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As told to Gideon Jacobs, 1276 words.

Tags: Food, Creative anxiety, Focus, Beginnings, Day jobs.



On never making the same thing twice

Mixologist Arley Marks on the path that led him to working with drinks, how designing a cocktail menu is similar to sculpting, and always thinking of ways to avoid repeating yourself.

You do a lot of things. Is that by choice or necessity? Do you think we're in a moment in your industry, or maybe creative industries in general, when you can't just do one thing?

Actually, I feel the opposite. In New York, one of the first questions people ask is, "What do you do?"

That's true. People do ask you to define yourself.

I'm always having to define myself as a mixologist because that's how I make money and that's the biggest umbrella I can open up. But I do more than that. I think I end up using drinks as a way to access a lot of different communities, realms, and places around the world. It's just become my best creative outlet. But I studied furniture design and sculpture, and we built everything in this bar: I did all the metalwork, the bar top, the stools, and built the furniture. That said, I would never call myself a carpenter or anything. I also wouldn't really feel comfortable calling myself an artist. I've always had a little bit of a challenge identifying myself.

So drinks are a means to an end of sorts? An entry point into other things?

In a way. The whole drinks thing happened randomly. I was working in restaurants when I was in college. I was also training as a sushi chef. I would always come back to the service industry because when you become good at something like that, it's just such an easy job to pick up anywhere.

Did you always fall back into the service industry for financial reasons?

I had to make money, so I would end up working in those roles, but I always had a creative project going on as well. Like in Providence, I ended up quitting a sushi bar after four or five years, and my friend (Jonathan Mosca), who designed this place, and I had like \$100, and built this cart that we pulled behind a bicycle, and served vegetarian sushi from. We'd just pop up at bars. It was super fun. We designed and built this thing, and figured out how it worked and had this weird experiment.

Clearly, a beverage—as an object and concept—is totally universal. Every human has to drink something. But the beverage industry seems kind of niche to me.

Is it niche? It's an enormous industry. Well, I guess it is and it isn't. For example, at Honey's, we make mead. The mead business is niche. But it's also one of the fastest-growing alcohol industries. Mead is sort of at the very beginning, but it's growing.

You're early on mead.

Yeah, we're really early on mead. But at this point, it's more exciting for me to make something that doesn't have alcohol in it because the shackles have been taken off. A lot of making cocktails is balancing alcohol, and I can barely taste alcohol anymore. You remember when you first tasted alcohol when you were a kid? How fucking crazy it was?

I was drinking from a plastic bottle of vodka in Union Square Park.

I can taste balanced drinks, but I don't get that feeling anymore.

I'm wondering how you come up with drinks. What do you do when you need an idea?

Well, I'm often given prompts when working for money. People have a bunch of dumb ideas or interesting ideas, and my assignment is to create something that sort of fits with those. Give me a kernel of inspiration, and I can usually run with it.

Do you find it helpful to have a starting point, even if it's a bad starting point?

Seasonality is always a starting point because seasonality in New York is really specific. That's a prompt: What's seasonal? What is being grown in New York state, right now? I live in Chinatown. A lot of what I'll do is walk around my neighborhood. It's not farm-to-table seasonality. It's more like, what's flowing through Chinatown? The process is a lot like making sculpture and building things.

When I was making art, I found this abandoned dog racing track in Connecticut, and there were all these televisions and AV equipment in there, and I loaded it all out in a van and ended up making video art for five years after that because I had all this stuff. I'm always excited by having things at my disposal that I wouldn't normally have. So, it's not necessarily about just honing a particular craft, but exposing myself to new things and figuring out new ways of working with them, because I never make the same drink twice.

What do you mean you never make the same drink twice?

I mean, although the Honey's bar is the same, I would never sell one drink to one person for an event and sell that same drink for another person. I'm always like, "How do I figure out something new?" It keeps it really exciting and it feels to me like more of a creative practice. We have the Ocean Martini here. I go out to Montauk and I get ocean water.

About the Ocean Martini: here we are at this "cool" bar in Bushwick, which is sort of the "cool" neighborhood in New York's "coolest" borough, and you're collecting ocean water for a martini. I could see critics saying it's a little over-the-top, or Brooklyn-y, in a "Brooklandia" sort of way. How much do you hear that noise? How do you avoid letting noise like that stifle your creativity?

To be honest, I really don't care. I really don't give a shit. The reason that drink's on the menu is that I really think it's the best martini I've ever had. And it's fun.

How do you deal with the fact that you often put a lot of creativity and effort into a medium some people might not be fluent enough in to appreciate your creativity and effort? In other words, does it ever bother you when you make a martini for someone who has never had a martini before and takes this carefully designed drink down in a single gulp?

If it did, my life would suck. I really don't need people to get in deep. The people who want to get in deep can get in deep. Those are the people who are going to care about it. Someone else will hopefully find a drink they love and just drink it. I bartended last Saturday. This place was mobbed. At a certain point in a night like that, you just have to be a machine and not necessarily delve in too deep. But if that was the norm and that was what was expected, I don't think it would be fun for me. We probably suffer a little bit in terms of how busy the bar is on the weekdays because it might not be an easy place to come if you're a very basic drinker.

You mean if you changed the identity of Honey's, you could probably make more money?

Yes. But I like this place the way it is.

Arley Marks recommends:

read Ecotopia by Ernest Callenbach

drink anything made by Laurent Cazottes

spend some time in the woods

take the B train down to Brighton beach on a Friday during the summer months, then walk down the boardwalk towards Coney Island just as the sun is setting, then catch the fireworks display overhead

visit Harbin Hot springs

Name


Arley Marks


Vocation

Mixologist

Fact

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