

Soaking in wealth of knowledge at BCB



Vikram Achanta shares his enriching experiences at Bar Convent Berlin, a high-value event for the bar and spirits world, which is held immediately after the German Rum Fest at Berlin Station every year.

Berlin Station which played host to the German Rum Fest on October 3–4, 2015 also played host to an infinitely bigger event, Bar Convent Berlin (October 6–7). I got the idea of the scale of Bar Convent Berlin (BCB) at its opening event, Mixology Market on the evening of October 5, whose purpose was to give away the awards linked to the show. I arrived in time bright eyed and bushy tailed, and found a long line backed up to the street. My media status got me a black band snapped around my wrist and complimentary cocktails at the bar inside. Four-five other bars in an outside hall were serving up a variety of drinks and I decided to whet my thirst with a glass of Pilsner Urquell.

I soon shifted to the bar inside which was serving up some wicked cocktails. I had a Rabarbaro = Gin Mare, Lime Juice, De Kuyper Sour Rhubarb Liquor, Thomas Henry Cherry Blossom Tonic, followed by a Jamaica Mule with Appleton Rum, Lime juice and Thomas Henry Spicy Ginger. My second cocktail in, I realised that the screen up on the stage was not a backdrop for the presentation ceremony, but to screen the presentation ceremony, which was actually happening at that moment at a Berlin hotel. A humbling moment, and more so, when the ceremony began which was conducted entirely in German.

Two awards and three cocktails down, I beat a hasty retreat to the U Bahn and decide to read about the results later.

The next morning I'm back at Berlin Station for day one of BCB. The Bar Convent occupies multiple halls of Berlin Station, and within each hall, apart from the open exhibition spaces, are also Mixology Stages, Demo Bar Areas and Tasting Forums which play host to brands and bar luminaries from around the world.

Business meetings apart, I am also keen to attend as many talks, seminars and demonstrations I can. But it was tough to make decisions on what to attend, with space also limited in most halls especially for keynote speakers.

ALEX KRATENA'S INPUTS FOR CREATIVITY

I started with "Push" by Alex Kratena, who at that time was still at the helm of the Artesian Bar at London's Langham Hotel, and a routine winner of best bar / best bar team / best bar man in the world. Alex had some inputs on creativity for us — "don't ghettoise it", "creativity requires you to slow down", "creativity requires an incubation period – always sleep on the idea".

Kratena showcased a few drinks from his brand new surrealist menu at the Artesian, inspired by the works of

Salvador Dali, including an Elephant made of Lego, with an enclosure for a mini Martini glass and a glass resembling a marching ant, with 2 receptacles for a delicious drink which was poured over granola.

He also talked about how his love for the Negroni and for beer led him to create a house beer at the Artesian, which had the flavours of a Negroni, ensuring that essential botanicals which you find in Gin, Campari and Vermouth were a part of the brew. As he'd got only one bottle with him, he told us that the next time we visited the Artesian, the beer would be on him. As Alex has since departed, I wonder if the new bar team would honour his commitment.

In between Alex and the next session, I visit the Martin Miller stand and find David Bromige, the co-founder there. David is here to take a session on the essential role played by water in the creation of their gin, which fascinatingly takes a voyage to Iceland where water is added and then sent back to England. A session I'd love to attend, but I am equally intrigued by the next speaker after Alex, who is Ryan Chettiwardana, of the White Lyan and now Dandelyan, two cocktails bar which are taking London by storm.

WHITE LYAN-A TOUGH ACT

A native Sri Lankan, Ryan now has a plummy British accent. Ryan first takes us through the drinks philosophy of the White Lyan, which is that it is a "house drinks only" menu and one cannot order off menu, as all drinks are created ahead of time. Ryan says this is due to an acute focus on the customer, and his vision of controlling every element of the drink beforehand, namely the mineral content, the flavour, the recipe, the dilution, the PH levels and the temperature arc.

White Lyan is a tough act to follow, and Ryan hopes he's got it right with Dandelyan, which situated as it is by the side of the Thames is inspired by the Golden Age of travel and from the botanists who voyaged to faraway lands. He therefore took a "nose to tail" approach to plants, and made sure that his cocktails had similar foundations – cereal / mineral / floral or vegetal.

