

BRIDGET ALBERT KEEPS IT “MARKET-FRESH”



## Gin Blossom

By Michael Nagrant

**BRIDGET ALBERT HAS GIN IN HER BLOOD.** Albert, the chief mixologist for Southern Wine and Spirits and the co-author (with Mary Barranco) of the newly released “Market-Fresh Mixology,” from Surrey Books, is a fourth-generation bartender. Her lavender-eyed great aunt Tilly started the string by hopping behind the family tavern in Coal City, Illinois as a 12-year-old. Bridget’s then 10-year-old great grandmother soon joined Tilly and became a fixture in the street, hand-chiseling ice off the old delivery trucks with her fierce ice pick. Albert says, “My great grandfather used to get scared when he saw his wife running around with that pick.” The family lived above the tavern, and Albert’s great-grandmother would occasionally manage the tavern by peeking through the knots in the rickety floor down to survey the bar room below.

As a 16-year-old boy, Albert’s paternal grandfather, a Polish immigrant living on the East Side of Joliet, gathered up the gin made in his mother’s pot still, borrowed a car from an Italian family, and drove up the back-roads to Chicago selling the hooch during prohibition. He’d pay off policemen along the way while working the speakeasy circuit, often landing at the still extant Green Door (678 North Orleans).

Albert got her own start as a cocktail waitress at the Empress River Casino in Joliet, but as she says, “I didn’t have the ability to flirt with the ugly old guys.” One day a bartender called in sick, and she asked if she could jump behind the counter. She loved it, and steeped in the lore of her family history, dedicated herself to being the best. She pored over classic tomes, many given to her by her grandmother, including the “Mr. Boston” guides.

She moved to Las Vegas, where she met Tony Abou-Ganim, then the head mixologist for the Bellagio. She was inspired by his success and talent, and approached him, saying, “I will cut your limes and schlep your garbage. I just want to learn.”

Under Abou-Ganim’s mentorship, Albert eventually earned a shot as the first American woman to compete at the Bacardi Martini Grand Prix, often considered the Super Bowl of bartending. You’re only allowed to enter the competition once, so Albert practiced her signature drink, the 1862, an aperitif made of Martini and Rossi Bianco vermouth, Orange Curacao, lemon juice, passionfruit puree and a splash of spumante (the drink is named after the founding year of Bacardi) four hours a day for four months. She took home a silver medal, a feat that caused her disbelief. During the awards ceremony they called her name, and her husband nudged her and told her she won. She responded, “Nah, that must be somebody else.”

In 2007, Albert faced Abou-Ganim in the first-ever Iron Chef Cocktail Battle alongside Mario Batali and challenger Robert Gadsby. Inspired and blessed by the opportunity, she says, “Tony and I both started to cry. We were hugging each other and the producers were like, ‘Hey, this is a battle.’”

Being such a successful cocktail shaker also has its hazards, though. Every weekend party and backyard BBQ becomes a busman’s holiday, as friends and family always want the expert bartender to mix their drinks. Albert says, “Sometimes I just want to sit down and have a beer. I’m off the clock.”

In response, Albert decided to create a recipe book dedicated to the “non-bar geek,” so her immediate circle would finally have a manual to hone their skills. She says the book, “Market-Fresh Mixology,” is a “love story to my friends and family who love great cocktails, but don’t particularly know how to make them.”

And while the book’s recipes are very accessible (they were tested by her co-writer Barranco and family and friends), the guiding principle of the book—that all the drinks should be market-fresh or seasonal—is relatively revolutionary. Most cocktail books are gimmicky dictionaries along the lines of “1,000 Martinis to Soothe Your Depression” or “Five Cosmos for Your ‘Sex and The City’ Party.”

Albert’s recipes, like the Spiced Beet (a nod to her Polish roots) or the Savory Avocado Margarita, are based on farm-fresh produce and organized according to the seasons. Albert’s style is a reflection of growing up with fresh produce in a farm community in Shorewood, Illinois. She says, “We just got a Target. My family had a tab at the local store.”

Albert’s also a student of history, and the book is littered with anecdotes of the origins of many classic cocktails, so if you don’t know Tom Collins from Phil Collins, you will now. And if you’re one of Albert’s friends, you better start studying up, because for her there’s only one measure of the book’s success. “I’m hoping I go to my friends’ houses and they make me a great Mojito,” she says.

