

# On the rocks with Norty the bartender

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and Zay N. Smith

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Sun-Times reporter Zay N. Smith — Norty the bartender — had spent five days learning the mixologist's art at the Professional Bartenders School.

Now it was time to apply his skills. He knew the tricks of the trade. He knew how to mix more than 85 drinks. And he remembered the parting words of one of the instructors: "Good test, Norton. You won't have any problems."

But Norty hadn't learned how difficult it is to tend bar in the real world. He would learn that the hard way at the Mirage.

It is a story of shattered glassware, spilled beer and cocktails that were always a surprise — the story of Norty's life behind bars.

The young woman had taken a few sips of her V.O. and ginger ale when she screamed. She also made a face — the kind of face you would make if somebody, say, sprinkled sawdust on your tongue.

"Something the matter?" Norty asked, looking up from a chaos of glassware and a bottle of olives he had just spilled.

"That last drink you served me! It had a wad of gum in it this big!"

The gum was no longer in the drink. Another Mirage customer, wanting to be helpful, had fished it out and thrown it on the floor.

"Wad of gum?" Norty said.

"Who'd do a thing like that to your drink? What a bastard! God, it made you sick!"

Norty apologized on behalf of the Mirage. He was positive the gum wasn't in the glass when he mixed the drink.

Almost positive, anyway.

The tippler wanted a flaming drink for his girl friend. It was her birthday.

"Sure thing," Norty said.

Norty knew the recipe. Take a shot glass. Fill it three-quarters with peppermint schnapps. Lace with blackberry brandy. Touch a match to it. Voila!

Ten minutes later, Norty was on his second matchbook. He had worked with three different shot glasses. Nothing. Edwin Reyes, an investigator for the Better Government Assn., was helping now. So were the tipplers lined up along the bar.

"Try bourbon," one said. "Dat'll burn."

Norty finally went off in a corner and held a match to the drink until it blistered his finger. Then another match and another. About a dozen matches later, there was a glimmer of blue flame across the drink's surface. You had to look real close, but there it was.

Norty delivered the drink to the tippler's



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## 'Different, but good'

Norty the bartender (lower right) was not at his best mixing drinks such as the Singapore sling or the Bahama mama, especially on a busy night. So he developed a Mirage Fancy Drink recipe: a jigger of something colored, a jigger of something else colored and a lot of gin. "This Singapore sling is, uh, different," a customer said. "But good."

girl friend, who was not impressed.

"Voila," he said.

One thing you could say about Norty as a bartender: He fell down a lot. He started by spilling beer all over the place for a few minutes. Then, when a nice beer slick was built up, he would slip violently and go headlong under the bar.

The tipplers only smiled. They had watched Norty try to slice limes. They had watched him break five cocktail glasses at once. It seemed only natural that he would go headlong under the bar before he was through.

And you think bartending is a cushy job?

Norty worked with three other bartenders one night for six straight hours serving a packed house of from 75 to 100.

It was 2 a.m. when the last customers moved out. The bar and tables were solid with dirty glasses, straws, filled ashtrays,

loose cigaret butts, spilled popcorn. Norty wasn't even bothering to stand up straight any more. His shoulders, back, knees and legs throbbled. His eyes would barely focus.

He looked down at his shoes. They were soaked, to the socks, in beer.

Norty noticed he was mistakenly spraying 7-Up into the Tom Collins drinks. But the customer had already swallowed several made that way and seemed happy, so Norty stuck with the new recipe.

He finally developed a standard Mirage Fancy Drink recipe for wags who ordered Singapore slings and Bahama-mamas on a busy night. Pour in a jigger of something colored and another jigger of something else colored. Then add so much gin the customer won't know what hit him.

"This Singapore sling is, uh, different," one customer said. "But good."

## Assembly to push tax-fraud probe

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of thing goes on or at least suspected it. But you have documented it. It has been a very good series."

Shapiro, contacted at his office in Amboy, also supported formation of an investigative commission. "Something very definitely has to be done," he said. "I am really delighted to see the Democratic leadership take a role in this. If nothing were done, people could be pretty disgusted."

At their press conference, Hynes and Madigan both objected to a question implying that the Cook County Democratic organization condoned the sort of corruption uncovered at the Mirage.

