



# 10 STEPS TO *OWNING* YOUR BAR OR RESTAURANT'S COCKTAIL PROGRAM

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As I've grown from a novice bartender to managing beverage programs, I have found there are some essential steps which helped my career growth along the way. Here is the outline of them below, and we all know that growing an amazing mustache is the first step.

## 1. **Take the Time to Learn the Basics**

Really steep yourself in learning the basics. I cannot stress this enough, you have to learn how to create the classics before you begin to create your own amazing drinks. One of my bartending mentors taught me that in his time a good bartender could be evaluated based off of 3 cocktails and how well they make them. They were the Manhattan, the Margarita and the Aviation.

There's some homework for you: find three recipes and really hone them in to make them part of your arsenal. Try different bourbons, try a rye whiskey instead. Then try it with Brandy instead of whiskey. Your use of vermouth might be different even when switching to a different bourbon, so pay attention to how the drink changes as you try different ingredients. Also try a different amount of bitters. Test every variable in the recipe to find your perfect version of that drink, then move onto the next one.

## 2. **Build your Family Tree**

One of the strongest realizations I came across in my bartending career is that cocktails are not all different – many are related, like “relatives” in a family tree:

- Whiskey sour with vodka is a lemon drop.
- If you were to substitute rum and change the juice to lime-now you have a daiquiri.
- If you were to keep the lime and add tequila instead- you could have a margarita.

Look at all the recipes you already have and begin to develop *your* cocktail family tree.

Recognizing the relationship among different cocktails gives you a framework to know how to

build and adapt your own recipes.

### 3. **Understand the Product**

Understand the products that you are working with and some of the unique aspects of each one. When I first began to mix my own cocktails I remember I literally wrote down every single bottle that my bar owned and researched all of them. I found any piece of information that I could on everything.

For example, Reyka vodka is the only vodka still distilled in a Carterhead. (Of which there are only 10 in the world, Hendricks and Bombay sapphire operate the others). Here's an example from the document I created:

*“Disarrano: This Italian liqueur is made from brandy infused with almonds and apricot pits along with other herbs and spices. The legend behind this liqueur is that Leonardo da Vinci and his student Bernadino Luini had been commissioned to paint a town's church and Luini needed a model to complete the painting. He chose a local woman whom he became enamored with. As thanks the lady prepared for him this liqueur. It has had the same recipe since 1525, the same year as this commissioned piece.”*

There is no substitute for taking the time to really understand the products you are working with, but I assure you it is worth it! This first step will immediately differentiate you as you start to become an authority in your bar on the nuances of each ingredient.

### 4. **Ice, Ice Baby**

This is a pretty simple point, but it amazes me how many people don't use it. Alcohol will melt ice the second they come into contact. When building any cocktail, add your ice last, even if it's a Jack and Coke. I always pour my alcohol first, add my mixer to half way up the glass then add ice. The displacement of the ice will bring the cocktail to the top, and will help from diluting the drink down. You will look like a pro when people see a half full glass go to the perfect measure when you add ice.

While on the topic of ice, get in the habit of using fresh ice in your final cocktail. What I mean by this is that the ice that you shake a drink with should not go into the glass you serve your customer, this is called dirty ice. The main reason for this is that when you shake your ingredients, the ice becomes smaller as the water melts into the cocktail. The smaller ice that is present in "dirty ice" will melt faster than the larger fresh cubes that should be in the customer's final drink. Always give the customer fresh ice.

### 5. **Keep it Fresh**

Use fresh ingredients. If your bar gives you Sweet & Sour to use, go out and buy a juice squeezer and make yourself some simple syrup. Bring your own if you have to. Using Sweet & Sour will prevent you from gaining the knowledge of how to create a balanced cocktail. There are drinks

that you simply would not be able to create otherwise. Being able to achieve balance in a cocktail will quickly move you from bartender to Mixologist

## 6. **Learn proper techniques**

As an example, drinks that are completely spirits based should be stirred. Anything with fruit juice, milk or egg whites should be shaken. This is a general rule of thumb when deciding on whether to shake or stir. If a customer is used to you shaking their martini and leaving enough ice on top of their drink so they can skate across the surface, then for that customer, by all means shake the living hell out of it. As a test though, stir a martini in a mixing glass, for about 10 seconds, then pour it into the martini glass. As your pouring pay attention to how silky and almost thick the martini is when it leaves the mixing glass. It has a much smoother texture, taste and is much clearer in the glass. There's much more going on now, than simply an alcohol delivery vehicle.

