

DENVER

HOTEL MAGAZINE

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SHINING SUPERSTARS

A fun look at some of Colorado's top athletes — how many will you recognize?

SHAKEN, NOT STIRRED

Denver's Top Bartenders Mix it Up

HAPPY NIGHTS

Our Guide to the City's Best Jazz and Whiskey

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Denver's Embarrassment of Riches

A Surfeit of Brilliant Bartenders

by **Eric Elkins**

Who are the best bartenders in Denver? In a booze-happy city like ours, it's a fraught question for several reasons. First, we have so many talented drink-slingers, and narrowing it down to the best ones could fill an entire magazine. Second, just defining "best" has its hazards — is it the award-winning mixologist? The LoDo powerhouse who knocks out a billion drinks an hour when the bar is four people deep? Is it the quietly competent bartender in the fancy restaurant, not flashy or trying to build a personal brand, just steadfastly taking care of her customers every single night? Third, with so many new spots opening every month, the roster behind any individual bar can change quickly. By the time you read this, a favorite bartender at one spot may have moved on to another, or drifted into the liquor rep game, or left the craft entirely. And, finally, as a confirmed carouser who counts many local bartenders as friends, no matter who is included and who is left out, I'm going to miss someone crucial.

So instead of trying to provide a long list of bartenders and what makes them special, I created categories to make my life easier: ensembles (so I can talk about whole crews and not have to pick a bartender from among them), unsung heroes, volume rockstars, and Denver legends. And then I reached out to some of my trusted friends in the industry for their recommendations.



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But even that doesn't simplify things as well as I'd like.

For instance, the Ste. Ellie is like my second home, and the ensemble there is made up of lovable, talented professionals, who make every visit a warm and memorable experience. But journeyman bartender and unsung hero Alex Kady deserves his own shout-out, as does Minetta Gould, the powerhouse heart of the place.

And by the time you read this, Kevin Burke, whose leadership helped shape Ste. Ellie (and Colt & Gray upstairs), will have moved on to Denver legend Sean Kenyon's (Williams & Graham and Occidental) new RiNo juggernaut, American Bonded. Kevin deserves extra consideration, because he was mentioned by several of his peers as one of the most-respected bartenders in Denver. When news came about his move to the new digs, the accolades were universal.

Some of my favorite spots in Denver are special because they have a whole posse of charming, talented, personable bartenders to make your experience noteworthy, no matter who happens to be working that night.

At the Occidental in LoHi, the raucous team doesn't take itself too seriously (just get a load of their Instagram account to see for yourself). Not only can they all spin up anything from a gin and tonic to a boozy and brown concoction to match your taste, they keep the crowd entertained with their back-bar shenanigans.

Just down the block, sister restaurants Bar Dough and Señor Bear sport ensembles of bartenders with a depth of mixology skills and a love of the delicious food coming out of both kitchens, which means they'll help you pick the right cocktail to go with your carne crudo or brócoli saltado. Maggie Maxwell is my favorite reason to visit Bar Dough, and Shawn Williams is one of those unsung heroes who has built a following in the neighborhood. Garrett Alvarez was so good at Bar Dough, they recently promoted him to run the bar at Señor Bear.

If you're in Cherry Creek, you can't go wrong with the teams at Departure and B&GC. Order a stellar, refined cocktail from the menu, or buckle up for a bartender's choice if you're down for something unique and delicious. Whatever you order, the uber-smart crews of both spots will regale you with the deep history behind the ingredients in your drink. Unsung heroes Chris Cleary, Daryl Prior, Geoff Goggins, and Marcelo Petrone can be found here, so be sure to say hi for me if you see them.

I have so much love for the Wayward/Way Back ensemble, led by another Denver legend, Chad Michael George. He and unsung hero Alexandra Parks have built a crew that works between both restaurants — a talented A-team of foodies who know their wines and spirits. Customer service is of the highest value and you'll feel like you've made new friends by the time you stumble your way out the door.

Speaking of stumbling, if they're not at the aforementioned Ste. Ellie, you'll find most of Denver's bartender family rambling into downtown's Star Bar late-late, where that ensemble, led by unsung hero Brandon Meyer, keeps the bourbon and craft beer flowing until the wee hours.



Alex Kady - Ste. Ellie



Minetta Gould - Ste. Ellie



StarChefs

Jason Snopkoski of Avanti Food & Beverage



Garrett and Maggie at Bar Dough



Wayward Bartender

When it comes to volume rockstars who are also a seamless team of fun and friendly bartenders, the fast and furious ensemble behind the two busy bars at the hipster food court Avanti Food and Beverage are unbeatable. Led by fearless leader Jason “Snap” Snopkoski, the posse of veterans and future hall of famers manages to keep a diverse clientele (20-somethings, 30-plus Bumble daters, LoHi locals, and families with kids) like they’re the only people at the bar who matter.

