

COCKTAIL CONTEST

Just an Old Fashioned type of guy

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Take whisky, ice, bitters, syrup and some imagination, and you have 248 permutations of the Old Fashioned. At least, Tim Philips does. The Australian, who was in Hong Kong last week, was crowned the Diageo Reserve World Class Bartender of the Year 2012 at the final of the global competition in July.

The "248 ways to serve Johnnie Walker" cocktail he made for the Johnnie Walker Bottle Serve round obviously impressed the judges. In addition to using Johnnie Walker, the cocktail also had to be inspired by a movie star. Philips picked Bill Murray, "because he has taken a lot of chances in his life that I respect", he says. A classic Old Fashioned mixes whisky or brandy with muddled bitters and sugars and a twist of citrus.

While in Hong Kong, Philips demonstrated his ability to make 168 different Old Fashioned cocktails. He used six bitters – Angostura, Peychaud's, absinthe (although not strictly a bitters, Philips says it plays the same role in the drink), chocolate, cherry and orange; seven home-made syrups – popcorn, orgeat (made from almonds), cinnamon, raisin, honey, maple and agave; and four types of infused ice – vanilla, lapsang souchong, berry and peach.

The making of the cocktail, like Philips' view of Murray's life, is about taking chances. It also requires audience participation: someone takes a die, whispers something complimentary to it, and then rolls it on the table. The number shown represents which bitters will be used. Next, from a small hessian bag the same person is invited to pluck out a poker chip that has a number (one to seven) on one side. The selection determines which syrup will be used. The ice is chosen by spinning a key on a board divided into four colour segments, each representing a flavour. Philips says any combination of the three, mixed with the whisky, results in a successful drink.

The 28-year-old, who beat over 15,000 bartenders from 50 countries to be world champion, likes to take a different approach to cocktail making. "Throughout my career I have nurtured a strong passion for cocktails and creating a superior customer experience," he says.

Philips has opened his own bar, Bulletin Place, in Sydney. The small establishment has received rave reviews since opening in late December, quickly becoming one of the city's hottest watering holes. Philips also plans to release a book of cocktail recipes this year.