

Czech Please

Renowned bartender Alex Kratena on success, innovation and life after Artesian

Words: Harry McKinley

Even on a weeknight the lobby bar at The London Edition has a healthy buzz. The music is upbeat, the post-work crowd boisterous and the cocktails suitably pithy. We're sharing a Negroni with Alex Kratena, the Czech Republic born, London-based bartender and global force in mixology.

He's fresh off a plane from Oslo and is due on another early flight in the morning, not that the crippling schedule shows. Snapback on, drink in hand, he's full of energy, waving to the occasional familiar face and openly excited to talk about his new projects.

Before that of course, there's the matter of his old project. Formerly head bartender at Artesian at The Langham London, Kratena led the bar to international recognition. His creative approach and flair for the theatrical brought a new dimension to the notion of the hotel bar and saw him become a figurehead for the bartending industry at large.

Looking back to 2015 it seemed that everything was going swimmingly for Kratena, as Artesian scooped the top spot on the list of World's 50 Best Bars for the fourth consecutive year. Just a few hours before the ceremony, however, Kratena and his creative partner Simone Caporale had handed in their notice. Nine of the bar staff would follow.

It was an audacious move that sent tremors through the industry and set tongues wagging. And whilst we're keen to delve deeper into the bar's success, Kratena's work there and his views on the hotel bar scene, his departure is the elephant in the room that needs acknowledging before we can steer the conversation backwards. So, what happened?

"My team, Simone and my business partners came to a point where the whole thing started to slow us down," says Kratena, "and we wanted to go faster. In order for that to happen we had to take ourselves out of it. Looking back I feel that there couldn't have been a better time. We were lucky and we just nailed it."

Luck, in all truth, had little to do with it. Kratena's talent had secured him a reputation that opened doors and which would eventually nurture a desire in him to tackle projects over which he had full control. It was his strength of vision that defined Artesian and saw him credited with reinventing the hotel bar.

"I never personally said that Artesian reinvented the hotel bar," he says, with trademark modesty. "But I did feel that that room was meant to be a different breed of animal. I felt that the classic hotel bar with its strict door policy and dress code was outdated and boring. It was one of the last places someone would actually want to drink. The key to Artesian's





Aquavit, Sherry, Grapefruit and Dill Pollen

success was the element of fun. It was exciting, experiential and we understood that no matter what you do at the table, with the food or with the drinks, it's about how you make people feel. People would come in with £20 and for an hour they would feel like a millionaire."

Kratena's commitment to the guest is clear. He's devoid of much of the self-aggrandizing chatter that can sometimes flow from bartenders of his stature. He takes his trade seriously, by which we mean he takes the enjoyment of others seriously. One thing he's particularly attuned to is the changing nature of the customer. He notes that not only do they want great quality and to be entertained, but they also expect value. "These days it's not only about the flamboyancy on the surface, everything needs to have a solid foundation," he says. "Artesian was over the top. We wouldn't do standard bottles of champagne, we would do magnums. We had the most dramatic interior. It was like a movie scene, where everything is a little too much in 'real life' but looks great on camera. That was our philosophy, but the important thing was that

there was a sense of purpose and that it never felt gimmicky. When I started at Artesian a place like that would have been a novelty, but today it's what people expect. London in particular redefined what hotel bars could be and what they can be."

It would be easy of course to wrap Artesian up as part of a collective bar movement or as part of a vanguard of hotel bars that sprouted because of shifting guest tastes. Something, ultimately, set Artesian apart. It was for many 'the best'. Kratena is grateful for the recognition. As he says it 'changed his life'. However he's also quick to admit that it's an idea he doesn't really subscribe to. For him the best is always subjective, but he does have one tip: consistency.

"For me it's simple things like keeping track of your regulars, which comes through consistent training. Print out pictures and put them on the noticeboard. If one waitress knows someone is vegan, why should it be so difficult for the whole team to know? Artesian was always consistent: open everyday 11 until late. The whole preconception about time and

schedules has changed. If someone comes in on a Tuesday morning and wants to crack open a bottle of champagne because they've just finished the most important project of their life, provide that for them."

For a bartender noted for his captivating concoctions, Kratena gets bogged down surprisingly little in actual drinks talk. It could be that he's simply bored of talking about spirits, but he openly likes to think of the big picture. Even when discussing cocktails the thrust is more on inspiration than specifics: how a drink was inspired by an Aesop handwash or how he famously designed much of the glassware used at Artesian. John Jenkins no less. The breakage bill was apparently painful.

"Albert Adriá told me once, if you want to be creative you need three things: money, money and money," he jokes. "Not that I agree with that. I think you can achieve beauty and creativity through restraint."

Before moving on to discuss Kratena's latest project, we're curious to find out what Kratena thinks of the machinations of the hotel F&B industry, now that he's had some time apart



Olive & Fennel liqueur

from it to reflect. He takes a perceptibly larger gulp of his drink before weighing in. For a start, it's unlikely he'd go back to a similar setup. "Where I think a lot of hotels are failing is that they cannot make timely decisions and hotel companies have no idea how to operate F&B. The ones who do it well – Mandarin Oriental, Sydell and Four Seasons for example – outsource. You have to think about the changing role of the hotel bar. A great bar is not just an incredible revenue stream, it's something that puts the hotel on the map. What would the Regent in Singapore be without Manhattan Bar? What would The Langham be without Artesian? What would The Connaught be without Agostino Perrone at the bar? Just more luxury hotels. So the function of the bar has been elevated for a reason. You're not selling a £25 drink, you're selling the brand and, actually, you're selling the rooms."

Luckily for Kratena, bureaucracy and a complicated distribution of decision making powers – he prefers a holocracy these days – are issues he doesn't have to navigate, with the launch of his own endeavour: P(OUR).

A not-for-profit project that aims to disseminate information to the industry and support worthwhile causes, P(OUR) is Kratena's 'love project'.

"With all of the changes in the industry we need to be responsible so we can maintain it long term. We want to expand everyone's knowledge and unite the industry. Alcohol and cocktails are only a smart part. People can be mad about coffee or mad about water. Sometimes we forget to communicate and so we hope to establish a platform that gives everyone a space to share what they do."

This ultimately manifests itself in an online platform through which all of the information P(OUR) collects is offered free of charge in the form of videos and podcasts. For an industry often dominated by corporate interests and brand secrecy, it's a pioneering and egalitarian move.

Another strand is the P(OUR) symposium, which launched this year in tandem with Cocktails Spirits Paris. A series of presentations and seminars featuring a broad spectrum of industry innovators – from chefs to artisan

brewers – it aims to provide insight and inspiration with a purpose: to help the industry operate more sustainably and encourage those within it to work better and work smarter.

With his name attached to one behemoth of a project, the next question on everyone's lips of course is when we can expect to see Kratena back behind the bar. Well, your guess is as good as his. Whilst the plan for a bar is absolutely on the agenda it all depends on finding the right space. This could be now or in five years time. After all, what's the rush? The one thing he knows for certain is that it won't be another Artesian.

With the ice melting at the bottom of our glasses and time getting on, the conversation winds down. As we bid goodbye any thoughts that Kratena might be headed for an early night before an early flight are quickly dashed, as he walks away and sidles in beside a recently arrived group of friends. We're not surprised. As he said earlier, "For me, a bar is where all of the beautiful things happen. My night would rarely be as exciting if I just headed home." ●