Definitely doing their part to keep the Red Bull and vodkas flowing for the better part of a decade are Front Porch’s Brooke Sutter and Isaac Leon. These two volume rockstars (who also qualify as unsung heroes) are in perpetual motion on weekend nights, keeping their young crowd drunk and happy while never losing their cool.

And Stuart Jensen at the high-volume bar Curio in the Denver Central Market, is succeeding in his mission to make bartenders nice again. He’s training his team to be gracious and kind when powering through a busy night, as they get pummeled by the masses craving liquid refreshment.

When it comes to unsung heroes in Denver — you know, the humble mixologists who aren’t out to make a name for themselves in bartending competitions or build a following on the ‘gram — the name that always comes up is Dwight Long at Colt & Gray. He’s unassuming and eminently likeable, always putting the customer first, and quietly knocking out some of the best cocktails in Denver night after night. He has that old-fashioned quality of quiet, friendly reserve, happy to be there at your service.

And the Denver legend field is deep. You won’t find a more beloved bartender than Jason Patz, a Williams & Graham alum who relentlessly ignores the spotlight. He ran the bar at Union Lodge #1 before moving to open sister spot Tartarian in the Highlands, where he’s raising up the next generation of talented, proficient, bartending acolytes.

Patrick Murphy at Mercantile Dining & Provision is a Denver native, a bartender who started a “Friendsgiving” event that benefits the Denver Food Bank every year. Ky Belk, beloved bar manager at Linger, is probably responsible for training and grooming as many successful bartenders as just about anyone in the city.

Over at The Family Jones Distillery, another legend, the eminently likable Nick Touch, has created a whimsical, sophisticated bar program that’s only going to get better over time as the distillery’s spirits age and mature.

Amber Osborn at Acorn is a hybrid — a wicked-fast volume rockstar whose fine mixology skills make her an unsung hero whom Denver’s bartenders mention with reverence and admiration. Whether the bar is rocking at capacity, or you’re one of just two or three people bellied up for a craft cocktail, she’ll be sure you’re served exactly the liquid refreshment you need.

What the Bartenders Say

I'm a fortunate soul, because some of my favorite people are beloved bartenders in our fair city. When I asked for their advice, they gave me a rundown of folks they respect and love. Here's a sampling in their own words.

Minetta Gould (Ste. Ellie) - Unsung Hero: Caleb Russell.

"One of my favorite regulars, Caleb is gracious, honest with what he knows and what he doesn't, and is a doer, something every bar team needs to be successful, especially with an ambitious program like Tartarian. I've always loved seeing Caleb at his places of work, and I look forward to watching him grow on Tennyson."

Chad Michael George (Wayward/The Way Back) - Volume Rockstar: Les Baker.

"He's as fast and accurate as any bartender I have ever spent time watching or working with. Whether he's slinging beers and vodka sodas at Star Bar or mixing up tiki drinks or old fashioned, when he's in the zone, he can move."

Geoff Goggin (B&GC) - Unsung Hero: Marcelo Petrone.

"I have never seen a bartender's choice sent back if that's the guy putting it out! A bartender for more than 10 years, he is 100 percent the guy you want on your side of a weekend night. Worked with him at two high-end locations now and most of the industry knows him well and has a very large amount of respect for him."

Greg Studley (Avanti) - Volume Rockstar: Duke DeGraff.

"Duke is unflappable. The man is impervious to stress, I swear. Forty people could walk in off a party bus and he'd be like, "Howdy."

Finally, pour one out for the beloved Denver bartenders who've crossed over to the other side, shilling spirits as liquor reps, relinquishing late nights and working weekends for regular schedules and healthy expense accounts. You may never have a drink mixed and served by Kamuran Maturaci, Ryan Conklin, Brittany Wangsness, Chad Larson, or Gentleman Jack Bethel, but their influence remains in the labels carried in bars across the city.

Wherever you go in Denver, you can't flip a shot glass without a superb, friendly bartender right there to help you find that next perfect cocktail (or the right beer or the perfect wine pairing). Denver is a hub of talent that's been nurtured over the last decade-plus.

The smart thing to do is ask the right questions, surrender to the expertise of your hosts, be gracious and friendly (and patient on a busy night), and, of course, tip well.



Brittany Wangsness



Jack Bethel