

ON THE TOWN by Summer Block

# mix masters

the Warden brothers reinvent the wheel



Antoine Icard

If you live in Shanghai and you love cocktails, you're likely to run into at least one of the ubiquitous Warden brothers. Young, gregarious and armed with knowledge so vast that they are downright intimidating, this pair of cocktail consultants is responsible for creating many of Shanghai's signature sips.

Paul and Tom were born in Wellington, NZ, the lovingly indulged sons of foodie parents. Paul reminisces, "I'd say that Tom and I were brought up in a food loving family. Mum and Dad would always let us mess around in the kitchen. We were never told 'No' when we wanted to make something."

Neither brother received any formal training. "We are students of flavor," Paul explains. "I learned about liquor the way I learned about food – taste, think, mix."

This simple motto comes in handy as bartenders are beginning to borrow inspiration from the kitchen. Paul enthuses over his first unique cocktail – created in Thailand – containing mango, coriander, chili, passion fruit vodka and lime. "I made it based on the principles of Thai cooking," he explains, "sweet, spicy and sour."

"Why should cocktails be stuck in the 80s? If [chefs] Heston Blumenthal and Ferran Adrià can manipulate food, why can't bartenders play with cocktails?" The questions Tom poses are rhetorical, of course. There is no earthly reason why cocktails must adhere to a strict formula, especially as signature ingredients can also imbue a drink with local character. Tom remembers, "I found this new [fruit] the other day in Phuket, called *sapota* which has a

very creamy, almost custard-like texture. I threw it in a few cocktails and gave it to some unsuspecting guests at the bar."

Clearly, being always on the move implies flexibility and spontaneity. Tom explains that "the biggest challenge is product availability – some spirits are available in China that aren't available in Thailand or Cambodia, so I have to keep changing my recipes where ever I go – or just make up new ones."

Before he became a cocktail pioneer, Paul paid his dues washing glasses and making espressos, hardly the role for an independent mind. These days, however, he's found his niche, in association with 42 Below, New Zealand's premier vodka brand and fastest-growing company.

Tom had equally humble beginnings – at 14 he was employed mixing fresh juices and smoothies. He switched to harder stuff in Melbourne, when he worked at the local watering hole. Today, the former juice barista is busy in Washington, DC, rewriting the Marriott Hotel's beverage guide with legendary barman Dale Degroff. In Shanghai, Tom also works with clients like Pier One, Remy Martin and Grey Goose, as well as the Sofitel Hotel chain.

Though the brothers have a reputation for innovation, they retain a hearty respect for tradition. Paul cites such classic cocktails as the Aviation, the Brandy Crusta and the Old-Fashioned among his favorites; Tom also lists the first and last, adding the timeless Mint Julep.

"These cocktails have lived much longer than the person behind them; they still taste amazing and are still the source of debate," says Paul.

Tom recently handled a 400-person, five-day Indian wedding-cum-pool-party, featuring Bollywood hip hop DJs and free-flowing Champagne. "I'm surprised," says Tom, "that anyone was still standing for the ceremony on the last day."

Not to be outdone, Paul remembers offering US President George W. Bush's daughter a shot in Las Vegas. There's more to the story, but apparently 'mum's the word'. He's similarly coy about finishing another anecdote, which begins in Canada with a ride in a stretch limo from Whistler to Vancouver, and a briefcase full of vodka. That reluctance to tell secrets is, after all, traditional; everyone knows that bartenders, like priests, take confessions but are sworn to silence. ■