Madigan said that as committeeman of the 13th Ward he has "told anyone coming to my office seeking a job that if he becomes an

embarrassment, I will be the first to ask for his dismissal."

Madigan said that public employees who feel they have to supplement their salaries with bribes "should resign."

Meanwhile, a spokesman for Atty. Gen. William J. Scott said his office was investigating whether at least seven jukebox vendors mentioned in the Mirage series may have violated a 1971 Circuit Court consent decree. In that decree, they agreed not to allocate customers or to divide the city into "territories" for a period of 10 years. The decree also barred them from using threats or coercion to prevent competitors from winning new accounts.

The Mirage was told by jukebox and game machine vendors that they generally would not poach on one another's accounts. The most explicit statement of the policy was

made by Jim Ruzicka, operator of J&R Amusement Co., 4146 W. 26th:

"If I came in here and you had done business in this location or the prior owner had done business in this location with certain companies, then I couldn't deal with you. Say like Apex, Melody, Swingtime or Lindy had the machines in here . . . well, we got an agreement with some of them. We don't cut into them and they don't cut into us."

Melody Music Co., 3809 W. Grand, and A. A. Swingtime Music Co., 1914 W. Division, among those named by Ruzicka, were included in the group that signed the consent decree. Others that signed the decree and were mentioned in the series were:

Dial Amusement Co., 415 N. Cicero; Acme Music Co., 3711 W. Fullerton; Argus Amusement Co., 4056 W. Armitage; Hi-Fi Music Co., 3500 W. Cortland; and Western Automatic Music Co., 4206 N. Western.

Then there was the saga of the whisky sour.

Norty was hiding behind the back bar one night when William Recktenwald, BGA chief investigator, fetched him. "This guy wants a whisky sour," Recktenwald said. "I told the guy you're our professional bartender and you'll make it for him."

"Sure thing," Norty said, smiling at the customer.

He ducked behind the back bar again to double-check his recipe book. There it was: 1½ jiggers sour mix, ½ jigger bar sirup, 1 jigger whisky, garnish with orange slice and cherry (in the case of the Mirage, just a cherry, take it or leave it).

Norty returned to the bar and started pouring the ingredients into a glass. Then he remembered it was supposed to be mixed in a shaker first and then strained into the glass.

"Damn," he said. Norty poured all the junk into the shaker glass and continued to add ingredients. He lost control of the whisky bottle and poured on the counter. He wiped it up.

He then put the metal top on the shaker and shook. The top was on loose and the drink squirted out. He jammed the top on hard and shook again.

Now it was time to strain the drink — this should be done triumphantly — into a waiting glass. But the shaker wouldn't come apart. Norty twisted it, banged it, squeezed it, put it under the hot-water tap. He and Recktenwald each grabbed an end and pulled. No deal.

"So you're the professional bartender, huh?" the smiling customer said.

Norty put down the shaker and stared at it.

"OK, I'll blend it then," he said. Norty got out the electric blender. He spilled every ingredient as he poured the new drink. "Just a moment more," he said.

Norty put the top on the blender and pressed the high-speed mix button. Nothing happened. He pressed all the buttons, one by one. Just nothing at all.

Then Norty made his big mistake. He took the top off the blender and peered into it. He wanted to see if something was jamming the mechanism.

"Here," Recktenwald said. "You gotta plug it in right."

Recktenwald, who had not noticed Norty's new posture, plugged the blender in exactly right. It erupted like Krakatau.

Norty doesn't remember what he shouted just then. A bar towel was offered to him as soon as he regained his balance. He applied it to his face and neck. The customer was trying not to smile. He was not good at not smiling.

Norty strained what was left of the whisky sour into a waiting glass. He spilled as he strained. Then he bumped the glass against the bar railing as he offered it to the customer, spilling it again.

"Thank you," the customer said.

"You're welcome," Norty said.

## Hit by shakedown? A hot line for you

Ever been the victim of crooked city, county, or state employees?

Have you ever been forced into illicit dealings with businessmen such as accountants, bookkeepers, vending machine operators, or other salesmen?

The Sun-Times would like to hear specific details — names, dates, and places. Because of reader interest in our series on the Mirage, a tavern we operated for several months, we have set up a special Shakedown Hot Line for you to call.

We will protect your anonymity, if you wish. The number is 321-2527.