



Always Stirring, Never Shaken

Agostino 'Ago' Perrone is one of the most recognisable names in modern bartending. Head bartender at Connaught Bar, he has recently seen his professional home crowned World's Best Bar, an accolade he attributes to service, creativity and authenticity.

Words: Harry McKinley

There's always something a little peculiar when sitting in a bar out of hours. It's early in the day and, with the bright noon light streaming in from Carlos Place, Connaught bar is bereft of its usual ambience. Somewhere in the background a few uniformed members of staff are tinkering with glassware and prepping tables. Elsewhere a small huddle has assembled, discussing the business of the day ahead in hushed tones so as not to cause a distraction.

We're here to meet Agostino Perrone, more commonly known as Ago. As head bartender, he's been instrumental in shaping Connaught Bar, most recently leading the venue to clinch the title of World's Best Bar at the Spirited Awards, part of Tales of the Cocktail in New Orleans. Quite the accolade to be sure, but Perrone and Connaught Bar are no strangers to high praise and awards.

He's talking shop with a Connaught colleague, who in turn is busily engaged with something ice related. When we're introduced

he instantly slips into hospitality mode, "So how are we doing this? Would you like to try some cocktails as well?"

If his name and general reputation weren't enough, his lilting accent instantly gives away his Italian heritage. He's in a chipper mood and smartly dressed: a full suit no less. We take a seat by the window and get straight to business. As one of the world's most influential bartenders he's no doubt well practiced in discussing his work and himself and there's little sign of reticence or nerves. He's come a long way. When Perrone first arrived in London in 2003 he barely spoke a word of English.

Growing up by Lake Como in northern Italy, bartending wasn't always a vocation. His passion was, and remains, photography. As a teen he dreamed of journeying to exotic locations, camera in tow, and he describes how from a very young age he's always been exceptionally curious.

He didn't enjoy school and instead found early inspiration in a Taoist schoolteacher who

taught him to cultivate and explore interests outside of the formal etiquette of education. Whilst he ended up going to university in Milan, it was during this period that his love for the world of bars started.

"I was going to a friend's bar in the centre of Como, next to the cathedral main square," he recalls. "It was very well frequented by the local people: all of the wealthy lawyers and storeowners. It had a wonderful atmosphere, almost like going back to the past when bars were for the aristocracy and creatives." Perrone describes the allure as something romantic, intoxicating even – imbibing aside.

"I completely fell in love with the bar," he says. "I started to touch ingredients that were considered rare. The lime and the passion fruit, even, were still thought of as very exotic and were only available in a few bars. So to touch those ingredients and to try and understand where they came from in a world before Google, to experience different spirits and then try to tell a story to the people

coming there for a drink, was very involving. I found it was satisfied my curiosity for discovering new things.”

For two years Perrone worked at the bar without pay and in his own time, such was the appeal. As he says, “I’ve always tried to work in places that gave me something more than a wage.”

Following a chance approach in a nightclub in Como, Perrone next moved onto a bar in Monza. “The guy who approached me, Simone, explained that he was working in what was previously a family business and that he had a long-term vision for the bar and of what mixology could be. He was my head bartender and it was an absolutely fantastic time in my life.” Fantastic perhaps, but also gruelling. Still living in Como, Perrone would drive in the morning to Milan, where he was now at American Bartenders School. In the afternoon he would make the journey to Monza where he would train and subsequently work the 10

from one of those people. He was my idol at the time.” The person was Andres ‘Dre’ Masso.

Masso was interested in starting a venue with a ‘Latin vibe’, somewhere that would have the Italian, Spanish and Mexican staff necessary to authentically deliver the concept. Whilst Masso is now living in Bali with his family, the restaurant and bar, Salvador & Amanda, remains a fixture of London’s Covent Garden. It proved to be a breeding ground for talent and other early recruits have gone on to individual success. Colleague Stefano Francavilla – still one of Perrone’s best friends – developed Calle 23 with Sophie Decobecq and is now brand ambassador for Tequila Fortaleza.

Following this was a stint at Dusk in Battersea, under the guidance of Giuseppe Santamaria, now brand ambassador for Campari in Spain; and owner Nidal Ramini, now at Brown Forman. Perrone describes it as the only bar south of the river to rival London’s cocktail clubs. “It was very successful. We

and many who would go on to be top names – he describes his career up until that point as being fundamentally ‘self-developing’. “I just always wanted to do my own thing. It might seem a narrow vision, but I always thought of it as a wider vision.”

