

Tapping The Local Network

Regional cocktail conventions are growing in popularity

When Erik Westra—owner of Minneapolis event production company Westra & Co.—and Billy Helmkamp—co-owner of the Chicago cocktail bar and music venue The Whistler—decided to launch a cocktail convention in the Windy City, they aimed to highlight the local bar scene. “We wanted it to be a who’s who of the Chicago cocktail world,” Helmkamp says. The result was the Chicago Cocktail Summit, held May 22nd and 23rd at the Logan Theatre. The event hosted about 400 people, with the first day devoted to consumers and the second day focused on industry professionals. There were a few out-of-town speakers, but the vast majority of the seminars were led by Chicagoans. “I could point to almost any of the sessions and say it was about something happening in Chicago,” Helmkamp adds.

Consumer classes included a punch-making workshop, taught by Will Duncan of Punch House, and “Thinking Outside the Shell: Creating Cocktails with Eggs,” taught by Eden Laurin and Aubrey Howard of The Violet Hour. Seminars about ingredients—like shrubs and syrups—and techniques—including forced carbonation and frozen cocktails—were available for industry professionals. The Summit also hosted a tasting room and off-site “Bonus Activities” showcasing top retailers, restaurants and venues. These events included “Grrrls to the Front” at Crown Liquors & Taproom, celebrating women’s contributions to the local cocktail scene.



Regional trade conventions for mixologists have sprouted up in recent years. At Thirst Boston, bartenders from around the Northeast converge for hands-on education and conversation.

Thirst Boston, held from May 20th to May 23rd, highlighted the cocktail scene in Boston and other Northeastern cities, including Portland, Maine, and Providence, Rhode Island. The convention was held at the Boston Center for Adult Education, and teaching kitchens were available for hands-on cocktail classes. There were also comparative tastings and other events like the “Blender Bender” frozen cocktail contest featuring local bartenders.

Charleston BevCon—which at press time was scheduled for August 21st through August 24th in Charleston, South Carolina—aims to highlight up-and-coming brands through seminars, tastings and excursions. At a cost of \$500 a person, industry professionals must apply for the event, and attendance is capped at 300 people. “We wanted to create something intimate and small, so attendees can get to know each other and have a great network to call on,” says event organizer Angel Postell of Home Team Public Relations. Encouraging people to visit local companies is a focus as well. Tradesmen Brewing Co. will host an in-brewery event on the process and business of brewing, and another excursion takes attendees to a farm where ingredients for nearby distilleries are grown.

Most regional conventions emphasize professional development. A Thirst Boston seminar addressed a problem that event founder Maureen Hautaniemi says industry professionals often raise: how to retain quality staff. The Chicago Cocktail Summit tackled construction and legal stumbling blocks new business owners often face in “If Red Tape Doesn’t Kill Your Bar, These 10 Mistakes Will.”

Lindsey Johnson, cofounder of Portland Cocktail Week in Oregon, says the need for professional development inspired her to change up the cocktail convention model and launch The Bar Institute. Originally a feature at Portland Cocktail Week, the series of seminars is going national this year, making stops in Baltimore, Phoenix, Miami and Austin, Texas, before wrapping up with a major event in New York City in November. Attendees can learn about the business side, but there are also opportunities to expand technique, service and spirits knowledge. “When you talk about taking the next step in your career, it might still be behind the bar,” Johnson says. “Learning new techniques and new ways of engaging guests is the primary focus for many of our attendees.”

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Beth LaMontagne Hall

Beth LaMontagne Hall is a Portsmouth, New Hampshire–based freelance writer.