

Barnett on Business Travel: Oregon saloon doesn't know the word 'recession'

by *Chris_Barnett*

PORTLAND, Ore. -- Born in Norway in the mid-1800s, Simon Benson worked as a bull-team driver, fry cook, and logger turned philanthropic lumber baron. He donated 20 bronze drinking fountains to Portland, Ore., so his timber cutters wouldn't quench their thirst in the city's saloons. Wishful thinking.

The lifelong teetotaler would be stunned to learn that today the El Gaucho Bar, attached to his elegant namesake hotel, The Benson, is selling \$220 cocktails and a snifter of cognac for \$750. And these are hard times! Portlanders must have deep pockets.

El Gaucho, (319 S.W. Broadway; 503-227-8794; www.elgaucho.com), with its a swanky 1940s supper club ambiance, has made the bar a destination for discriminating and well-heeled drinkers, not just a waiting room for its signature 24-ounce New York steaks that fetch \$96. Indeed, El Gaucho's rich, royal blue walls, cherrywood bar rimmed in black leather and lined with 13 stools is dimly lit and has a film noir feeling with servers in tuxedos and crisp white shirts. Is that Bogart in the booth or Cary Grant sipping a martini in a corner table?

No. But still, \$220 for a libation?

"You just missed The Josephine, which was \$500 for a snifter," said Mark Joseph, bar manager. He justifies the tariff by explaining that it was a blend of L'Espirit de Courvoisier that retails for \$6,000 a bottle and Grand Marnier 150. "Courvosier claims L'Espirit had traces of Napoleon's personal (cognac) stash dating back to his coronation in 1802." The Josephine is no longer served " hopefully temporarily " because El Gaucho Bar had only one bottle and is searching for another.

Fear not cognac lovers. Joseph still has a half bottle of Hardy Perfection, said to be the "world's oldest known unblended cognac." It commands \$12,900 for a crystal decanter from the purveyor and \$750 a snifter at this bar. Who ponies up for this rare of pleasure? Joseph said a family of four recently was savoring a flaming dessert of bananas Foster and passed one snifter around for everyone to sip.

Lest you think the El Gaucho Bar fancies itself as Portland's version of Monte Carlo's haughty Hotel des Paris, Joseph also creates classic cocktails in the double digits. But his culinary approach to mixology produces some new and impressive taste experiences. His version of the legendary Bellini, for instance, is a blend of house-made, fresh peach puree (not peach juice) and Prosecco, a sparkling Italian wine, \$14 a flute.

Joseph's take on the Negroni — invented in 1919 in Florence after a customer, Camillio Negroni, drank them nightly for years — is to use 80-proof Portland-distilled Aviation Gin, California sweet vermouth and Italian Campari, shaken and served straight up, garnished with a curl of orange rind. The \$11 Negroni is a good before-dinner aperitif because it arouses the taste buds. It's a refreshing after-dinner digestif, too.

"They give me a fair amount of freedom here to experiment and do twists on old favorites," says the bar manager. In chilly weather, he re-creates Trader Vic's original Hot Buttered Rum "to keep the ghost alive." Joseph stays with the original ingredients — butter, brown sugar, clove and cinnamon, but he uses 8-year-old gold Bacardi Anejeo instead of a younger rum, \$10.

The El Gaucho Bar also has a page of "specialty cocktails" on its menu that live up to their billing, running from \$10 to \$14, and four exotics that will fatten up your bar tab but thrill your palate. What's more, Joseph has 60 bottles of uber-premium liquors that sell by the shot — from \$7 for a Sauza Commemorativo tequila to \$145 for a Glenlivet 1969 Cellar Collection single-malt Scotch. Not surprisingly, the bar has a massive wine list and kegs of eight draft beers drawn into pre-chilled glasses.

Clad in his black vest, black pants, white shirt and black bowtie, Joseph is an easygoing conversationalist who engages his customers — when they want to chat. "You've gotta throw a little love out there or you're not going to make much of an impression," he says. And he feeds them when they want to eat from a bar menu that includes a small sirloin steak capped with portobello mushrooms, \$16.

El Gaucho serves up entertainment rarely found in a steakhouse. Besides the flaming swords of lamb and beef kabobs, two Latin-style guitarists play in the bar 7-11 pm. Portland has banned smoking in bars, so an enclosed cigar lounge now caters to aficionados of the leaf. Hung with vintage black-and-white Cuban cigar ads and furnished with six small tables, leather couches, a television and warmed by a fireplace, it transforms

into a 21st century speakeasy at 7 p.m. on the first and third Fridays each month.

That's when a dealer and eight players sit down at a table, ante up \$50, puff on stogies, sip fine cocktails, nibble on canapes and play Texas Hold-em poker â€” not for money but for luxury gifts. And you don't need a password to get in.

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