

Causing a Stir: Dylan Columbare brings mixology and magic to Massimo

Dylan Columbare is just 20 years old, yet he's achieved the status of bar manager at Massimo restaurant in Providence. Not too shabby, considering nothing was handed to him. He is not family, but works for the family establishment. He started at Pane E' Vino, Massimo's sister restaurant farther down Atwells Avenue, and worked as a bus boy. It didn't take long for him to get noticed by Pane E' Vino's bar manager, Dante Roberti, who moved him up to barback, where he learned everything he needed to know about classic cocktails and wine from Roberti.

"He would slap down a pad in front of me and make me write the notes three times," Columbare explains with a laugh. "And then I had to explain all the spirits as I made the drinks for the guests, who had to approve them. That's how I learned my classic cocktails."

"Pushing him to this level really made him shine with his creative side," explains Roberti, who saw something special in Columbare, and brought it to the owners, Esther and Joseph DeQuattro. They approved his promotion to bar manager at Massimo and never regretted it.

Roberti says, "I'm just proud of him. He's a very talented young man. What he does speaks for itself — he comes up with his own drinks." Roberti recognizes his involvement in Columbare's start. "I knew he had a good work ethic so I brought him behind the bar. He was like a sponge. And now, after me just teaching him the basics, he not only makes drinks but makes people at the bar have a good time. Dylan makes them feel at home and entertains them. It makes people a little more intrigued, wanting to know a little more about him. Dylan can open up spirits and show people how different ones can be used in drinks to expand their horizons. People who don't like gin will find something they like when Dylan makes it."

Columbare wasn't trained in a bartending school as most are. Explains Roberti, "We used color-coordinated flash cards representing different spirits. On the back we'd have the measurements and ingredients. We had over 150 drinks on the cards." The two laugh and say in unison, "It was a bible." Roberti gained the knowledge from different bartenders who helped him along the way at various locations throughout the city. He brought this knowledge to Columbare, who ran with it. "The owners know they've found something different in the way Dylan has changed drinks to make them his own," says Roberti. "Sometimes I'll see him at my bar just staring at bottles, wondering how he can use them to benefit the bar and be a great mixologist. The student surely has surpassed the teacher. Now I'm learning from him."

Campari, a bright red liqueur, is an amaro infused with 68 different bitter herbs and aromatic plants, a secret recipe of natural ingredients dating back to 1860 that has become an Italian tradition. Fascinated with mixology, Columbare has taken his game to a whole new level. He's dehydrating Campari into sugars for a drink called Negroni, using this sugar on the rim of the glass. He's also making his own bitters and tinctures, spicing them up in different ways to put a unique accent on his own craft cocktails. "I don't try to change it so much that it's a different drink. It was a completely different garnish I came up with," he explains. "I try to respect the Italian classic cocktail drinks, but try to add a

new twist — something no one else is doing.”

And different it is. “I’ve never seen a dehydrated Campari sugar drink in my life,” says Roberti.

Columbare is turning an American oak cask into a sherry oak cask, creating his own amaro. He will serve this straight up, and will make cocktails with it. “The reason I wanted to do this is because nobody else in the state is. I wanted to have this on tap and bring attention to the restaurant for its craft cocktails and amazing food.” Besides the amaro, he makes his own (orange) arancello. “Limoncello is very popular, but nobody makes arancello. I peel 120 oranges for this and nobody touches them.” It’s his craft, his recipe and it’s been that way for nearly two years now. “It’s not something everyone gets to try.”

I have sampled Columbare’s creations, which he serves up freely, and can vouch for the terrific flavors he’s come up with. The food truly is amazing at all three locations — a new Massimo restaurant opened this past winter in Dedham, Mass, but you can only get his craft cocktails at the Providence Massimo. “I’m kind of separating myself, going my own way,” says Columbare. “We share a few cocktails, but they do their own thing and I do mine.”

Columbare endeavors to have “attention to detail with efficiency. I want to create that same effect and be able to get it to you in less than two minutes. I would hope that I make a name for myself with the amaro and arancello, and will have a future in liquor distributing.” There’s little doubt he’s already on his way to success in all he creates. “With so much to learn, I’d like to keep creating new liqueurs in time, while keeping with classic traditions. I don’t want to slow down!”