

How to Win cocktail competitions

The ultimate guide to preparing a winning entry, getting selected and knocking your presentation out of the park



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How to Win Cocktail Competitions

Winning a large cocktail competition can line you up for prestigious jobs and positions in the industry.

How do you put your best cocktail forward to get the best chance of winning?

Different Kinds of Cocktail Competitions

So you're thinking of entering a cocktail competition. Great! It'll help to understand the different types of competitions out there so you'll be prepared for the full process.

Common Ground

There are probably dozens of different “kinds” of cocktail competitions out there, but for the most part, they will have a couple of things in common:

- They are sponsored by a liquor or industry brand
- They require entrants to somehow use or publicize their product
- They have a prize for the winner

Local Cocktail Competitions

Local competitions are often staged by bars or restaurants looking to create publicity around an event. Organizers will often select competitors in advance and frequently support a charitable cause. Prizes for the winners are usually smaller than prizes for larger contests, but these events can be a lot of fun.

[Here's an example](#) from Delray Beach in Florida.

If you'd like to compete in a Local competition, start with your local Bartender association (either the [International Bartenders Association](#) or the [United States Bartenders Guild](#)). Keep your eye out for events, or even help your own bar organize one. This is a great way to create excitement and bring in a whole new group of customers to your bar.

Web Based Competitions

Recently this type of competition has become more popular – where bartenders from all over the globe can enter competitions virtually.

Often larger cocktail competitions will use the web as the first step – to narrow down the field to fewer finalists that they can then judge more closely. Others will be completely online, like the [Swizzlemasters](#) competition. In their case, entries are narrowed down to a list of finalists and then they have one of their own bartenders actually create the finalist's cocktails to choose a winner.

*“There are winners,
there are losers and
there are people that
have not yet learned
how to win”*

- Les Brown

Social Media or Raffle-Style

Another style of web-based competition is actually not a competition at all – it's technically a “raffle” or “sweepstakes.” [Here's a good example](#) – a contest we co-sponsored with a brand.

In this model, participants will be asked to share something on social media and include a hashtag to be a part of the contest. Contests like this may be focused on cocktail pictures, recipes, bar tips, or anything else related to the industry. The important thing about this type of sweepstakes is that **the winner is chosen randomly**, not based on the quality of their cocktail or their bartending skills.

That's not to say these aren't fun contests to join – they absolutely are, and the prizes can be great as well. Don't expect media coverage, publicity or major career opportunities from winning any sweepstakes-style contests, however.

Large, Multiple Round Competitions

This is where careers get made.

Large international competitions like The Most Imaginative Bartender, Bacardi Legacy and MIXLDN are competitions where the winners can expect massive media coverage across the bar and spirits industry – but where the competition is that much harder to beat.



Nearly all of these large global competitions operate in a multi-round model, and will likely be some variation of the following:

1. Bartenders enter the initial round online
2. The best of the online entries are selected and semifinalists are given the opportunity to compete in a local in-person competition.
3. The winners of the local competitions may also compete in regional, then national stages as well.
4. The finalists will be flown to the city where the finals are held, and will compete for the Grand Prize.

For the remainder of this Guide, you can assume we're talking mostly about skill-based competitions, whether it be local or multi-round global.

Getting Selected to Compete

Most in-person competitions have a pre-selection process to choose who will have the opportunity to compete. Learn how to make sure your competition entry is the most likely to get you in the door.

For most in-person competitions, there is a selection process to choose who will have the opportunity to participate. Five years ago, this selection process pretty much just included submitting a great cocktail recipe. Now things have become much more complicated, creative and in many cases, interactive.

Regardless of the specific details, there are some universal rules that will help you put your best foot forward and have the best chances of making it to the next step.

“Competitions are created by brands which have paid huge amounts of money to put on a show, so obviously the brand should be the star.”

*Sebastian Hamilton-Mudge,
Global Brand Ambassador,
Beefeater gin*

The Three Laws of Cocktail Competitions

- Follow the rules. Not most of the rules. All of them.
- Find the judging criteria and build your entry accordingly.
- Use the sponsor’s product, and avoid using products from competitors’ portfolios

I remember early in my career I entered a cocktail competition with an amazing, beautiful cocktail and I was sure I’d get selected. I only used one more ingredient than their limit! Needless to say, I learned my lesson when my entry was rejected because I didn’t follow the rules.

Understanding the Brand's Perspective

Brands don't host cocktail competitions just to make bartenders happy. (Wouldn't that be nice!) They spend millions of dollars on massive competitions because it gets hundreds of bartenders (and buyers) worldwide to work with their brand, and it gives them a tremendous amount of publicity.

As a participant in a cocktail competition, you need to think about your entry and presentation from the perspective of the brand.