### MUSEUMS

#### Field Museum

1400 S. Lake Shore (at Roosevelt), (312)922-9410. ➔NATURE UNLEASHED. The Field Museum’s “Nature Unleashed” opens with a tree cracked in half and stripped of bark. It is just one of many extraordinary visuals from the planet’s most destructive natural phenomenon: earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanoes, hurricanes and tornados. The exhibit juxtaposes Earth’s callous meteorological and seismic forces with the poignant human stories affected by its disasters. Visuals mimic the colossal power of nature while smaller artifacts, such as handwritten letters from Hurricane Katrina survivors, tug at heart-strings. The recorded sounds of seismic activity (alien-like pops and scrapes) lend the space an omnipresent sense of doom, as if at any moment the floor might rupture. The exhibit’s most impressive offering is the invention of stormchaser Tim Samaras, a digital recording device which allows guests to stand in a 360-degree video-viewing area that places them in an approaching tornado’s path. For several heart-stopping seconds, visitors are encircled by the eye of the storm. (Laura Hawbaker) Through Jan 4. CELEBRATING WOMEN features multiple photographs by renowned photographer Paola Gianturco. Through Sep 7. ➔MYTHIC CREATURES: DRAGONS, UNICORNS & MERMAIDS. This latest exhibit at the Field Museum should unleash the imagination of everyone who attends, as “Mythic Creatures: Dragons, Unicorns & Mermaids” delves into the realm of the relative unknown. The exhibit’s divided into four sections: land, sea, air and dragons. Every room is beautifully crafted, with a quintessential creature recreated to match each room. In the sea-themed room, the infamous Kraken, a gigantic sea monster that has been featured most recently in “The Pirate of the Caribbean” film series, appears to be coming from the floor of the exhibit room, with its serpentine tentacles winding up towards the ceiling. Mermaids are among the highlighted sea-oriented creatures, as the exhibit contrasts the numerous variations on the myths that range from the familiar to the relative unknown. In the air-creature section, a Roc greets the visitors with its seventeen-foot wingspan and equally massive talons; the room also takes a look at the egasus and a model of the Aepyornis. The latter is a now-extinct bird that was the largest to have ever lived, standing at more than ten feet tall. The kids also have an opportunity to create their own dragon using a touchscreen, if all the nifty models and short films aren’t enough. With its wondrous layout, “Mythic Creatures” captures the imagination of all ages by not only making the unreal accessible, but also by allowing the same myths to take on a life of their own. (Thomas Barbee) Through Sep 1. ➔MELTING ICE—A HOT TOPIC: ENVISIONING CHANGE. This small exhibit off the Field’s main lobby is easy to walk past. “Melting Ice” occupies a sparse two-room alcove, darkly lit with the muted, cool tones of the arctic tundra. It’s a “blink-and-you’ll-miss-it” set-up, which is unfortunate, given the project’s big, world-changing aspirations. Organized as part of the “Art of the Environment” initiative by the Natural World Museum and the United Nations Environment Program, the exhibit consists of twenty-three pieces from an international cast of artists. Using modern sculpture, video installation, choreography and frank point-and-click photography, the exhibit documents the effects of climate change. Subject matter focuses on the arctic: endangered penguins in Antarctica,

Alaskan villages cobbled away by a rising sea, fresh water depletion and collapsing icebergs. Here and there are odd men out, such as Free Range Studios contribution: an idealistic, fictional documentary from fifty years in the future in which massive protests, bio-fuel and a laughable “Obama-McCain” ticket change the course of human history. Saturating the vibe of the entire exhibit is a driving urgency to fire up visitor’s attitudes about global warming. This is art-meets-environmental activism, and one can’t help but leave feeling invigorated with a renewed desire for change. (Laura Hawbaker) Through Sep 1. Hours: Daily 9am-5pm. Fees: \$12 adults, \$7 children 4-11, \$7 students & seniors. With Chicago ID: \$10, \$6 children, \$7 students & seniors.

#### Museum of Science and Industry

57th and Lake Shore, (773)684-1414. ➔SMART HOME: GREEN + WIRED. The Museum of Science and Industry’s latest exhibit is a fully functioning three-story house, the “Smart Home,” an ecologically sound building built on the foundation of material, energy and water efficiency. This is green living gone haywire. Museum guests are ushered through a twenty-minute eye-opening (if somewhat rushed) tour of the house. Every aspect of the building is environmentally friendly, from the recycled construction material, to the organic food, to the LED lights. An ethanol-burning fireplace. A “raw” wood kitchen table. And of course, in the garage, a hybrid car. The house is called “smart” for a reason. Even the houseplants are clever. When a plant needs watering, a call is placed to your phone. That’s right—your plant is calling to say it’s thirsty. A black obelisk with blinking blue lights (that calls to mind HAL from “2001: A Space Odyssey”) is the “brains and guts” of the “Smart Home”; it’s an automated system that controls the heating, cooling and lighting of the entire house. A module of the house’s network charts not only the amount of energy being used, but also the amount being produced. Guests are given a “Resource Guide” which, like a shopping catalogue, details each gadget and piece of furniture, and where everything can be purchased. We all might not be able to live in technologically advanced, self-sustainable houses, but we can live green by bringing aspects of the “Smart Home” into our own. (Laura Hawbaker) Through Jan 4. ➔THE GLASS EXPERIENCE. Vases edged in filigree, windows like Japanese shoji screens, vibrant sculpture pods—one wouldn’t expect an exhibit at the Museum of Science and Industry to feature galleries flaunting Tiffany lamps, Frank Lloyd Wright windows and a Chihuly Macchia sculpture garden, but “The Glass Experience” does just that. The exhibit celebrates the collaboration between glassblowing and science, a relationship in which the artisans of Venice and Murano jumpstart technological leaps forward in LCD and fiber optics. The scientific specifics are only touched on in favor of a more all-inclusive look at the glass world. (Laura Hawbaker) Through Sep 1. Hours: Mon-Sat 9:30am-5:30pm, Sun 11am-5:30pm. Fees: \$11, \$10 Chicago residents with ID; \$9.50 seniors 65+, \$8.75 city residents; \$7 children 3-11, \$6.25 city residents; children 3 and under & members free. Thu free. Omnimax, U-505 sub tour & CSI exhibit prices not included. Parking \$12 non-members.