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TIDES & TABLES: Schooner bartender shakes things up on a global scale

By LORI MCKEAN - Photos by ALEX PAJUNAS
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'When the tide is out,
the table is set.'
— Northwest tribal proverb

If you thought all "lounge lizards" were alike - think again.

Meet Rich Ewing, also known by his DJ name, Nacho Bizznez. Ewing's mission in life is to bring back classic cocktails, vintage lounge music, alligator shoes and, in all their sleazy glory, leisure suits.

On most days, you'll find Ewing shaking and mixing drinks behind the bar at The Schooner in Astoria. Every Tuesday from 3 to 4 p.m., you can listen to him on KMUN spinning his '50s and '60s era cocktail lounge music on his radio show, "Cocktail Nation." His musical collection (which he copies from old vinyl records to his laptop) includes everything from classic champagne music to mambo, cha-cha, old Vegas lounge acts, private-eye jazz, Rat Pack songs and more. He is a huge fan of Yma Sumac (a sultry mambo singer from the '50s) and he plays an Esquivel tune every time he's on the air. He is, as he puts it, "saving lounge music, one song at a time." Even though he can't be "seen" over the radio, Ewing wears his lounge lizard outfits for inspiration.

In addition to devoting his time to saving lounge music and leisure suits, Ewing is passionate about resurrecting classic cocktails and creating new ones. His top blue-ribbon creations earned him a trip to Finland to compete against top bartenders from around the world in the 10th annual Finlandia Vodka Cup challenge.



Rich Ewing, bartender at The Schooner, prepares a Mango Flower Crush, one of his award-winning cocktails. The drink includes Finlandia Mango Vodka, St. Germain Liquor, freshly muddled lemons, sweet-n-sour mix and a dash of sugar.

For Ewing, the competition began in Denver, Colo., where he was working as a beverage consultant for a new lounge. One day, a representative from Finlandia Vodka stopped by and asked if he would be interested in entering a cocktail competition. "When is it?" he asked. "Tomorrow night," she answered.

"I was working as a DJ that night in town - playing my lounge lizard music, so after that I showed up to the contest in my sleazy blue ruffled shirt," he said. Thinking it would be a small event, Ewing says he was "blown away by the media coverage," which included television reporters, national and international magazines. "There were 12 competitors," he explains, "and I

Get your groove on

The Schooner
360 12th St., Astoria
(503) 325-7882

Happy Hour: 4 to 6 p.m. daily
Lunch and dinner: 11 a.m. to closing

KMUN 91.9 FM
Cocktail Nation
3 to 4 p.m. Tuesdays
Classic lounge music with host Rich Ewing (alias Nacho Bizznez)

show up with my muddler, some mint leaves and lemons and my own old glass cocktail shaker." While other competitors were busy making elaborate garnishes out of melons and fruit, he concentrated more on pure flavor. Each competitor had seven minutes to make each round, which consisted of an aperitif, a long drink and a dessert drink. Ewing took first place in each category, starting with his Mango Flower Crush. This was followed by Wild Berry Lemonade and ended with Café Mocha Delight.



Rich Ewing sends sparks flying while sprinkling cinnamon onto one of his unique concoctions at The Schooner, the Hot Cinnamon Roll.

While the others were busy fiddling with their fancy garnishes, Ewing kept it simple, utilizing techniques learned from his grandfather. "My grandfather taught me to cut thick slices of lemon or lime and dip the rim of the glass in the fresh juice, instead of dipping the glass in a sponge saturated with bottled juice. The fruit and rind act like a sponge and, when you dip the glass in fine sugar or salt, it gives that perfect razor beam of flavor on the glass." With time to spare, Ewing noticed the resident DJ and asked him if he could play a cut from his vintage cocktail lounge CDs. The answer was yes. "While introducing me as the winner of the competition, they were playing my own music mix in the background - it was sweet. This solidified that I was making some of the best drinks in the States and it earned me a trip to Finland to compete in the International Finlandia Vodka Cup."

In Finland, competitors were asked to demonstrate their range of mixology talents by crafting three creations in the aperitif, long drink and Iron Chef-style "quick mix" categories. Each drink had to be a new creation utilizing Finlandia Vodka, or one of its special flavored vodkas. Cocktails were judged on appearance, flavor and aroma. Ewing first arrived in Helsinki and then flew to Lapland, where the competition (among the top bartenders from 28 countries in the world) took place inside a "snow dome," a building constructed completely of ice and snow. A semi-circle bar built of ice was where the bartenders worked their magic. The temperature inside was just 3 degrees F.



Rich Ewing mixes a Mai Tai at The Schooner.

In the first round of competition, Ewing took first place with his Mango Flower Crush. He also earned fourth place for his Wild Berry Lemonade. "I took first place for Mango Flower Crush and the only garnish I used was a fresh raspberry," says Ewing. "I am proud to say that my drink was the highest scoring drink in the competition. I am also proud to say that I am now considered the second best bartender in America - or the 27th best in the world."

Ewing's award-winning cocktails are featured on The Schooner's cocktail menu, along with a variety of signature drinks and Schooner classics. A whole menu is dedicated to dessert martinis, including Ewing's Café Mocha Delight (made with Finlandia Wild Berry vodka, coffee liqueur, butterscotch schnapps and more - served in a chocolate-laced martini glass). During Happy Hour (offered daily between 4 and 6 p.m.) tasty appetizers, including golden crab cakes, mini Angus sliders with Gorgonzola cheese and caramelized onions, artichoke fondue and spicy grilled wild prawn skewers are the perfect bites to toss down with drinks poured from one of the world's top bartenders.