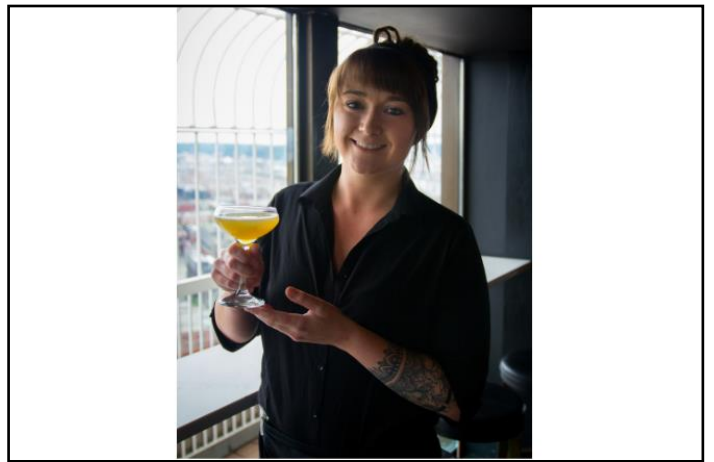


A monthly cocktail contest at the Smith Tower Observatory & Bar elevates mixology with creative concoctions



SUMMERS ARE FOR nostalgia, and the true retrophile can get a feel for old Seattle while staring out at the view of the new Seattle from the [Smith Tower Observatory & Bar](#), a glittering jewel of filigree and Art Deco, of dark leather and nostalgic chinoiserie.

The trip upward in a cage elevator (for which you must buy a roughly \$12 to \$22 ticket) feels like a ride in time back to the glorious excesses of the 1920s. Smith Tower is an atmosphere for vintage cocktails, for Bombardiers and French 77s and absinthe-louching while absently lounging, but it's also a place for the innovative, serving brand-new cocktails that feel vintage, like a couture dress or a Mini Cooper.

Every month, Smith Tower’s bar manager, Mark Sassi, puts out a call among the staff for mixology gladiators willing to create new recipes and pit them against each other for the honor of creating the next month’s signature cocktail — and while the advantage is obviously to the bartenders, the informal, employees-only contest is open to all staff, from the gift shop to the uniformed elevator operators. After all, a great drink idea can come from anywhere.

In my capacity as a professional cocktail remarker, I was invited to judge May’s contest, which included a suite of six brand-new, original libations. Smith Tower’s bar is encyclopedic, and the staff’s willingness to go full-on craft allows for the creation of fresh shrubs, infusions and tinctures (although, here’s a hint: If your drink is too complicated to make repeatedly at rush hour, it won’t win). Any and all of the panoply of bottles glittering on the shelves were eligible, and if it had been me doing the mixing, I would have ended up with a sticky glass full of one drop of everything and a handful of Luxardo cherries. Wisely, I was allowed to touch the drinks only after they were done.

The drinks were made one by one in turn, the bartenders shaking, blending and stirring with élan, their eyes shifting surreptitiously sideways at their keen rivals as they splashed their creations into the appropriate glassware. It’s a friendly competition, the prize nothing but bragging rights, but as with anything, the competitors play to win.

The entries included:

- a summery drink called the “Andean Smash” — so-named because it was based on the Peruvian brandy pisco, combined with Bärenjäger (honey liqueur) and passion fruit liqueur;
- a tropical “Jungle Love” made of pineapple juice and banana liqueur that, in my opinion, needed a paper umbrella;
- the deceptively simple “Westward Ho,” which combined locally produced Westland Peated whiskey with absinthe and bitters;

- Sassi’s own “Irish Exit,” a tiki-inspired combination of Irish whiskey, mango simple syrup and locally produced Lucky Falernum (“Falernum” is a Caribbean cordial made of spices, citrus and rum); and
- the runner-up, the cheeky “Almohada Menta” (“pillow mint” in Spanish), an unmixed cocktail based on smoky mezcal, mint and lime and chocolate bitters meant to be enjoyed in layers, a real Hemingway of a drink that suggested bullfights and darkness at noon.

And the winner, I am pleased to announce, was the “Citrus Garden,” a tart, quintessentially springy cloud of Amaro Montenegro (an Italian herbed bitter liqueur), vodka and lemon juice with just a whisper of absinthe, served in a delicate coupe glass, finished with a basil leaf floating like an island of serenity in the center.

The Citrus Garden was the signature cocktail for June, the perfect thing to sip while sitting in the gilded bird cage of Smith Tower and watching one of Seattle’s sublimely sunny summers unfold below, a view well worth the price of admission.