



From Norway to Her Way

Bartender Monica Berg talks culture clashes, labels and why breaking the law led her to the career she loves.

Words: Harry McKinley

When it comes to interviews at Artesian, at The Langham London, we've had an amusingly unfortunate run. Once stood up by Alex Kratena, at the time head bartender, it was a case of history repeating when his business partner and internationally-celebrated bartender Monica Berg failed to show on our originally allotted day. These things happen of course and, like Kratena, Berg was unfailingly polite and unendingly mortified that our first attempt fell off the schedule. Bartenders of this calibre are busy people these days and, as they flit from continent to continent, project to project, the occasional coffee morning is bound to get lost in the maelstrom. If nothing else, it's given us a keen familiarity with the bar that was once widely acknowledged as the world's best. "I haven't actually been here since Alex left," Berg notes as she pulls up a pew on our second go, hinting at the shift in the venue's renown since Kratena, Simone Caporale and much of the wider team departed in 2015.

She's recently returned from Finland, but despite stepping off a plane the evening before, she's found time this morning to regain some semblance of routine – a yoga mat dangling from her backpack. Tomorrow she'll be flying off again, this time to Spain for a sun-soaked weekend and some downtime.

Hailing from Oslo, Berg believes she was destined to be a bartender. In her adolescence she rearranged her bedroom

into a bar and describes how she was always drawn to social roles. Her first job at 14 was working in an ice cream shop and by 16 she was a server for an events company. One night, at 18 (below the legal age for serving spirits in Norway), she was accidentally put behind the bar. "I made my first gin and tonic and I just thought, I am home, I have arrived, this is where I want to be," she says, laughing.

At 19 she spent a year in Greece, where the same age restrictions didn't apply, returning to Norway when she could pursue her bar work in less clandestine fashion, alongside her studies. Gradually, she says, she spent less and less time in the classroom and more behind the bar. "I worked everywhere from nightclubs to dive bars, pubs to whisky bars, and eventually cocktail bars."

In her mid twenties she accepted a role working for a bartending school and, at just 23, took over its running. Despite holding the position for five years, she was always conscious of her age, being younger than the majority of those she was teaching. "For the first three years I did nothing but read," she explains. "I felt that if I could answer all of the questions, or at least try to answer all of the questions, then age wouldn't matter."

Still hankering for the buzz of the bar, Berg left the school and returned to fulltime bar work. It was a changing time for the industry, with bar shows and competitions springing up,

offering an opportunity for bartenders to showcase their work and mix with peers on an international scale. She travelled extensively and it was at her second Tales of the Cocktail in New Orleans that she met Alex Kratena, her future friend, collaborator and business partner. This was 2012 and eight months later she had shuttered her life in Norway and decamped to the UK, where she is still based today.

“It took me a long time when I moved to the UK just to learn how not to be Norwegian,” she says, on the Scandinavian British culture clash. “Sometimes people perceive you as very rude, even though it’s not the intention. In Norway we have a very practical, straightforward way of thinking about things. If I need an answer, I’m used to being direct as opposed to asking how someone’s weekend was first.” Chuckling as she details the differences in social norms between her home and her adopted home, it’s difficult to tell if she was simply misunderstood, or if her time in Blightly has softened her frank Nordic edges. Certainly she seems more jovial than the average Londoner.

Berg’s career has consistently moved in an upward trajectory and is more varied than most. She’s worked with the likes of Thon Hotels, was the bar manager at Jason Atherton’s Pollen Street Social and is the creative force behind HIMKOK back in Oslo, to name a few. In many ways she’s been front and centre of an industry that has evolved dramatically since she first entered it.

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Artesian seemed the perfect spot for our rendezvous, not least because she once named it one of her favourite bars – during its heyday under Kratena and Caporale – but also because the hotel bar at large has seen a dramatic shift in perception, spearheaded by venues such as this.

“London has always been a centre for hotel bars, but it used to be very stiff,” she says. “The first time I came to Artesian was before I knew Alex and I remember feeling like I didn’t belong. But after the first half hour it felt so much more relaxed than I thought it would, and it changed my mind. The team at that time was part of a generation that made the hotel bar more approachable. There’s this mythical world of five-star hotels in London, but I don’t think the bar scene would have evolved in the way that it did if a generation of creative bartenders hadn’t found themselves working in hotels.” Today, one of Berg’s favourite bars is The NoMad Bar at The NoMad Hotel in New York, which she describes as “a completely different style of hotel bar.” For her it is practically perfect in every way, or the Mary Poppins of hotel bars if you will.

Behind the scenes, however, Berg notes that the world of hotels is often very different in operations than the freer landscape of standalones. “I’ve been in this industry for a long time and so I know how it works. Working in a hotel bar is very different to working on the outside and it’s a double-edged sword. Whether it’s here at The Langham or at The Savoy or The Connaught, you have very skilled

people making it look easy,” she explains. “If you want to have a career inside a hotel, you have to accept the fact that there is always going to be politics and there are a lot more skills needed than just to be able to make drinks.”

With her own bartenders, Berg proselytises the importance of taking joy in being ‘just a bartender’, particularly in environments that arguably cultivate creativity more than hotels. “It’s the only period in your career where you have the time to care only about yourself,” she says. “If you want to be a bar manager, you have to accept that your time as a bartender is over and the focus becomes more on choosing and nurturing talent, and helping them become better than you. If you still have the ego and the drive, and want to make a name for yourself, then you shouldn’t be a manager.”