Still, when he was approached in 2008 by Santino Ciccari – at the time assistant manager at The Blue Bar at The Berkeley – his lack of exposure manifest itself. He was invited by Ciccari to join him when he moved to The Connaught, immediately accepting. The twist? “To be honest I didn’t know what The Connaught was,” he says, barely suppressing a deep, heartfelt laugh, which subsequently ruptures to the surface. “I was involved with independent bars and that’s the world I was aware of.”

Once Ciccari began to explain the concept and ideals behind the bar, however – somewhere that would possess a cocktail identity and reinvent the notion of the hotel bar – Perrone was convinced he’d made the right decision. “Because at the time there weren’t any ‘real’ cocktail bars in hotels,” he explains. “The most advanced at the time was probably The Dorchester. Hotel bars were for classic elegance, style, champagne, spirits and classic cocktails. And then there were independent bars for creativity and extravagance, almost more inspired by the techniques of chefs.”

The opening team comprised Ciccari, Erik Lorincz – currently head bartender at The Savoy – and Perrone as head bartender. And while he says it’s been “magic ever since”, it’s undoubtedly been a process and a learning curve. He talks about the first time he stepped through scaffolding and into the space from Mount Street, greeted by the construction site that would soon become his professional home. “The only feature left from the old American Bar, when Brian Silva was the bar manager, was the clock and the wood paneling. The paneling was sent to France, to be painted with gold and silver leaf. Every one is a work of art. The owner also wanted to remove the old fireplace and put the focus on the bar, to create a stage where people could see the art of the cocktails and the service. But there was a structural issue because, of course, the fireplace had a chimney that went all the way up through the building. So the owner said,

‘do what it takes, I want the bar there’. So they did.” It was Perrone’s first experience of the inherent hierarchy that exists within hotels.

With a smart refurbishment and the new team eager to get started, The Connaught Bar opened with a theme of classic-inspired cocktails with a personal twist. The creations drew inspiration from Perrone and Lorincz’s travels, but also navigated the familiar territory of cocktail bar standards. The linchpin would come to be, and arguably remains, the martini: dramatically assembled on a slick black drinks trolley and combined with one of several homemade fragrances, as chosen by the guest. “In all of our drinks there’s technical research, then there’s a story and finally there’s a theatrical aspect in the service style. So the trolley is almost a chef’s table. You have the bartender pouring the drink from up high, catching the eye. Some guests don’t always want to talk, so this is how we make them feel that they are in a unique place. No talking necessary, just the martini they want to the dot. It’s a memorable and elegant guest experience that makes them feel at home, makes them feel comfortable and keeps them coming back.”

Of course whilst the martini is still a pull, much has changed in the years since, not merely in the increasing profile and acclaim of Connaught Bar but in bartending and mixology at large. For Perrone the evolving industry is something he is both aware of but also something he has come to shape. “Connaught Bar set a new stone in the history of the hotel bar. After this bar opened a lot of hotel bars tried to follow what The Connaught did,” he says, not with ego, but as a matter of fact statement on the impact it has had on the hospitality landscape. His own contribution to the sector has been noted by the likes of Tony Conigliaro and Alex Kratena in previous interviews for this publication. “We give a welcome drink on arrival. You probably see a welcome drink now in many places, but it started here. We were the first bar to import bar equipment from Japan, to use the ice moulder and have a block of ice behind the bar. We were the first bar to give a cocktail card to the guest to finish the experience, something that still works today.”

Outside of his own work, however, for Perrone the biggest shift has been in the

“Connaught Bar set a new stone in the history of the hotel bar. After this bar opened a lot of hotel bars tried to follow what The Connaught did.”

or 11 hours expected of him. Tired and bleary-eyed he would close out his day driving back to Como, only to repeat the same pattern the next day and the day after that. Nonetheless he was content, “I had my job, I had my car, what else would I want?”

Soon, however, the opportunity came to head to London with his boss. There they opened a bar in Chelsea with an Italian company. For Perrone it was a short-lived endeavour. Just a matter of weeks post opening he was sent to Italy on a professional errand, where he received a call telling him not to return.

For some, that might have spelt the end of life in London, but Perrone was already smitten and determined to pursue a future in the British capital.