Why do I mention this? As a participant in a cocktail competition, you need to think about your entry and presentation from the perspective of the brand. You are creating a cocktail that features their product in front of the public and media. **You are representing their brand. Make them look good and you will be rewarded.**

Planning Your Entry

Submitting a cocktail recipe on a website may feel less "intense" than standing in front of the judges on stage, but it's no less important. This is the stage when you are competing against the largest number of other competitors and you have limited opportunities to connect and impress the judges.

- **Get Creative.** The key in this stage is to stand out from the crowd. How can you present the brand in a way that's new, original and newsworthy? (While following the rules, of course!)
- **Consider the theme.** Different competitions focus on different themes. Is the competition about originality? Skill? Flair? No matter what, make sure your submission aligns well with the theme of the contest – because your competitors will.
- **Watch the Competition.** Many of the global competitions now have websites where you can see all

“One of the main things to remember is that the drink has to be different.

For Bols Around the World, I waited until the last minute to submit my recipe so that I could look and see what everyone else was planning. This way I found that punch would be a niche recipe. You have to be original and have some ideology behind your drink; otherwise you will inevitably fade into the background.”

*- Rusty Cerven
2014 Winner, Bols Around
the World*

competitors and their entries. This is a huge advantage over years past – take advantage of it! Watch what other people are doing to get a sense for how stiff the competition is – and how you can stand out.

Submit Your Entry

This step is simple. Don't wait until the last day to submit. Be prepared in advance – don't risk this career opportunity on whether or not the internet will be working!

Make sure you have reviewed the whole form in advance and make sure you know *every single thing* you will be asked to provide so you will not be in for a surprise on the last page.

Winning the In-Person Competition

You've been selected to compete in-person for a panel of judges. Congratulations, you should be proud! Now is when the work really begins.

Once again – and I cannot stress this enough – you must remember the brand's perspective when preparing your entry and presentation. The brand paid a lot of money to create this competition so they can get bartenders like you to use their product and show it off to the media. Make them look good!

Preparation

Now's a great time to remember your Boy Scout Motto and Be Prepared! Most of winning is in the preparation, so this is definitely where you should spend most of your time.

Start with Research

As always, start with your research. Here are some areas to look into more closely:

- **Contest rules:** I said it before, I'll say it again. Go find the rules. Read the small print. Don't take chances – follow the rules to a "T".
- **Judging Criteria:** What are the judges looking for? If the judges want speed, be quick – and maybe focus less on precision. If the judges want flair, you can focus less on the perfection of the recipe. If you can find the exact scoresheets, even better – know exactly where your points will come from, and what the penalties are. Is going "over time" minus 1 point or minus 100? This information can be incredibly useful.

"The best bartender doesn't win. The bartender with the most points wins."

– Jim Meehan



- **Prior Years:** For annual contests, take a look at last year's competitors and their cocktails. What did they do? What did the winner do that set him / her apart? This will give you a good sense for what you're up against!

Prepare your Presentation

Now that you've done your research, it's time to prepare your presentation. Here are some additional factors to keep in mind:

- **You are representing the brand** that is sponsoring this competition. Yes, I know I have said this before. But it deserves another mention. Create a cocktail that puts that product on a pedestal and makes it look great. If you use other spirits or liqueurs in the drink, try wherever possible to stay within the sponsor's portfolio. Make them look good and they will like you!
- **Design a cocktail you can actually make in a competition setting.** When presenting, it's high pressure. Yes, you'll practice – but if you don't know how to make the drink, practice won't save you!
- **Build a story.** If your drink is highlighting Cognac, tell a story of your visit to France and how the Orange Flower Water reminds you of the aroma of the garden behind your hotel.... etc. Stories engage and evoke emotion, and if you can build a story around your entry that suits the competition theme, it will definitely help set you apart.
- **Consider Seasonality.** Especially with large annual competitions, you may be qualifying in Phoenix, Arizona in July for a competition in Stockholm in January. Think about the season that you will be in when actually giving the presentation – not

necessarily the weather outside your window “right now.”

- **Make a Checklist.** This sounds too simple, but it’s important. In the craziness of packing for your all-expenses-paid trip to the finals, don’t forget your julep strainer because you didn’t make a list!

Practice, Practice, Practice

This section is short, but you should spend a lot of time here.

Create your cocktail. Create it again.

Run your routine over and over and over again. Invite friends over to critique. (Offer them cocktails; they will be happy to help!) **This part of preparation is all about repetition.**

By the time you arrive at the competition you want your routine to be “muscle memory” so you can tell the story and engage the judges while perfectly executing your cocktail along the way.

The Day Of

I hope you got a good night’s sleep – the big day is here!

Prepare for your day the same way you’d prep for a big job interview. Dress nicely. Clean your fingernails. Brush your hair. How you present yourself tells the judges that you respect the competition and you respect their brand.