Sat at Artesian, it’s hard not to note the importance of talent. With its elaborate, David Collins-designed interior, it’s undeniably a beautiful space, but since the departure of its core team, it has gone from the number one spot with World’s 50 Best Bars – four years in a row no less – to slipping off the list entirely. While its star will undoubtedly rise once more, it’s a lesson for hotels that attracting the right figures will always be crucial for success, but that retaining them may require more flexibility than they’re known for.

“It’s not necessarily about the individuals, but the team is very important,” says Berg, now in slightly hushed tones, lest any of the hotel’s HR team be within earshot. “This bar is very decadent, but what made it so special is that it felt like home, and that was down to the energy of the team. It could have been anywhere. In fact, a lot of the investment in hotel bars has not necessarily been in London, but in growing markets like Asia; markets that are attracting both local and international talent.

“Manhattan in Singapore is an incredible bar. The initial investment was, of course, on the design and the build, but they’ve also managed to get the right people, continue to train them, and also attract new people. You could take that team and if they were doing a pop-up it still would be an amazing experience, even if the concept were completely different. It’s because they’re a skilled and passionate group.”

In her years in the industry Berg has developed her own take on what makes for successful training and progression. She’s a firm believer in not taking the easy path and in a combination of education and practical experience. Too many bartenders, she believes, enter the industry with their eye on immediate rewards. But to excel in the long term she thinks it’s important to take it step by step. “To be able to do the job you have to have at least a certain amount of time in most positions,” she says. “Even if it’s for no other reason than to be able to know when people are ripping you off, if you want to do your own bar in the future. It’s surprising how many bartenders or bar managers don’t know how to cost their drinks. I’ve also worked quite a few years cleaning, bar backing or serving, and it’s all part of the job. If you only judged bartending by the three or four hours a day when it’s busy and fun to work, then it would be a walk in the park. So you need to read and gain knowledge but you also need to be able to connect the dots, and this you can only get through experience. As Alex always says, ‘you need the knowledge to know that a tomato is a fruit, but the experience to understand why you don’t put it in your fruit salad.’”

Berg speaks often about those that inspire her, or from whom she has gleaned pearls of wisdom, but one in particular stands out: a former



Ruby Reserve



Photography: Addie Chinn

boss from her time working at a brewery as a teenager. “She was very enthusiastic about being there and very solution oriented. She would make everything happen through sheer will,” explains Berg. “Even back then the brewing industry was very male dominated and everyone respected her immensely.”

The topic of women in the bartending industry has been covered ad nauseam and at first we’re sure that Berg in particular must have had her fill of discussing it, seeing as she is often held up as the poster girl for gender success. But surprisingly it’s still an issue that resonates, for the simple fact that it’s still an issue. Whilst she describes the bar world as more open than others, there still isn’t parity in the wider sphere of hospitality. She doesn’t feel that women, generally speaking, are underrepresented, but the divide becomes clear when one looks at the upper echelons. “In the US, the majority of bartenders are female, believe it or not, but the higher up you go the less women there are. It’s the same with chefs,” she explains. “50% of all cooks that go to culinary school are women, but they represent only 13% of head chefs. Of the really famous ones, it’s even less. You see ‘Chef of the Year’ awards and then, alongside, ‘Female Chef of the Year’. So it creates an uneven playing field, because why can’t a woman be Chef of the Year? For the first ten years of my career, maybe even more, I was just a bartender and then all of a sudden, as I gained more success, I became a female bartender. I realised very early that perhaps you have to make conscious choices. Because I like wearing dresses, once in a competition someone gave me feedback that I should stop looking like a girl and start looking like a bartender.” Change, she feels, will come and – despite the current sense that things are less than equitable – it’s only a matter of time before the label of ‘female bartender’ falls away.

Gender formed the theme of this year’s P(OUR), the initiative she co-founded in 2016 along with fellow bartenders Alex Kratena, Ryan Chetiyawardana, Jim Meehan, Simone Caporale, Joerg Meyer and Xavier Padovani. P(OUR) was envisaged as a programme to allow bartenders to share experiences, and includes an annual symposium which, for the past two years, has been held in Paris in conjunction with Cocktails Spirits. “We get to travel to a lot of places, we get to taste amazing things, and that’s not always the case for many bartenders. You reach a point of experience in any profession where you can start giving back to people that are less experienced,” she says. “Everyone is willing to come and work for free because P(OUR) is always going to be unpaid and you have to be happy to give your time to other bartenders. We wanted to create the symposium so we could discuss things that are important to bartenders, but not necessarily linked to drinks, coffee or wine. There are other amazing bar shows that already do that and we wanted to create a space where bartenders could always talk freely and not be restricted.” The result is a forum that looks more at social issues and concepts than the nitty-gritty of bartending. 2017 saw presentations on the likes of diversity, motherhood and even on using mathematical principles to look at the world differently. “The goal for the future would be that POUR outgrows the initial people and that other bartenders globally can take it to be theirs,” she concludes.

The future looks bright for Berg. A London bar with Alex Kratena and Simone Caporale is on the cards, once the right location is found. Like P(OUR) it will allow all of them to express themselves freely, but in the most tangible way possible for a bartender. But more than ever Berg is driven by a love of what she does. “If you didn’t love it you would just go home, have a beer and stay with your family.” Instead, she’s off to Spain. ●