



voyage avec charles

In the first of a regular travel column bartender **Charles Vexenat** takes in the French competition scene as a judge at the Trophée du Bar

Things started early for me that day, with a 9.36am Eurostar straight to the heart of Paris. The weather was beautiful; I dropped my bag at a flat in St Germain-des-Près, and got picked up by an old friend keen to introduce me to a new product from Bolivia.

It sounded dodgy but Bolivia is producing an A.O.C distillate call Singani, distilled from Muscatel Alexandria grapes growing in the world's highest vineyard in Tarija, in the south of Bolivia. The results were very interesting.

Anyway, this was not the reason I was in Paris, rather it was for two events: The Trophée du bar 2008 and the Fantastic & Ridiculous Monday of the Unusual Cucumber & Rose Society.

As a French dude who never really worked behind the stick in France, I was very excited to be part of the judging panel at a national competition and witness the level of bartending there. It also doubled up as a useful exercise as we considered our presentation for the Bar Show in Paris May 25 and 26 – which you should try to get out to.

The Trophée du Bar is an intensive three-day competition organised by Fernando Castellon, creator of Bar Expertise and author of the *Larousse des Cocktails* and *Le Grand Livre du bar et des Cocktails*.

To compete, bartenders had to present both an original creation and a classic cocktail in five minutes and take an hour and a half

long general bar culture test. And finally, to top it off, they faced a blind tasting on a specific brand of spirits chosen by the jury.

And what a jury. On it were Davy Nerambourg from the Hotel Manali in Courchevel 1650 Winner of the Trophée du Bar Mixology 2007; Julien Escot from Hotel Kilimandjaro in Courchevel 1850 author of *L'Art du Bar*; and me, the French guy from London.

And on bar culture was Mauro Mahjoub, the head bartender at the Negroni American Bar in Munich and owner of one of the most impressive bar book collections in the world (definitely a kindred spirit).

When it all kicked off the tension was on and the drinks flowed with some rather weird results – an unusual jelly layered with purée emerging and a liqueur float top up with champagne finish and a gin dribble. It all appeared very colourful, but not really to my tastes.

Overall though the competition revealed a good standard of bartenders. Elsewhere they were found using interesting ingredients like lavender extract, bisap, jams, infusions and coconuts as glassware. (And it wasn't Papa Jules, I promise!)

Overall I found the cocktails slightly on the sweet side but generally well-made with plenty of thought put into it all.

Carina Soto-Velasquez from the Experimental Cocktail Club really surprised us with the Experimental Meat Packing (see

recipe below). It proved a great twist on a Harvard cocktail with some cucumber notes and she also brought her own Cold Draft ice cubes to stir it. I know somebody who does that in the UK ...

experimental

Talking about cucumber and Experimental, I followed the excellent judging process with a trip to the Fantastic & Ridiculous Monday of the Unusual Cucumber & Rose Society at the Experimental Cocktail Club (ECC).

The aim of the society is to live the life, re-create and share cocktails from the 1800s to 1900s and do so with our friend Hendrick's gin at the ECC. Dress code only, *ha ça oui!*

On the night the theme was Jack the Ripper and out front there was a coach and horses parked while inside Xavier Padovani made Martinis for smoking guests. *Quelle Classe Monseigneur!*

Top hats and tails, thick moustaches and ball gowns were the attire, with guests found swinging to the music and enjoying the gin libations.

On the other side of the counter a regular bartender of those ridiculous Mondays, Mr Eric Fossard was concocting a Jack Le Snapper and the trio from ECC were offering Le French Dark Annie concocted with a little absinthe, Hendrick's Gin, lemon

juice and sugar syrup.

The guest bartenders were Jamie Forbes (dressed as a cowboy) and Mr Louis Smith – who, it should be noted, was the only one in the room with a real twisted moustache – shaking fizzes and serving punches.

My contribution to the event: the 'Long Liz Hot Ripper', a mixture of Hendricks and water boiled in a kettle served in a tea cup with a few dashes of Peychaud, a barspoon of rose & Honey Butter garnish with a cucumber slice and Ginger bread on the side of course ... Super Sympa!

The night returned to the ECC on March 3 for Sherlock Holmes 'Elémentaire mon cher Watson' and I now hear they're going to move to London in mid April for a one off ... What is that all about? n

experimental meat packing

10ml **Martin Miller's gin** (to rinse the ice cubes only)

dash **lavender extract** (to rinse the ice cubes only)

50ml **Hennessy cognac**

20ml **vermouth rosso Antica formula**
dashes **The Bitter Truth aromatic bitters**

glass: martini

method: stirred

garnish: seasonal flower