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The students are sitting at bar stools. The teacher is pouring a whiskey. But nobody is calling the school board, enraged.

Not to worry. This is the Professional Bartending School, where not even the brightest child prodigy would be admitted. But for the 21-year-olds and older who savor a foamy cold one or the sweet taste of a Long Island Iced Tea, this might be your destiny. For those of you who wouldn't know Anheuser-Busch from George Bush, you might want to rethink your career plans.

It's the middle of the first day for the students, in a classroom that resembles a bar more than some actual bars. The school is in Northside, over, fittingly enough, a bar called Boswell Alley. Six twenty-and thirty-somethings are seated at a counter hanging on every word, as Roger Oldham explains how to remember the ingredients in a Manhattan.

"Some of these word games are a bit sexist, but bear with me," says Oldham. "Think of a big strong man. Stereotypically, what does a big, strong man drink?"

"Whiskey," a young man pipes up.

"Whiskey. That's right. A man drinks whiskey," declares Oldham, and then he glances at the two women in the class, "Now, ladies, another way to think of that, and of course, you'll say there's no such thing, but I want you to think of a sweet man. I know, you've never met such a creature. They're very rare, almost extinct... So a Manhattan is made with sweet vermouth, and a big strong man drinks whiskey, and so that's what a Manhattan is: sweet vermouth and whiskey."

Moments later, Oldham is onto another important step of preparing the same drink: "We're going to chill the glass, because, the No. 1 thing we're going to teach you is how to be professional bartenders, so you can work at the nicer places, right? That's why you come to school, not just so you can work at the beer and shot joint on the corner. You want to work at the better places." Better places means better tips, he stresses.

"The Manhattan was created by Lady Randolph Churchill, which was Winton Churchill's mother," Oldham says a few minutes later. "She introduced this drink to the Manhattan Club in the 1870's, which is where it got its name. She was a bit before her time, drinking straight alcoholic drinks in 1870. In the United States, it wasn't considered socially acceptable, until the Alexander was created in 1923, for women to drink alcohol in public."

Good stories mean good tips.

The students who come to this school have their own stories, of course. For George Perry, a recent graduate, his tale is that he

Passing the bar

bar

Students learn art of mixing drinks

By Geoff Williams
Post staff reporter

got tired of the corporate world. When the 58-year-old is asked if he'll make more money this way, he snorts: "Absolutely not." "I'll be going from six figures to about a third of that, at best, but at my age life is not all about money. It's about doing what you want to do."

Jason Paul, 22, was inspired by the 1988 Tom Cruise movie "Cocktail." He also wants to work nights.

Thomas Hughley, 21, loved watching the long-running TV show "Cheers." Like a few other students in his class, he wants to open his own bar someday, a place where everybody knows everybody's name.

Mike Chance, 32, is planning to ditch his insurance job, work on his novel during the day and tend bar at night.

Linda Moore, assistant director of the school, offers other scenarios that bring students to the Professional Bartending School:

"We get a lot of college students doing it, while they're going through school, because of the flexibility it offers them — and the money. We get a lot of single mothers who want to supplement their income."

While bartending is frequently about fun, the school takes itself seriously. Oldham is the president of Professional Bartending Schools of America, which has a chain of schools around the country. He began tending bar when he was 17 ("I was 6'5", and nobody asked my age," he tells his students and in 1998 won the Ohio Bartending Championship.



Student Jason Paul displays his technique while mixing a drink at the Professional Bartending School in Northside. Right, instructor Sandy Gruca gives pointers to Adam Lewis.



Professional Bartending School director Roger Oldham watches as student Dianna Taylor mixes a martini. Below, a student takes notes in front of an assortment of drinks



When the 1994 movie "Milk Money" was being filmed in Cincinnati, he spent five hours as the personal bartender of Melanie Griffith and Don Johnson.

The students spend 40 hours learning how to make at least 140 drinks, including Sex on the Beach, a '57 T-Bird with Florida Plates and a Singapore Sling.

A lawyer lectures about the various regulations and laws bartenders need to be aware of. Representatives from companies such as Guinness, Martel Cognac and Anheuser-Busch drop in to deliver seminars for the staff and students. The students learn how to handle everything from the cash register to a tough customer.

At the end of the course, there's an extensive written test (a 90 percent score is required to pass) — and then there's the dreaded speed test.

"You have to pour 12 drinks in eight minutes," says Perry, "and they're throwing out all different types of drinks. There are a lot of things you have to do, depending what the drink is: how you present it, where you place the stirrer, how to place the coaster. The Long Island Iced Tea, for instance, has half a dozen ingredients."

The instructor doesn't wait for his students to finish preparing the first drink before he's barking out additional orders. And next to the student taking the speed test in another student also taking a speed test.

"It's important to know how to make these drinks correctly," Oldham lectures at one point. "Sure, you're going to serve a lot beer, and a lot of gin-and-tonics and bourbon-and-Cokes and simple drinks, but, when a customer asks for a complicated drink, that's what separates a mixologist and a bartender.

Mixologists work in the nice places, adds Oldham. The run-of-the-mill bartenders don't.

"Put your index finger on the top," instructs Oldham during the hands-on-training, "and keep the label facing you. Keep the bottle at a 90-degree angle. Perfect."

Dianna Taylor, 27, has just poured a dry martini. Nobody drinks it, however; all the liquid in this classroom is dyed water.

Nobody minds. The students are just glad to be here. "One of the reasons I want to do this is that a bartender makes people have good times," Paul says.

And the favor is often returned, notes instructor Sandy Gruca who used to teach junior-high English:

"We've seen some really quiet people turn into dynamic bartenders. It's a confidence-builder back there. It's like you're on your own little stage."