



Worth a trip

MEZCAL OLD FASHIONED FROM VOL. 39

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By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

On the weekends, when the bankers flee to the 'burbs, filching swigs of liquor on the Metra, the LaSalle Street canyon goes dark. The corridor between Jackson Boulevard and Madison Street becomes a lonely hearts club, inhabited by scant hotel dwellers and a few stragglers purged from revelry at The Berghoff or Miller's Pub. It's precisely the kind of noir landscape you'd expect Batman might perch above on a skyscraper cornice, contemplating his existential doom.

If Batman came down from that dark aerie, he would most likely tuck himself into the tufted leather sofas in the corner of Vol. 39 bar (39 S. LaSalle St. 312-604-9909) on the second floor of the Kimpton Gray hotel.

He would be here because he is a man of wealth and taste, traits which are amply rewarded, whether in the form of a trio of

miniature beef Wellingtons overflowing with foie gras and black truffle, or a fine selection of caviars. The caviar presentations are both, traditional (sturgeon eggs served with toast points, shirred egg yolk, zested lemon, lustrous licks of crème fraîche and tiny jewels of red onion) and modern (sphere-ified pearls of yellow chartreuse liquor that, when breached, burst with whiffs of honey and saffron).

The chartreuse caviar is a touch of whimsy served alongside a cocktail called the Canary Trap (\$16), a highball variant of a Tom Collins imagined by head bartender Jess Lambert. Lambert, an Arizona transplant who previously spent time behind the stick at The Dawson and Sable Kitchen and Bar, is a liquor savant. Though not yet a household name, she has a fervor for cocktails that reminds me of other established local greats, like Toby Maloney of the Violet Hour, Mike Ryan of Sable and Julia Momose of the forthcoming Kumiko.

There have been many epiphanies in Lambert's journey to master bartender. One is the time where she met Steve Ol-

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son, a partner in Del Maguey mezcal at Arizona's cocktail week.

"This guy leans over and is like, 'You want to taste something amazing?' I'm like, 'Who is this guy pulling a clear unmarked bottle from his backpack?'" Lambert said. "It's like (the) weirdest thing ever. But then I tasted it and it was this amazing juice, Tobala, and my mind was blown."

Lambert was moved by Olson's passion and it set off her own personal exploration of mezcal, an expertise she deploys quite well at Vol. 39. While Del Maguey is a single company, their mezcals are made in different family palenques (distilleries) in Mexico. Each of the mezcals is an expression of the process, the type of agave, where that agave was grown and the personality of that particular village's head distiller.

For example, Lambert deploys Del Maguey's Vida — a mezcal which has notes of honey and vanilla and plays that

against pistachio syrup, allspice, lemon and egg white — to create a drink called the Shinebox (\$14) that tastes like a smoky cold version of a traditional hot toddy.

Her most masterful expression of mezcal, however, is deploying Del Maguey's San Luis Del Rio in a mezcal old fashioned (\$28). Whereas Vida burns hot and sweet, San Luis Del Rio is subtle and smooth, featuring a mineral top note and a citrus lilt deeper in the finish that winds its way through the floral acidity of hibiscus tea and the tang of lime peel. All of that is rounded off with the hot spice of angostura bitters. This not your grandma's Korbel brandy old fashioned, but a refreshing elixir of tropical notes and hot spice, more like the kind of thing James Bond would brew up if he crash-landed a cargo plane carrying top-shelf liquors and citrus on to a remote Caribbean island.

Michael Nagrant (@MichaelNagrant) is a RedEye freelancer. Reporters visit restaurants unannounced and meals are paid for by RedEye.