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Behind the Bar Bitter Bar's Michael Cerretani holds his own in national competitions

By [Laura Shunk](#) Fri., Jan. 13 2012 at 5:00 PM
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courtesy of Michael Cerretani

Michael Cerretani, barman at Boulder's [Bitter Bar](#), has been bartending off and on for about a decade, but he didn't start down the craft-cocktail path until he landed a job at Bitter Bar a few years ago.

"My family members were big martini and Manhattan drinkers, so there were always cocktails around, and I developed an interest in it," he explains. "I started bartending when I could get my hands around the stick, when I was 22 or 23, and did it off and on, but eventually decided it was something I really enjoyed doing. I moved to Boulder and walked in the door of the Bitter Bar. They'd been open for about a year, and I started talking to

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James Lee and Mark Stoddard. I said, 'Look, I have no experience with craft cocktails. But I'm really interested in this, and I'd love to give it a shot.' They hired me, and I found very quickly that it's a vertical learning curve. But you can't really ask for better people to train you, so I did my best to keep my mouth shut and my ears open and learn as much as I could."

Cerretani also started studying at home and diving into the spirits scene wherever he could, touring Leopold Bros. Distillery and picking the brains of other members of the industry. "Every time there was a brand ambassador in town, I made it a point to hang out with them as much as I could and learn as much as I could," he says.

Not only did that make him an asset behind the bar, it also made him a top-notch competitor. Last year, he took first place in the regional Bombay Sapphire competition and finished in the top five at nationals. As a result, this year he judged fellow Boulderite Bryan Dayton in the regional contest before Dayton [went off to Vegas to win](#). And right now, Cerretani is in New York, having competed on Monday in the national Woodford Reserve and *Esquire* Manhattan Experience, after besting his regional competitors here.

"There were sixteen people from throughout the country, and they wanted you to reinvent the classic Manhattan," he explains. "There were a lot of variations, some of which were so far from a Manhattan that I was a little shocked." His own variation was a take that kept the traditional bittersweet flavor profile of a classic Manhattan through Cocchi's Vermouth di Torino, yellow Chartreuse and housemade Amer Picon plus Woodford Reserve. And though he didn't win, Cerretani says the experience was worth it for the judges alone: "The judges were Dave Wondrich, Gary Lee, Chris Morris -- the master distiller at Woodford Reserve -- and Leo Robitschek, head bartender at Eleven Madison Park. It was really cool to get up in front of those guys and talk cocktails."

Here's more talking cocktails with Cerratani:

Bartending rule to live by: Be a bartender first and a mixologist when you have time. We're bartenders. We tend to a bar. Our customer is always our first priority. If our customer comes in and wants a shot of whiskey and a beer, pour them a shot of whiskey and a beer - make them have the most enjoyable experience possible.

Five words to describe your drink list: That's tough. We just launched a new one on Monday. Mark and I developed it together and put some really hard work into it. How about: An exciting winter cocktail menu.

Favorite drink on your list and why: We just put a Spanish Coffee on the menu, and that would be my favorite current winter cocktail. It's interesting - classic preparation of flaming your rum; adding your coffee liqueur, high quality Triplum liqueur and house blend Ozo coffee; topping with homemade whipped cream and shaving a little nutmeg on top. That's what I'd be drinking right now.

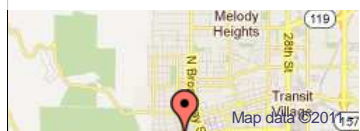
Favorite item on your back bar: The fist-pumping cat. It's left over from the days of Happy. It's this little white Siamese cat and it's hilarious. Oh, spirits? Pre-Prohibition medicinal whiskey. It's dated from 1917, and it's never been opened. It's just dorky and cool. I'm very curious about it, but I don't think we'd ever open it.

What was your craziest night behind the stick? I was working at a bar back in upstate New York. It was the other bartender's birthday, and he was scheduled to work. My boss asked me if I'd mind coming in taking over his bar shift after my serving shift so we could throw him a surprise party. So I hopped behind the stick and said, "George, take off man, it's your party." Pandemonium ensued. All of our friends pounded through the doors, and they were reaching over the bar to grab beers from the coolers because I couldn't keep up with the hundreds of drink orders. George was riding around on someone's shoulders, drunk out of his mind, calling for more shots. One of those moments where you look up and go with it. George was friends with the owner, luckily, so it was a great night.

Favorite Denver venue for a drink that's not your own and what you order when you're there: I have several, so this is tough. Honestly, after a shift, I love going to the [Sundowner](#) because it's just so the opposite of what the Bitter Bar is. It's dirty, and it's got pool tables everywhere. But at the same time, it has a fantastic whiskey selection and a great selection of bombers. If you want to drink Stag, you can. If you want to drink beer and rail whiskey, you can. For cocktails, I've been going to Oak at Fourteenth a lot. I've got a lot of friends that work there, and I enjoy a really good back bar as much as the next guy.

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Location Info



The Bitter Bar
835 Walnut St, Boulder, CO
Category: [Restaurant](#)

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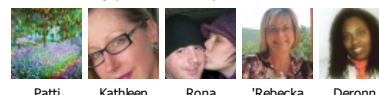
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