## 7. **Leverage your Comp Check**

I was fortunate in my first bartending job that I was given a comp check every night in which I could use \$50 of product to build regulars. Sure, sometimes I would just use it to buy a shot for someone, but often I'd use it as an opportunity to grow my skills. If I knew that the person sitting in seat 6 was a gin drinker and they wanted something more exciting than a gin and tonic, I could make that happen. I would have 3 recipes in my back pocket, (literally) that I'd use to create a new cocktail for them. Maybe it was a French 75, or a corpse reviver #2. The idea is that you are building your knowledge of cocktails at the same time that you are building a regular. It's a win-win. I would have a new drink rotated in when I felt comfortable with the one that I had been working on. In a few weeks, your mental recipe file will be pretty impressive.

## 8. **Make Friends with the Chefs**

Chefs can be a great source for flavor development as they have years of experience with building powerful flavor combinations. In my restaurant, I would go in to work and immediately go into the walk-in to see what was fresh and in-season and then bounce a few ideas off the chefs. "Strawberry and celery, chef do you think that would work? How about Bacon and Vanilla?" Not only are they great sounding boards for flavors, but they are trained in techniques in flavor extraction that would take a lifetime to learn. If you're lucky enough to work in a restaurant that has one, the most powerful allies you can have are in the pastry department. Not only do they have the lifetime of experience a chef has, but they are specialists in one of the key questions in mixology: How to balance the sweet and the tart.

*"Strawberry and celery, chef do you think that would work? How about Bacon and Vanilla?"*

## 9. Understand the Cost

Get in the habit of costing out cocktails. This is a very powerful skill in which to develop. Remember that you are working for a business and that they are there to make money. Here's a quick way to do it.

List your ingredients and how much of each is in your cocktail. Then find out the price per bottle and the ounces per bottle. For the ounces conversion, there are typically 2 sizes of bottles you will find in a bar, liters and 750mls. A liter will contain 33.81 ounces per bottle, and a 750 ml bottle will contain 25.36 oz in a bottle. Divide to find the cost per ounce, and multiply the cost per ounce times the total in the drink.

### *Let's take a simple recipe for a Manhattan :*

1.5 oz Bourbon, .75 oz of Vermouth, and a few shakes of bitters.

Oz of Ingredient	Price / Bottle	Oz / Bottle	Price / Ounce	Cost
1.5 oz Makers Mark	\$25	25.36	\$0.99	\$1.49
0.75 oz Vya Vermouth	\$14	25.36	\$0.55	\$0.43
2 Shakes of bitters	n/a*	n/a*	n/a*	\$0.05

*\*I generally assume \$0.05 for bitters.*

**Total Manhattan Cost: \$1.97**

In my experience, traditional mark-ups in bars is around 5X your cost. So in this example, the cocktail would have to cost around \$10.00 for the restaurant to reach its profit margins.

## 10. Put it all Together

Now that you've grown your knowledge of ingredients, process and cost, schedule a meeting with your General Manager or your Bar Manager and ask them for some responsibility over your beverage program. Bring a completed cocktail list with the cost and recipes to show you know what you're doing, you've done your homework and you understand their perspective.

If they don't immediately give you the opportunity to design cocktails for the bar, see if you can work directly with the person who is. With the preparation above, a bit of dedication and time you'll almost certainly find your name on the cocktail menu in no time.

## What do you think?

I hope my experience and this guide were helpful! I'd love to hear from you to get your thoughts. Feel free to contact me through the contact form on our website at [www.abarabove.com/contact](http://www.abarabove.com/contact) or send me an email at [Chris@abarabove.com](mailto:Chris@abarabove.com)