lime. In fact, it is everything that I have mentioned in the steps above. So, you see, there is no reason why our drinks can't look like iconic poster images. In fact, if they don't look as good, it's just a missed opportunity and has nothing to do with the image being an unachievable fantasy and everything to do with the amount of care and attention you apply to your drink-making.

## **Adding the little extras**

It's funny how the small things can make the biggest difference. In terms of a guest's perception of drink quality, this is certainly

the case. Using the above G&T as an example: if you served the identical drink but without the freshly cut lime wedge and you then lined them up next to one another, the drink with the garnish would appear far more appealing than the one without. Likewise, if one drink had a freshly cut garnish and the other had a slightly dry, pithy, more thinly cut garnish.

With this in mind, it's worth considering what else we can do to elevate the appeal and presentation of our drinks. Consider this: adding a straw, preferably a black one as it feels more sophisticated, will also change the appearance and perceived quality of the serve, as will serving your drinks on bev naps (beverage napkins). Likewise, if your budget stretches, you can also consider investing in higher-quality glassware. Maybe you can find a style and design that enables you to create your own signature serve for the G&T.

Ultimately, whether you are selling your G&Ts for a few pounds in a local pub or you are charging the extraordinary prices that top venues and hotels appear to get away with, you will be using the same ingredients. The pub's brand of gin is the same as the five-star hotel's; the pub's ice is made from frozen water just like the hotel's; if they serve the same brand then their tonics are identical; and both venues' limes grow on trees. So, ultimately, it is the little touches that make the difference: the

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**The pub's brand of gin is the same as the five-star hotel's; the pub's ice is made from frozen water just like the hotel's.**

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care, the attention to detail, the focus on consistency and the little extras.

## Mixing cocktails

While technique is important for all styles of drink service, it is of particular importance when it comes to mixology (creating cocktails). There are so many aspects to consider when producing a range of cocktails that it's easy to understand how practising and mastering the various techniques will stand you in good stead as you expand your knowledge of recipes and drink styles. I always advise bartenders that it's not the number of recipes that you commit to memory that counts but how well you can turn those recipes into amazing cocktails.

My very first cocktail bartending job, thirty something years ago, was a case in point. The bar had a fairly extensive cocktail list numbering over 150 cocktail recipes. Before I could start working on the bar I had to commit each one of them to memory! However, once I began serving, my lack of technique and experience resulted in me serving a lot of very average cocktails (and that's being generous). You see, without the fundamental mixing skills, simply knowing what went into the drink meant that I was riding somewhat blind. It was a bit like being given some flour, water, tomatoes and mozzarella and being asked to make an amazing pizza! No technique, no chance! It wasn't until I changed jobs and worked in a bar where the main focus was technique, making a small selection of great cocktails, that I really started to understand what producing amazing drinks was all about.

With this in mind, here are a few tips that have underpinned everything I have gone on to achieve throughout my career, both as a bartender and then subsequently as a trainer.

## **Mastering the three fundamental mixing methods**

### **Shaking**

Ever wondered why we shake some cocktails and not others? Well, the process of shaking a cocktail is quite full on. It rapidly mixes and chills the ingredients, but as a result of the high-impact coming together of the ice, it also dilutes them very quickly. This is the perfect technique for producing many cocktails, allowing us to mix, chill and dilute at speed. But while a major aspect of being able to shake well is controlling dilution, it tends to be too aggressive for the more subtle and delicately balanced cocktails where we need to retain much greater control than is achievable when shaking. The general rule for shaking is to do so fast and hard – no rocking it to sleep! The aim is to get the ingredients to combine effectively while lowering the temperature. Dilution is very much part of the final mixture as far as shaken cocktails are concerned, but as with any other ingredient you need to know how much you are adding. Too much (or too little) water will inevitably impact the balance of the final drink.

So how long should you shake for? Again, it depends. How vigorous is your shaking technique? For me, I shake fairly hard, which means that a cosmopolitan cocktail only needs four to five seconds in my shaker. For other less ‘enthusiastic’ bartenders it

may require seven to eight seconds. To some degree, this is something you need to discover for yourself. Practise, check, practise again! Also, ingredients can influence the shake time. For example, if I am using cream I shake a little longer, egg white even longer still (to get the white smooth and frothy). When it comes to juice, I shake pineapple juice for slightly less time than orange because the pineapple froths a lot whereas the orange froths hardly at all. Ultimately, don't think of the shake as something you do the same way every time.