Have a decent breakfast (no, not Red Bull.) You may be able to rely on your muscle memory for your routine, but you’ll need your brain for questions, for the story, and – God forbid – for when something goes wrong.

“Bartenders... should also ask themselves, how could I meet all of the elements while making sure I tell my story and watch the clock at the same time? The only way to do this is with practise.”

*– Matteo Fantacchiotti,
Global Commercial Director
for Diageo Reserve*

Last Minute Preparation:

Get there early and **bring all of your own stuff**. Don't make any assumptions – if you need it, bring it. (Yes, check a bag if you have to – it's worth it.)

If you're allowed to, **pre-measure your ingredients** and / or **line them up in order at your station**. Anything you can do to help yourself remember in the moment is worth it.

Do your calisthenics – or whatever works for you. Drink water, do jumping jacks, breathe.

DO NOT DRINK.

It will be very tempting to drink before your turn to “loosen up” the nerves. But alcohol also reduces concentration and lowers your accuracy and attention to detail. Not to mention – if the sponsors see you taking shots, it tells them you are unprofessional and need alcohol to do well. Not a good sign. Respect the competition, hold the drinks for the celebration.



During your Presentation

You've practiced this; you know what you're doing. At this point you just need your body to go through the motions without passing out or forgetting an ingredient. So seriously, bend your knees and **don't forget to breathe**.

1. **Introduce yourself.** You are a representative of where you came from, the cocktail you created and the story you are telling. Say hello.
2. **Narrate your Routine.** Talk to the judges and explain what you are doing, why, and how it relates to the cocktail and story. This makes you more personable and welcoming, and avoids awkward pauses.

“A participant should prepare a unique story as this can add another level to their performance when told articulately. They should explain what their cocktails mean to them as a bartender – what is its history? How do the flavours complement each other? What trends does it utilise?”

– Matteo Fantacchiotti

3. **Listen.** The judges may have questions, and you don't want to miss them. Be professional and polished but conversational if appropriate.
4. **Be likeable.** If the judges can't decide whether to give you 4 or 5 points, if they LIKE you, they are far more likely to go for the 5. Give them every opportunity to do so.
5. **Stick to the Routine.** You know this routine, you know this cocktail. Do not improvise, no matter how confident you are feeling. Now is not the time to introduce risk!

If something goes wrong – which it will – it is truly your opportunity to shine. Embrace what happened, work with it – avoid negativity and stay likeable and you will likely be just fine.

After the Competition

Whether or not you take home the Grand Prize, there is reason to celebrate. Being asked to participate in a cocktail competition of any size is an honor and can be a really great time. Enjoy it!

Take the time to thank the judges – they are often big names in the industry and this is a great opportunity to shake their hands and network. If someone from the brand is present, try to take a moment to thank them too. They may not be the most vocal person in the room, but they might be the one who signed the check for your flight.



Be Gracious

If you do win, don't flaunt it. All eyes are on you – be gracious and professional. If you don't win, stay positive and congratulate the winner.

Network & Celebrate

As with any industry event, cocktail competitions are fantastic networking opportunities and your composure after winning – or losing – says a lot about you to everyone around.

After the competition can be one of the best times to network. The pressure is off and you are no longer competitors. Take the time to really get to know the others in the room – the other competitors, the judges and other brand representatives. These are the folks who have the career you may want. What better opportunity to get to know them and make some new friends?

Closing Thoughts

“Competitions are about pushing your boundaries and doing things you'd never be able to do behind the bar on a busy weekend night, so don't take it too seriously.”

-Tim Etherington-Judge

*Global Reserve Ambassador:
Emerging Markets & Bulleit
Frontier Whiskey*

There is no better way to leapfrog to the top of your industry than winning a Cocktail Competition.

... and the other good news is, there is very little cost to entering. So I highly recommend taking advantage of all of the competitions available to you.

In addition to the obvious benefits of prizes and publicity, taking part in cocktail competitions can benefit your career by:

- Giving you practice working in a high-pressure, high-speed environment
- Offering great networking opportunities
- Keeping you up to date on what new techniques and tricks are being used in the industry

Finding Competitions

Hopefully we have convinced you to give a competition a try! If so, keep an eye on our [Cocktail Competition Directory](#) for new, fun contests that you can enter.

Break a Leg!

You've already taken the first step, and you're way ahead of the crowd by knowing the tips in this guide. Now go find yourself a competition and get started!

Sources:

“How to Win Cocktail Competitions” – Seminar, Tales of the Cocktail 2014, New Orleans LA. Panelists included: Nick Van Tiel, Adi Dedianko, Jim Meehan, John Lermayer, Jason Williams and Jacob Briars.

[Top 5 Tips to Win a Cocktail Competition](#)

The Spirits Business, 27th May, 2014, by Amy Hopkins

[How to Win a Cocktail Competition](#)

Diageo Bar Academy, by Tim Etherington-Judge



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