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Russians Compete for Title of Best Barman

By Olga Kalashnikova

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Valeria Jaskelyainen, right, won the regional stage of the Barmen's Cup. **Olga Kalashnikova**

While athletes around the world prepare for the upcoming Olympic Games in Sochi, the best bartenders from across Russia are now preparing for a competition of their own: the Baltika Barmen's Cup. The winner will earn the right to be called the most skilled representative of the profession in Russia, and the top prize is a trip to the Olympic Games in Sochi.

The Moscow Times was present at the recent regional finals of the tournament in St. Petersburg, where the best bartender in the city was chosen. Yet it would be more correct to say "barwoman" instead of "barman" as it was a woman who succeeded in acing four tasks, including the theory and history of brewing, and a demonstration of pouring and serving techniques for beer. The participants did not know the criteria they would be evaluated on beforehand as organizers believe that a truly professional bartender should know all the secrets of serving beer, such as how to hold the beer glass or how to pour it correctly.

"It is beer that is the foundation and inalienable drink of bar culture," said Vladimir Lenshin, the head of a local bartending school and a jury member for the Baltika Barmen's Cup. "That is why a professional bartender has to know how to pour and serve beer to a client. This skill cannot be replaced by the effect created by making even the most difficult cocktail."

The participants were also tested on how well they communicate with patrons. An actor was brought in to display behavior that bartenders are faced with — drinkers without proper ID wishing to be served or a drunken patron who wants more drinks. The bartender's task is to handle such situations without causing animosity.

The forth task was a creative one. Each of the participants was required to prepare a task at home without any restrictions in format. For this part of the contest — the equivalent of the talent portion of a beauty pageant — one contestant created a Mexican cocktail based on beer, the bronze-medal winner demonstrated the preparation of cocktails with the use of liquid nitrogen, the second-place winner read a self-composed poem, while the gold-medal winner told a fairy tale about brewers and princesses.

"The competition was by turns challenging, interesting and educational," said Valeria Jaskelyainen, the winner of the regional stage of the Baltika Barmen's Cup, speaking to The Moscow Times. "Among the challenges I liked most was the one in which we had to speak with patrons, as this was closest to reality. I also liked the creative competition as every participant could show off his or her personal qualities and skills."

The occupation of bartender is not a simple one, the organizers of the competition assure. A bartender has to possess a wide variety of professional knowledge, such as being a specialist in the qualities of various drinks and the rules governing their serving and consumption. Another necessary skill is the knowledge of how to mix both alcoholic and nonalcoholic drinks. In addition, the true bartender has to be fast and learn timesaving secrets so as not to keep the customer waiting.

"The Petersburg stage of the competition revealed the bartender who knows not only how to behave with beer but, more importantly, who can explain the rules of beer consumption," said Yury Katunin, the beer expert on the panel of judges. "And it is the development of a culture of beer consumption that is the main aim of the project."

The organizers of the event believe professional skills are very important. However, while these skills can be learned, psychological and physical qualities should be in evidence from the start and include the ability to get along with people, a kind attitude and self-control.

"A good bartender acts the part of a psychologist for many patrons," said Katunin. "He or she has to listen to the guest, to empathize. Why does he or she need this quality? The main reason is that the bartender is the face of an establishment which hosts guests, and the guest should be made to feel welcomed."

Attention to detail and a good memory are also important, as it is not easy to remember the recipes of all the cocktails a bartender may be called upon to mix. It is also necessary not to forget who ordered what and when. Ideally, a bartender even remembers the names of loyal customers.

Maintaining order in a cafe or bar is partly the responsibility of the bartender. In some cases, it is the bartender who has to stop a patron from consuming more alcohol and this should be done with sensitivity.

Bartending used to be seen as an occupation suitable only for men. The winner of the St. Petersburg competition, however, said that more and more women are taking up the profession.

"It is not surprising as a bartender's work is very active and demands constant interaction," said Jaskelyainen. "These are areas where representatives of the gentler sex can excel. I like this profession because of the personal dimension. Every day you meet new people, discuss different topics and, in this way, constantly learn."

The finals, to be held in St. Petersburg, will gather 11 of the best bartenders from cities, including Moscow, St. Petersburg, Voronezh, Rostov-on-Don, Novosibirsk and Khabarovsk. The participants will face the same four tasks as in the regional trials, yet there will be one more event — a blind tasting. With eyes closed, the bartender will have to determine what sort of beer they are tasting. In addition to recognizing the drink, they will also have to talk about the typical characteristics of the beer, its distinguishing features, production methods and the rules of serving and consumption. Only the person who successfully passes through all trials will earn the title of Russia's best bartender, a title they will carry proudly to Sochi in February.

Contact the author at artsreporter@imedia.ru

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