



RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

If you want to get a true sense of Englishness, where old meets new, Covent Garden is a good place to start. Rooted in 18th century traditions, it has retained its bacchanalian edge right up into the 21st century. Office workers, shop assistants and tourists may have replaced flower girls, fruit sellers and prostitutes, but otherwise, things continue in much the same vein. Chefs and kitchen porters clatter in basement kitchens, goods are delivered with lively London banter and people linger gossiping in doorways. As dusk falls there is a sense of anticipation for the night to come. High heels clip down the narrow lanes. Streets resound with laughter and the clink of glasses. This is London, party capital of the world, and Rules restaurant, which opened here in 1798, has seen it all before.

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TASTE

- FLESH & BUNS
- DARREN PHILLIPS OF POULTERS FISHDOWN
- SCHOOL OF WOK
- DAAWAT AT JOHNSON'S
- WOODWARDS FARM
- VENCHI
- SLOW FOOD UK
- BRASSERIE BLANC
- FRENCH BUBBLES
- **RULES**
- RED GINGHAM BAKERY

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Rules bartender Chris Lacey

Yet even Rules subjects itself to the occasional change. In 2009, it opened a cocktail bar upstairs under the guiding hands of Brian Silva. Naturally, if you're the oldest restaurant in London, you don't want a stereotypical bar, or for that matter, a run-of-the-mill bar tender. Were you to wander up the steep staircase into the bar, you might think yourself in a Cotswold pub for a moment, with its sloping, carpeted floor, latticed windows and hunting prints on the wall. A large Stilton, sitting on an old-fashioned trolley, confronts you as you enter the room, and it is only when you're properly inside that you notice the small neat bar tucked to one side of the door. An incredible array of bottles is arranged behind the bar. Read the unfamiliar labels and you realise that this is a serious bar. Listen to the chat and it becomes clear this is where bar colleagues hang out, confident that they will get a perfectly-made drink. For those in the know, Rules bar has become one of the places to drink cocktails in London.

Naturally, you require the very best bartender/mixologist to run such a place. Chris Lacey, who took over from Brian as head bartender in January, is a self-taught cocktail maestro who came into the profession almost by accident. "I used to be a DJ at Timepiece Night Club in Exeter, while working in an office during the day," he says. "I got fed up with the office work and got more involved in the nightclub and ended up promoting its bar. It had a capacity of over a thousand. I realised that I really enjoyed it. Then about 14 or 15 years ago, I started working as a bartender at a boutique hotel in Exeter called Hotel Barcelona. They had a little cocktail list of about 10 classics and after a little while, when I tasted them, I felt that they weren't quite right. Then I came across Gary Regan's Bartenders Bible and started to change the drinks I was serving."

He began to collect old cocktail books. "Understanding the past allows you to create the future," Chris explains. "I can't resist looking around secondhand book shops. I recently found a 1934 edition of Jerry Thomas's The Bartenders Guide: How to Mix Drinks in Pennsylvania for just \$7." Jerry Thomas (1830-1885) was the first person to write down what up until then had been verbal recipes for cocktails. "I started to develop the cocktail list and expanded it to 25 drinks," recalls Chris. At that time Dick Bradsell, who is widely credited with changing the face of British cocktails in the 1980s and 1990s was really famous. His numerous creations, such as the Bramble (gin, lemon juice and crème de mure), the Vodka Espresso, and the Treacle (a rum-based Old Fashioned with a float of apple juice) were regularly hitting the headlines. As Chris recalls, "I took the best of Dick Bradsell by looking to see how he created balanced drinks by using simple flavours and complimentary flavours."

Such an understanding of how different ingredients can be combined to create sophisticated flavours that linger and develop on your palate takes years to develop. Gradually, Chris evolved his own style. His cocktails have a certain soft, lingering flavour. It is hard to describe, but utterly delicious.

Take his dry martini: Chris uses a five to one ratio of No. 3 London Dry Gin to Dolin Vermouth de Chambéry (both available from Berry Brothers). To this, he adds his magic ingredient, a few drops of Bitter Truth's orange bitters. Once stirred over ice, he adds a twist of lemon zest. The resulting cocktail has the delicious fragrant dryness of a classic dry martini. The orange bitters acts like a subtle seasoning. It plays with the fragrance of the lemon zest and lengthens the flavour experience of the martini in your mouth, without you being aware of the reason why. You just have to take another sip. As Chris explains, "I think that orange bitters were first used in a dry martini by William Schmidt in his 1892 book *The Flowing Bowl*. It's all about proper grown up drinking. You want to showcase the flavours of the spirits by adding nuances, so you need to choose the right complimentary vermouth and learn the right ratios. The same idea can be adapted to other classic recipes."

He makes it sound easy, but in reality, it takes time, experience and sensitivity create superb cocktails. Listening to Chris talk, I find myself in an unfamiliar world of intriguing spirits from a vermouth called *Visciolata*, which is infused with sour cherries, to a 36 month barrel-aged tequila called *Tapatio Excelencia*. "As you evolve as a bartender, you initially create drinks by adding eight or nine ingredients," he says. "You want to taste everything in a drink and for all the ingredients to work together, but with so many, it's easy for some to be lost, so you start to make your recipes simpler and simpler. Eventually, you end up with about three or four ingredients and that's when subtle awareness of how best to make a drink comes in, because there is no hiding what's in it."

In other words, a good bartender has to be sensitive to every aspect of the drink-making process, such as the sound and texture of liquid as it is mixed, shaken or muddled. It shouldn't be too diluted or too frozen. When is a quick adjustment to the balance of flavours needed? Such skills can only be learned by experience. Then there is the question of reading your customer. "I usually start by asking them what spirit they like, what flavours they enjoy and whether they like a short or a long drink," says Chris. "Then I'll take a spirit and work in the flavour they like—it might be in the form of a sweetening agent such as a syrup or liqueur—then I'll add a touch of citrus and a lengthening agent, such as soda or ginger ale, taking care to balance the sweetness with sourness." Like many bartenders, he loves variations of aromatic bitter negronis, such as his summery *Queen of Belize* which is made from white port, Campari, Cinzano and Dubonnet.

I suspect that many of the 18th century patrons of coffee houses would have approved of Rules cocktail bar. It is one of those rare places that welcomes everyone, from country cousins whose families have patronised Rules for generations to theatre-loving groups of office workers who like to start a night out with pre-show drinks. There are gentlemen with their 'ladies', rumbustious media types, creatives who've dropped in for a gossip with their friends and business internationalistas who enjoy a pleasant drink at the bar.

As I finish my dry martini, I ask Chris Lacey how he likes to be described? "What should I be called?" he muses. "Mixology is a term that comes from the 1860s, but I feel it's only one small part of what we do. Looking after your guests is equally important. To me, bartender is a better description of what I am." And his favourite drink? "To be honest, I love to sip a really good tequila." He then tells me of a night out at Tommy's Mexican Restaurant in Outer Richmond in San Francisco, where they have 350 tequillas stashed behind the bar. Like all good bartenders—Chris Lacey is good company as well as a brilliant cocktail maker.