His English was ‘very bad’ and he didn’t have a job, but for several months he stuck it out, attending English school and making connections with industry figures that would go on to be colleagues and peers. “In September 2003 I was lucky to receive a call

started to attract people from Chelsea and industry figures.” It was during his tenure at Dusk that Perrone began to dip his toes into the world of professional competition, winning awards and watching as his profile rose.

Next came the now defunct Montgomery Place in Notting Hill, which would become part of a trifecta of pioneering, mixology focused bars that also included Trailer Happiness and Lonsdale. “It was a beautiful bar: small, intimate, maybe only 40 seats; New York style. It was the time when the Internet became more accessible for everyone and when we started to discover the original stories of cocktails as well as rediscovering the forgotten classics,” he says. “We had one classic cocktail on one side of the menu and then, on the other side, our interpretation of it. It became a pull for those in the industry.” His work at Montgomery Place saw Class Magazine bestow on him the title of UK’s Best Bartender. It was a good time for Perrone, who says simply, “I was really happy.”

Despite working with several top names –





changing nature of the customer. He describes how a growing level of knowledge has made guests more demanding. “They understand the bar experience from every angle. They travel a lot and recognise the style that we provide here. These days guests know a lot about food and drink, so they know about spirits, about distillation and flavour. But it’s an opportunity, because you can engage and start a conversation.”

As Perrone sits in front of us, tie neatly in place and collar starched, it can be difficult to imagine him as the free spirit that once worked behind the bars of speakeasies and Italian nightclubs. Hotels are invariably a world apart, defined as they are by structure and procedure. He admits that things inevitably take longer and that, in the early days, he had to adjust his vision to fit. Even today he often finds himself having to think differently, to consider the story of a cocktail not just from a creative

standpoint but from a commercial one. “It’s no longer enough to have a good idea,” he says, “it has to be thought out.”

This sense of boundary, of intent, is perhaps what has enabled him to channel his creativity and ingenuity into forms that have proved lasting and which others seek to emulate. Even innovation he says is now about phases of ‘cost and experimentation’. Likewise, he’s had to develop an even keener appreciation for service, knowing that at somewhere like Connaught Bar guest’s expectations are high. “For the price that they pay, I would be the same of course,” he says. “So you have to be humble, because you need the guest. In order to give them a unique experience you have to place yourself below them, or at the same level, so you can truly use your imagination to anticipate their need. Salvatore Calabrese once said, ‘To be a good barista you don’t need to be a good mixologist. To be a good mixologist you

must be a good barista.’ Because if you have no personality to sell, no leadership skills to lead a bar or you don’t know how to welcome a guest, then this business isn’t your pair of shoes.”

So having discussed innovation and the strength of good service, to what else does Perrone credit his, and Connaught Bar’s, meteoric success? Unsurprisingly, authenticity. “I think nowadays people tend to fake their personal experience a little bit. So if you’ve never experienced Asian culture, or Middle Eastern culture or South American culture, don’t just put a chilli in a chocolate and say that’s how it’s done in Mexico,” he says with a chuckle. “I once went to Lebanon and it was one of the best experiences in my life: to experience the culture and the people, to walk along the beaches smelling the orange blossom, then discovering there is a gentleman who distils orange blossom water. I grabbed a bottle from him, brought it back here and told the story to the guests. That’s something real. Others often copy and do what’s common. They see something that works and replicate it, but I always want to do what makes me feel good and what makes my guests feel good.”

Despite Connaught Bar having been named World’s Best Bar, the primary thing occupying Perrone’s thoughts is an upcoming move. He’s not enthralled by the prospect of packing up his drinks cabinet. We get the impression it contains a substantial collection. Nonetheless he considers awards ‘a gratification’ but far from the ‘focus of his daily coffee’. He rarely goes out these days but, if he does, he cites Oriole, The Ritz in Paris, Blue Bar at The Berkeley and La Capilla in Tequila as his favourite haunts. Unexpectedly, he enjoys the mariachi.

All in all Perrone is a bartender at the top of his game. It’s hard to imagine where he could go next or what is left to achieve. It’s understandable then that his aims for the future aren’t extravagant or ostentatious, but instead rooted in how own growth. “I’m committed to my career and I’m committed to always serving people around me that are enthusiastic about doing new things. I’d love to stay in the hotel industry for a long time because I think it’s a great area, particularly nowadays. But being at the head of a team that is as excited as I am everyday is step number one. I wouldn’t be happy if it was a one-man job.” ●