

An Alien in Paris

Master of the Cocktail

Colin Field came to Paris in pursuit of style and perfection. He discovered a knack of reviving failing bars into oases of comfort and conviviality. He now holds court at the Bar Hemingway.

By Carol Berens

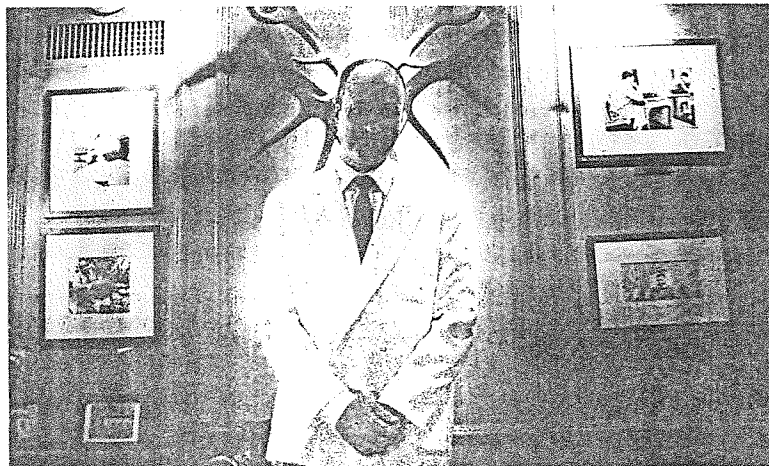
Mix a perfectionist with a romantic, stir in a natural raconteur, add a lover of drama, top with a magician, and stir well and you will get Colin Field, the head bartender at the Bar Hemingway in the Hotel Ritz. Here he is both the director and star of the carefully orchestrated theater which is the essence of a good hotel bar.

Spirited and properly dressed in white waiter's jacket and black pants, Colin is comfortably ensconced in the intimate wood-paneled bar which, in its present incarnation, he fashioned. With animated enthusiasm and energy, he acts out his stories, playing all roles as he walks around the bar, adjusting his jacket sleeves and lapels to emphasize his points with his body as well as words. He regales visitors with yarns of past jobs, bosses and bars, all effortlessly related with an impish grin and obvious joy in his soft voice still inflected with a retained English accent. Throughout, the point of each story is the search for combining impeccable service with inventive ways to entice people into his bars to have fun.

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Twenty-five years ago, Colin came to Paris to learn the ropes. It was love at first sight, or rather smell, when he arrived in Paris from his native England for the first time as a 14 year old student. "I fell in love with the smell of *Gitanes Filtrés*. There was the smell of *Gitanes Filtrés* in the air...and it was lovely," he reminisces. For him, everything was romantic and exotic, and he wanted to be a part of it all, specifically in the form of a *garçon café* who seemed to him to possess the right balance of insouciance, romance and power.

After finishing his O Levels in 1980, he sold his bike and headed off to Paris, giving himself a week and 80£ to find his future. He secured a job as a jack-of-all-trades or as he says with a native English turn of phrase, "dog's body," at the Hotel l'Océan, a three-star hotel off the rue de Lafayette. After a full day's work, he tended the bar. He was a quick study, learning the drinks and developing a clientele of people from the outside more than hotel guests. Ever ambitious, he started moving up the hotel ratings to become an assistant bartender at the four-star Hotel Westminster under an austere head bartender who officiously insisted on pouring mixed drinks. To make cocktails,



The master of the cocktail.

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however, his boss needed a "cheat-sheet." Getting increasingly miffed at being frozen out of doing his work, one day Colin took the list, memorized all 72 drinks, then tore up the paper. From then on, he was the master of the cocktail.

Within three years of arriving in Paris, he was a regular participant in cocktail contests both in France and in European and international contests where he "mixed" for France. In 1983 he placed second for the Scott Cup, which he previously thought was an obscure cocktail, rather than an prize. The cups he won are displayed for all to see on his bar. An astute observer will notice that he never seemed to be first, which for this perfectionist was only cause to work harder.

Colin moved around a lot both as bartender and as a waiter. Many of these jobs were obtained by serendipity (which, when spelled with an "i" as its final letter is the best-selling

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cocktail* at the Bar Hemingway); however, the list represents some of the best restaurants and hotels in Paris including Lasserre, l'Hotel, and Hotel Scribe. All represent pinnacles of impeccable? service, style, and attention to detail. Where some would see constraint, Colin saw perfection, or at least the honorable search for it. Along this journey, he developed a knack

for fixing failing bars. He instinctively understood that bars were welcoming places and theater and was quickly able to create places

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where people wanted to be. His clientele followed him.

He states that all cocktails are "invented for someone, by someone, at a particular place and for a particular situation." It also reflects its era. Again, the need for stories. His book, *The Cocktails of the Ritz Paris* (Simon and Schuster, 2003), not only has recipes, but provides the history and reason for the drink, the best time to have the drink and other information that imbues the reader with his philosophy and understanding of the infinite subtleties of the relationship of people and drink. The cocktail for him is a story rich in details and certainly not finished. There are always new events to celebrate and people to fete.

Twelve years ago he landed at the comfortable homage to Hemingway, his 17th job in 13 years. When the Hotel Ritz management was reopening the famous literary drinking hole, they interviewed Colin eight times. Each time he returned, he saw they had implemented his suggestions given in previous discussions. Finally, tired of giving free advice, he reminded them he wanted to be hired. He credits the success of the Bar Hemingway to his flexibility and ability to read others and quickly adapt. Colin recalls that at the opening night it was obvious that the original concept of a literary bar wasn't working. He changed it to a sophisticated cocktail bar within the night.

It was a good move. In a town known for red wine, Colin has staked out the cocktail as his own. Since Bar Hemingway's opening, Colin no longer comes in second. In 1998, Forbes named Bar Hemingway the "The World's Greatest Bar," and in 2001 he was voted the world's greatest bartender by Forbes. Kudos have been coming to him ever since. ■

*The Serendipiti-Calvados, apple juice, mint and champagne

Their Favorite Paris

Favorite Movie:

Cocktail. According to Colin, this movie reflects the true life of bartender—the heartbreak, the poetry, the stress.

Favorite Book (French):

La Première gorgée de bière et autres plaisirs minuscules by Philippe Delerm (printed in English as *We Could Almost Eat Outside: An Appreciation of Life's Small Pleasures*).

Favorite Book (English):

Across the River and Into the Trees by Ernest Hemingway.

Favorite Tourist Spot:

Standing on the steps of Sacré Coeur at 4 am in the winter looking over Paris.

Favorite neighborhood:

The 18th arrondissement, Place de Clichy, rue du Pic.