Try to understand the drink, what you are trying to achieve as a final result, and develop and refine your technique accordingly.

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**Ultimately, don't think of the shake as something you do the same way every time.**

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## Stirring

When we stir a cocktail, we are endeavouring to achieve the same goal as when shaking. Namely to mix, chill and dilute. However, as explained above, when we stir we have much greater control over the dilution. Generally, when stirring a cocktail, we take much longer than when shaking. This way we can gradually assess how well the drink is blending and chilling, and ultimately, by eye, check the dilution. On the whole, it tends to be the classic style of cocktails that are stirred. Martinis, manhattans, etc. These are drinks that are usually a combination of spirits, vermouths, liqueurs and so on, but which are less likely to include the heavier ingredients that would more likely require shaking. My recommended technique is to fill your mixing glass with ice, add the ingredients and, using a bar spoon, stir in rapid

smooth circles. You are looking for the ice to revolve smoothly around the glass and not clatter about.

## **Building**

A built drink is one that is made directly in the glass. This can be something as simple as a G&T as mentioned earlier, or a more elaborate cocktail such as a mojito. In the case of built drinks, all the blending (if required), chilling, etc. happens as the drink is being constructed. It is important when getting to know your built drinks that you understand which ingredients are added in what order, whether there are any actions that need to take place along the way (stirring for example) and what the final drink is intended to look like. This will help guide you in terms of confidently constructing your drinks and ensuring that you serve fantastic examples of them consistently.

Let's take the mojito as an example. The recipe is simple: rum, fresh mint, lime juice, sugar, soda. However, the process is somewhat more convoluted. Here's the method that Bacardi recommends for its 'original' mojito.

Start by squeezing the juice of 1 lime in to a 12–14oz tall glass, add 2 bar spoons of caster sugar (or adjust to taste) and give a little stir to help some of the sugar dissolve. Now take 6–8 fresh mint leaves, give them a slap in your hands (to help release the mint oils) and add to the glass. Once again give the mixture a small stir to help the flavours release and

combine. Now half-fill the glass with crushed ice, add the rum (approximately 50ml) and churn the mixture together. Now we are helping to combine the flavours and chill the drink. The reason we only add half a glass of ice at this stage is so the drink is easier to ‘churn’.

Next bring the level of crushed ice to within 10mm of the top of the glass (the level of the drink will rise along with the ice) and give the mixture another stir. Finally, add a splash of soda, add more crushed ice to create a ‘peak’ and garnish by tucking a sprig of mint (pre-slapped) into the top. Add a straw to the drink, nestled against the mint garnish (this is so you get the maximum aroma from the mint while you drink) and serve!

As you can see, this drink is all about process, order, technique and final coherent result. It is the perfect example of why Ultimate Bartenders work on developing their building skills and why their drinks are so much more enjoyable than those where building has meant no more than chucking everything in the glass and giving it a quick stir (if you’re lucky)!

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There are of course acres of text on producing and mixing drinks and I have merely skimmed over a few essential techniques and considerations here. The main reason for this is that this is not a

book about mixing drinks. I have made an assumption that every reader of this book will already have attained a certain level of drink-making skill – and what we are concentrating on are the skills and techniques that will help develop the drink-makers into fully rounded bartenders, eventually *Ultimate Bartenders*. There are countless books, videos and courses available for those of you that are still looking to improve on your cocktail-making abilities (I have produced a number myself), but this is about becoming a supremely talented bartender and therefore we will leave the drink-making behind now and move on to the sexy stuff...

## TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS CHAPTER

- **Consistency is key.** Always make sure that no matter how many times you mix a drink, it is exactly the same each time.
- **Deliver the perfect serve.** Every element of mixing your drink should be carried out to its maximum potential so that it couldn't be mixed any better.
- **Apply the same dedication and attention to detail** whatever the drink. Whether you are serving a bottle of mineral water or a sophisticated cocktail, you should be looking to achieve a level of service that is unsurpassable.
- **Perfect your cocktail-mixing techniques.** By understanding the processes and performing them correctly, your cocktails will be of a higher standard across the board.
- **Always remember the ‘little extras’.** They can often make the biggest differences in terms of your guests’ perception of quality and value.

