



In the Details

Head bartender at The Savoy's American Bar, Erik Lorincz discusses standards, inspiration and why he had to give up his hairdresser.

Words: Harry McKinley

There are a dozen or so famed hotels in the world that truly capture the imaginations of travellers and are synonymous with legacy and renown: the likes of The Ritz in Paris, Raffles in Singapore and The Plaza in New York. London's The Savoy would also surely take a spot towards the top.

It's perhaps why the hotel's American Bar, on a Monday afternoon, heaves with activity. In one nook a group of Americans talk loudly about their theatre plans for the coming evening and in another a solitary gent sips at a coffee and thumbs through The Times. A mother and her teenage son slip in, a few shopping bags in tow; she orders something from the cocktail menu, he has a coke. They're undoubtedly from out of town.

There really doesn't seem to be any kind of singular customer. It's a sign perhaps of the high esteem in which the bar is held, and certainly an indicator of its celebrity. Even for those who have never been, 'drinks at The Savoy' does sound rather grand.

My people watching exercise is cut short by the arrival of Erik Lorincz, American Bar's head bartender and the man I'm here to meet. He slinks into a seat with the pace of someone who has just this moment finished one task and is already thinking about the next. Life at the top is undoubtedly busy, like the bar.

In his white work suit and with slicked back hair he cuts a crisp figure – already giving the air of a man who likes things 'just so'.

I dive straight in and ask about Lorincz's journey to The Savoy, and to bartending luminary. "Well, if I'm honest," he says, and I hope he will be,

“the journey to the American Bar wasn’t as hard as the journey from Bratislava to London.”

Although now living in the British capital, Lorincz hails from Slovenia. He was already leading a team and managing a bar there when he decided to make the leap in 2004. But it wasn’t an easy one. He arrived in London speaking almost no English and got a job as a bar-back, collecting glasses and cleaning ashtrays in a nightclub. He couldn’t hold a conversation and describes moving into a shared ex-council flat in Archway that wasn’t so much from the outside, but at least had a garden.

As his English improved and his confidence in the Big Smoke increased he steadily moved from his bar-back job to Sanderson Hotel, and on to The Connaught. It’s quite a climb up the ladder by anyone’s standards.

By this stage Lorincz was getting the opportunity to truly showcase his talents and, in 2010, won Bartender of the Year in the Diageo World Class global final. The phone started to ring and one of those calling was The Savoy.

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reopening [after a £220 million, three-year refurbishment] and asked if I would be interested in the position,” he says. “I think they were drawn by the success that we had already created at The Connaught Bar. It was well recognised and there was an attention to detail on the standards, as well as creativity and innovation.

I noticed that the bar scene was moving from standalone cocktail bars to hotel bars. If you go back ten years, not many people went to hotel bars. Everyone thought of them as something for residents, places where travellers are sleeping over their whisky by the fireplace. That whole revolution started at The Connaught, with a young team that totally changed the face of the bar.”

At the American Bar, Lorincz was overwhelmed. He describes digging into the history of The Connaught Bar for inspiration and coming up short, while for The Savoy, every year was a goldmine, rich with stories.

“That was a challenge,” he explains. “Because you want to draw from the past, but when there’s such a wealth of history and legacy, where do you start?”

In the end Lorincz realised that if there was a common thread through the American Bar’s past, it wasn’t about looking to the past at all, but was a sense of innovation and of pushing forward.

“We want to make sure that there is consistency and that what the bar is about is recognisable. But we realised we want to bring it to that line where there is still something new. It’s probably about being elegant and creating an experience that speaks to today,” he says.

Today, of course, many guests expect more than just a well-made drink – they want a show. It posed something of a problem for the American Bar, which has only four barstools and where the vast majority of guests receive table service. Lorincz’s solution for the bar’s last menu was to create bespoke coasters and vessels for every drink in each category. He likens it to a restaurant, explaining that much of the action has to happen on the table and it’s something that bartenders at venues like his shouldn’t forget.

“Of course when people are sat at the bar they’re always more engaged, because they see everything,” he muses. “But in a restaurant you

don’t see how the chef prepares a meal so a lot of it is down to service and what is presented has to stand on its own. We have to deliver an experience that you don’t have to sit at the bar to appreciate. After all our cocktails are not cheap. They’re probably some of the most expensive in the city.”

He’s not wrong. While sipping from my glass of still water I cast a glance down at the menu and wonder what a Sazerac 5000 must taste like, at £5000 a pop. While the majority of cocktails sit at a much more palatable price point, it does pose the question of what justifies such a hefty bill. For Lorincz the experience is almost romantic – a foray into liquid history. Again, he’s not wrong. The cognac used for this particular Sazerac was bottled in 1858. Charles Dickens was still roaming the streets of London.

“I always try to explain to the guest that the things that are expensive aren’t because we just want to make a lot of money,” he says, “it’s because the main component is so rare and unique that once the bottle is empty, we’ll never be able to make it again.”

As if in demonstration of his integrity as a





barman, he recalls an occasion when he refused to serve a guest one of these four figure fancies. Simply put, he didn't think he'd like it. He also recalls a night when he sold three to the same man, who presumably did.

Lorincz clearly cares about his craft. He has a respect for the legacy of his bar, for the value of what he serves and for the manner in which it's served. But that sense of connection to the work and to the industry doesn't come quickly or easily and he riles against the new breed of bartender who expects success at the drop of an ice cube.

"I have new starters sometimes who feel as though they don't need to do certain tasks anymore, or work as a bar-back," he says, exasperated – understandably so for someone who started out in London cleaning ashtrays. "But I'll ask them if they know what certain drinks are made of and where they're from. If a guest asked the same thing and they don't have the answer, then they don't understand what they're doing. Once you think you know everything, you don't know anything."

It's now that we segue into Lorincz's well-documented love and fascination for Japanese bartending, something that makes sense now I have a better understanding of his exacting standards.

"The bartenders there are so humble and so dedicated to what they do," he says, in some ways describing himself. "They are so focussed on the task and attention to detail. They are so synchronised it's like they are dancing a tango and there's a lot of purity in watching how they work."

As such a detail-oriented person, Lorincz seems a better fit than some

for the occasionally restrictive world of the hotel, where an emphasis on standards and repetition are the norm. He recalls trying to train a hairdresser to cut his hair how he likes it, but explains that every time he went back, the hairdresser still had to ask. "After several years of that I just changed my hairdresser," he says with a laugh. It's an amusing story but also an analogy for his his approach to work, and indeed life. Further evidence that he does, indeed, like things 'just so'.

"The bar has always been a place for fun and relaxation. We always want people to feel comfortable and at ease," he says. "But at the same time there are people that need to understand that a hotel bar is not a pub. So if they want a beer it will be served in a glass, because that's how we do things here." Standards.

For all of this talk of detail and precision, Lorincz doesn't appear to be an uptight or restrained person. In fact he carries his meticulousness with a dash of humour, joking for example about how he couldn't sleep at night if he didn't have the right kind of ice at home. He also speaks joyously about how he finds inspiration in everything – whether it's creating glassware with John Jenkins or noticing how 'cool it is' that staff at a trattoria carry pepper grinders around in their back pockets. It's an idea he brought to The Connaught, where waiters now carry coasters in their aprons. "You have to be moved on a daily basis," he says. "And you have to be awake, because inspiration is all around us." Fitting closing words from a man who – to many emerging bartenders – is likely an inspiration himself. ●