

Tools from the East

Japanese bar tools finally are reaching the States, and they bring both craftsmanship and a focus on the artistic process of making a cocktail.

To the Japanese, the cocktail is more about the process than it is about the end result. It is about the precision in cutting and shaping the ice for a particular type of drink, the fluidity of movement when measuring and pouring the spirit into the etched mixing glass, the deft handling of the long bar spoon so that it swiftly and silently cuts through icy cold liquid. The Japanese hard shake, in its several variations, is a marvel to behold. Rhythmic and exact, it is designed to bring a drink to the absolute perfect level of chill and dilution while creating tiny, rolled bubbles of ice on its surface.

Much like the Japanese tea ceremony, a choreographed and nearly dance-like series of precise and beautiful movements that culminate in a cup of tea, techniques employed under the Japanese philosophy of bartending take years of practice and apprenticeship to master. As with the tea ritual, the movements

of the Japanese barman reflect a seamless harmony of beauty, efficiency and ritual, the belief being that the true essence of the craft is in the details and the aesthetic—and that the cocktail is just a part of something larger.

The tools that Japanese bartenders employ are an integral part of the form and function that defines their style. They are as visually striking as they are useful, and they too are crafted with meticulous attention to detail. Sought after for several years by bartenders and cocktail enthusiasts the world over, they have been tremendously difficult to procure until very recently. Thanks to the efforts of a few dedicated cocktail geeks, all that is changing.

Greg Boehm, founder of Mud Puddle Books and cocktail geek of the highest order, has created an online resource that is dedicated to sourcing all manner of fine barware from across the globe. He has recently begun to carry precision tools from the Japanese manufacturer, Naranja. Boehm says that demand for these items was instantaneous, and that sales are rapidly growing. Roughly thirty percent of his business is international, he adds, while the remainder is a mixed bag of bartenders and amateur enthusiasts from across the country. Boehm also is surprised by the number of on-premise operators who are outfitting their bars with the implements, since Japanese barware tends to be rather pricey. Bar spoons range from \$14.95 to \$39.95. Mixing glasses average \$35.95. Ice picks sell for \$44.95, and 2 oz. dasher bottles are dear at \$29.95.

Having been fortunate enough to use several of the Naranja tools, it is my opinion that they are worth every penny. The bar spoons, which range in size from 24 to 50 cm, are lightweight, elegant and perfectly balanced—yet extremely strong and durable. They are fashioned from a particularly high grade of stainless steel and are meticulously crafted both to be highly efficient and visually striking. The extra-long versions



● Japanese bar tools like those above are designed on the premise that the process of making a cocktail is as important as the final drink itself.

are beautiful conversation pieces and excellent for mixing cocktails in large formats. The trident ends are perfect for spearing garnishes with a bit of theater.

The heavy-bottomed mixing glasses allow the barman to stir a cocktail without having to hold the glass with the other hand, and the turned lip and Japanese Yarai etching pattern catch the attention of even the most distracted guests. Due to the thickness of the glass, they also hold cold very well.

The dasher bottles are gorgeous and delicate, and they provide an extremely accurate dash with no spillover. The three-piece Cobbler shakers, used almost exclusively in Japan and

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standard equipment for the hard shake, are machined from very heavy gauge stainless steel and feel hefty in the hands. They have yet to truly catch on Stateside, as we love our Boston tin-on-tin two-piece shakers. Naranja and other companies make those, too, and yes, they are fantastic. Similarly, we have yet to see many of the heavy, short-bladed Japanese ice picks and wide variety of ice-cutting knives that are so common behind Japanese bars.

While the quality of Japanese barware is unmistakable, it is the aesthetic that, I believe, adds so much value for non-Japanese bartenders. Adding these tools to our kits—and taking a bit of time to learn how they are used and why—allows us the opportunity to incorporate a bit of distant culture and tradition into our own techniques. It gives us the opportunity to share with our guests a deeper, more visual and more memorable experience and, ultimately, makes us better, more rounded craftspeople. After all, the cocktail is just a part of something larger. ●

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