

A Factory Man

Award-winning bartender Tony Conigliaro on storytelling, service and why working on a shoestring is the mother of invention...just don't mention the 'm' word.

Words: Harry McKinley

If chefs are the new rock stars, then in bartenders there's something eminently more disruptive, subversive even. They're perhaps more punk than rock.

With his restrained demeanour and measured tone, it's an analogy Tony Conigliaro would perhaps choose to shirk, but nonetheless he embodies the wry confidence of a man whose work is globally celebrated.

Founder of Drink Factory – a collective of bartenders 'pushing the boundaries of their respective crafts' – he works from an East London laboratory, devising concepts that often revolutionise how we think of mixology. His first bar at 69 Colebrooke Row was opened in 2009 and quickly garnered praise, including being named among the 'World's 50 Best Bars' by Drinks International. In 2014, he opened Bar Termini, an intimate coffee and aperitivo bar in Soho that seats just 25 and where traditional Italia meets modern creativity.

It's in the Zetter Townhouse Clerkenwell, however, that we meet. A 13-bedroom Georgian property, it's noted as much for its cocktail lounge as for its idiosyncratic accommodations. Conigliaro collaborated with the Zetter Group on the concept, creating the menus both in Clerkenwell and at the hotel's sister boutique, Zetter Townhouse Marylebone.

But before we delve into his work and his creative success, let's clear one thing up: Tony Conigliaro is not a 'molecular mixologist'. Although he's distanced himself from the term before, it continues to follow him around like a wayward ice cube – sliding back into his vicinity however much he bats it away. It even takes lauded position in the opening line of his Wikipedia page and in the introductions to numerous features on his work. With its mention a practiced smile crosses his face and we get the sense he's resisting an eye roll. Understandably. So how has molecular mixology somehow become his signature? "Because it's an easy term," he explains. "Molecular doesn't mean anything. It's a misnomer, as it was with molecular gastronomy. It's just a way for people to pigeonhole something that is different from what came before. It's not what we do. It implies everything is scientific, when it's not, it's romantic and it's about stories."

Even at midday on a Thursday the cocktail lounge flickers with activity – guests with newspapers are huddled over cappuccinos and well-dressed arrivals shuffle through, weekenders in hand. It's a contrast to Friday and Saturday evenings when the bar heaves with revellers, but it reflects an atmosphere carefully designed to feel more like a private residence than a traditional hotel. "We created a fictional



character [Great Aunt Wilhelmina], who was a composite of all of these eccentric artists, grandmothers or matriarchal figures in our family,” says Conigliaro. “It helped us to create a story for the bar. At the beginning the designer [Russell Sage] would come around and make decisions based on this character. We would think about what she’s drinking, where she’s travelling to and what she would like. We fleshed out a story for her.”

This sense of narrative, fictitious though it may be, affords the lounge a life beyond typical design and adds another dimension to a cocktail menu that is succinct but varied. The Levante (Beefeater gin, saffron cordial, Amontillado sherry and paprika tincture) and the Köln Martini (Beefeater gin and dry Martini with homemade citrus aromatics) drop clues as to the history and voyages of Wilhelmina, someone we imagine would be riotously good fun as a drinking companion. “Obviously that continued with Zetter Marylebone and Uncle Seymour, who is her nephew,” continues Conigliaro. “It’s an enjoyable way to work.”

The notion of creating bars that veer from homogeneity and have their own story to tell, or certainly their own dynamic, is something that’s important to Conigliaro. “Ultimately bars aren’t individuals, they’re about individuals coming

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in and meeting other individuals,” he says. “So if you don’t have individuals creating that space, you just have something that is sterile. You need to have that connection and that isn’t something that can be copied and pasted.”

Of course, when working with hotels, there’s a subtle uniformity that often needs to be applied to afford guests an understanding of the brand and allow them to develop a sense of relative familiarity. As with Great Aunt Wilhelmina and Uncle Seymour, they operate as members of a family, whether they reside in East London or West. So how does one balance distinctiveness with consistency? For Conigliaro it’s about training and service delivery. “You can serve everyone to the same standard but also serve them according to their needs. Beyond surroundings that will change, it’s a common quality of interaction and a personalised touch. Otherwise it’s just a series of serving actions as opposed to something that’s actually for the guest,” he explains. “Also a commonality of training. Even if you have ten hotels, if you have ten teams that are good and that have been trained and educated well, then you’ll have ten good bars with a common thread.”

Like most major cities around the world London isn’t short of bars. Swing a bulldog and you’re likely to hit a Starbucks or a drinking venue. And, culturally permitting,

this bar boom is reverberating the world over. From speakeasies to gastropubs, high concept cocktail bars to spaces that specialise in a single spirit, it’s a crowded market populated by an increasingly savvy consumer. But even with bars as his business, standing out in a competitive industry isn’t Conigliaro’s focus. “We don’t pay too much attention to what others are doing,” he says. “That’s said without arrogance. It’s just that our interests are different and what we do is different, so we don’t copy or consciously think too much about setting ourselves apart. We’ll always try to break things down to our interests and do things differently.”

It’s this alternative approach and, perhaps, distance from common tropes that may make Conigliaro such an interesting proposition for boutique hotels. Whilst he doesn’t feel “at all inhibited” when working with a hotel he’s pragmatic on the issue of hotel F&B as a driver of the wider bar industry. Even with the greater support it can sometimes afford bartenders seeking to bring a concept to market, Conigliaro speaks ardently about the benefits of stepping out without a safety net. “Even financial restriction creates innovation,” he says. “We opened 69 Colebrooke Row on a shoestring, but we became more innovative because of that. If you land in the lap of luxury it can be less stimulating. I’m not saying that’s what happens in most places, as in hotels you can also see the upscale of that creativity. Everyone always talks about the Artesian bar [at Langham London], for example. They realised that there was an exciting new kind of bartender and a new wave of bartending that could bring more attention to the hotel than the rooms or the chefs could.” As for who else is doing it well, Conigliaro singles out Agostino ‘Ago’ Perrone, master mixologist at The Connaught, for praise.

As our conversation nears its end, and wanting to make an exit before Conigliaro’s long-waiting lunch wilts to oblivion, we dive into our standard talking point: the length of cocktail menus. When asked if they’re bewilderingly long these days, Conigliaro is swift in his response. “Always,” he says. “You only need 12 drinks and anything else is overkill. We have always stuck to that rule and I think it’s an important one. There’s a precision. If you have 12 drinks, everyone knows how to make those 12 drinks. If you have 50, that’s less likely and half those drinks will never get made. But importantly you can tell a story better, convey more about what you’re doing and it’s inevitably more accurate to what you want to say.”

Tony Conigliaro is not your typical showman. In person he’s controlled and unostentatious. Whilst he’s adamant that he doesn’t have a signature mixology style, it’s a character that manifests itself in his work. He leaves the theatrics to others and in a world of high-flying Boston shakers, dry ice and eccentric serving vessels, he concentrates instead on flavour profile, guest experience and – crucially – the art of delivering a story worth telling. ●

