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Art of the pour

ENTER THE PLUSH RESTAURANTS, MODERN SPEAKEASIES and friendly neighbourhood watering holes from coast to coast and, chances are, the bar is not how you remember it. Cigar-infused aqua vitae, caviar alcohol and libations set ablaze: since the early aughts, the mixing going on behind it is looking increasingly like the first-rate liquid cookery of the pre-Prohibition era.

Patrons still have their pick of traditional cocktails, be they Manhattan, Negroni or gimlet. Modern-day bartenders are imparting fresh life to those as well as fashioning new classics with bitters, garnishes, unique and often seasonal ingredients, making tailor-made potables on the spot and serving them up in everything from a Collins glass to apothecary jars. Call it a cocktail renaissance with the barkeep — or given the artistry, skill and ingenuity involved, the mixologist — at the helm. One such mixologist is Mike Shum. A rising star on the competitive circuit, he's made The Lobby Lounge and RawBar at the Fairmount Pacific Rim hotel in Vancouver his laboratory, or rather his kitchen.

"The lines between the kitchen and the bar are blurring every day," says Shum. "Eggnog is just boozy *crème anglaise*, after all. And skills with a paring knife don't hurt either. Taking time to bandage up a cut on a busy night is never good!"

A self-professed wine, food and spirits geek, in 2010 Shum, then a server, began mixing drinks at the Hamilton Street Grill steakhouse in Yaletown on the suggestion of the bar manager. Once behind the counter, the mint julep cemented his allegiance to Cocktail Country. "There are only three ingredients [bourbon, sugar and mint], but it requires skill to execute well and is full of history," says Shum.

Now stationed at the Lobby Lounge, professional development courses coupled with autodidactic learning — Shum is currently completing his Wine & Spirit Education Trust (WSET) diploma level 4 at the Art Institute of Vancouver — have sharpened his skills. "I read cookbooks cover to cover and spend many nights up late experimenting with cocktails," says Shum. "With enough practice, though, you can almost 'taste' drinks by looking at a recipe you've written down before you've made it."

Shum's dedication is paying off. The fledgling mixologist made the Top 10 at last year's Diageo World Class Canada mixing competition held in Vancouver. Shum also nabbed a coveted spot at the 2014 Disaronno Mixing Star Lab in Cantine Florio, Sicily thanks to his original twist on the Disaronno sour. He also placed first at the Made With Love 2014 National Mixing Competition in Montreal with La Maison d'Escoffier, a dessert drink melding cognac, vermouth, sherry, homemade spiced and bittered maple syrup, and Scrappy's Cardamom Bitters, stirred over hand-cracked ice, strained in a chilled coupe and garnished with a shaving of white truffle. Ice, Shum asserts, is just as crucial a component in the making of a quality cocktail as the ingredients. "When done well, the whole is better than the sum of its parts."

What's next for Shum? Made With Love 2015, taking place next month. Until then, he can be found mixing things up behind the bar, where bartending and the art of mixology converge.

"They're different and the same at the same time," says Shum. "A mixologist may spend more time on the creative side of things but at the end of the day, the skills that the bartender brings are paramount to his craft." ✦