BCB is home to brands, big and small. The large brands apart from having massive stalls also ensure that they sponsor several of the ongoing talks, with Pernod Ricard sponsoring Alex's talk and Diageo underwriting Ryan's session. Several of the brands have events happening in city bars also in the evening, which are more focused for the bartender community from across Europe. I met several bartenders who have travelled here on their own salaries to meet their compatriots from across the continent and also to soak in the wealth of knowledge and spirits on offer.

Brazil is a partner country for this year's Bar Convent and a large pavilion dedicated to Cachaca is the first thing you see as you enter BCB. A representative of IBRAC, the Brazilian Cachaca association, kindly assembles a selection of Cachaca's from across the eight exhibitors, and takes me through a guided tasting of the same.

BCB VALUABLE FOR BRANDS

After cachaca tasting, I stop off at the Altantico rum stall and speak to Brandon Lieb, the CEO. I ask him what he thought of BCB and how it compares with the other behemoth for the bar and spirits world, Tales of the Cocktail (TOTC) in New Orleans. Brandon is a big fan of BCB. Having been to both the events, he felt that





TOTC had more of a feel of a large party organized by bartenders for bartenders, whereas BCB was a place where brands could actually hope to get some work done.

From Atlantico, I hop over to the Sipsmith stall and have a wee taste of the Sloe Gin Negroni. From there it was only the matter of a couple of minutes to hop over to a stall with an interesting product called Ancho Reyes, which was a chilli liqueur. An added benefit was that Josh Harris, co-founder of the famed San Francisco bar, Trick Dog, and also spokesman for the brand, was manning the stall.

I have to head now for a major event, the release of two products by industry legends – Desmond Payne, Master Distiller for Beefeater Gin, and Colin Scott of Chivas Brothers, presenting Chivas Regal Extra and Beefeater Crown Jewel. Seeing them both on stage together was a great moment and to hear them talk with such modesty and humour about their craft and their brands was learning in itself.

Next, I head to the MAS Wines and Spirits stall as Shalini from Spiritz has asked me to look up Ian Matthews there. Ian is delighted to see me and shows me his card, which shows that surprise, surprise he is based in New Delhi! He takes me across several brand stalls which MAS represents including Gosling Rum, Old Moonshine and Blue Coat gin. I also meet Ian Burrell, the legendary rum ambassador who could very well be India-bound next year.

This year BCB was also home to Brew Berlin with over 120 brands of craft beer being showcased. I take an opportunity towards the fag end of day two, to have a tasting of 10-15 beers across stalls, not just German brews, but also some from interesting breweries across Europe, including Brew Dog from Scotland.

TITO BORN OUT OF ONE MAN'S PASSION

On day two, I attend a talk on the Power of Authenticity in the 21st century marketplace that is being delivered by the President of Tito Beverages. Tito are owners of the eponymous craft vodka from Texas, which has grown far beyond its craft roots to become one of the fastest growing spirits brands in the world. The brand has fascinating origins born due to one man's, Bert "Tito" Beveridge, passion to make a "vodka which a woman would not make a face at when she drank it". An astro physicist, Tito used to make flavoured vodka for his friends, who persuaded him to get his brands to a wider audience. Unfortunately within six months of his start-up (which he part-funded by maxing out 19 credit cards), his wife left him, taking the house, but he kept the distillery. In its first year, he did 1000 cases and they currently do upwards of 2 million cases.

Tito's is a strong supporter of dogs, and releases a calendar that has a different breed of dog for each month. Every employee is free to get their dog to work, and a charity called "Emancipet" gets a share of revenues. Could call it a "Vodka for Dog people" and its animal loving instincts make it a clear favourite for the millennials which are fueling the stratospheric growth of this brand (watch for it to soon appear in Indian duty free stores).

The two days I have spent at BCB seemed far too short for the wealth of experiences, which got packed in. I come away overwhelmed by my visit, and with a heavy heart and an aching liver, I bid adieu to BCB. 📍

(Vikram is co-founder and CEO of Tulleeho, a drinks training and consulting firm and www.tulleeho.com, a drinks website.)