

Rockin' on the Rocks

THE TASTING PANEL'S
LATEST BARTENDER
COMPETITION FEATURED
THE EXOTIC-INSPIRED
FLAVORS OF **ABSOLUT WILD TEA**
AT FULLERTON CA'S THE SLIDEBAR
ROCK-N-ROLL KITCHEN

by E. C. Gladstone /
photos by Maria Schriber

Winner Ricky Yarnall of Fullerton, CA's Matador Cantina blew away the competition by using a soda siphon to create a "rapid infusion" (inspired by the French Culinary Institute's Dave Arnold) of crushed cardamom pods into the product, adding orgeat, a little kosher salt and lemon peel for his sophisticated Finishing School. "I typically don't like flavored vodkas," he said, "but Absolut Wild Tea is savory and quite mixable."



Our judges (clockwise from upper left) Pernod Ricard's Mike Karich, contest coordinator Jason Yeager, Absolut's Malin Karlsson, Southern Wine & Spirits' Tom Fell, Absolut's Michaela Norrman and Southern Wine & Spirits' Leanne Chau.



Fullerton, California is mostly known for two things: a branch of the California State University and the birthplace of Fender electric guitars—inspiring the rock-and-roll scene that spawned Orange County's No Doubt, Social Distortion and Lit. But as evidence of how deeply the mixology revolution has penetrated even smaller markets, THE TASTING PANEL found seven young bartenders within the city's historic SoCo district willing to go head to head with a brand new product: Absolut Wild Tea Vodka.

"It's a community. We all know each other; we've all worked together," said competitor Marit Towne of the Cherk Lounge. "And I'm gunning for it!"

Towne was joined by Fullerton neighbors Natalie Burke of Envy (see photos), Jason "Big J" Nieto of Bourbon Street (who offered a recreated Sex On The Bayou with Absolut Wild Tea, Midori, peach schnapps, OJ and cranberry), Vanessa Lui of the Venetian (her Wild Kiss combined Absolut Wild Tea with Grand Marnier, Domaine de Canton ginger liqueur, peach purée, sour mix, a dash of Tabasco, and orange zest), Slidebar's Timmy Morely (his Mad Hatter was a simple balance of Absolut Wild Tea and Domaine de Canton), Ricky Yarnall of the Matador (see photo) and Yorba Linda's Jason Denny of Rembrandt's (whose Rat Pack Tea combined Absolut Wild Tea with peach schnapps and Grand Marnier).

The summit was held at Commonwealth Avenue's rock mecca The Slidebar Rock-N-Roll Kitchen, which Absolut Brand Ambassador Michaela Norrman says embodies "the arty, edgy, fun atmosphere that Absolut is all about."

Absolut Wild Tea is the latest flavored Absolut, inspired by the similar black tea-elderflower Absolut Boston, but with a more Asian twist. The third-largest spirits brand in the world, wheat-based Absolut was the state-owned vodka of Sweden before becoming part of the Pernod Ricard family in 2008.

For our competition, the bartenders were allowed to use any ingredients and tools they would find in their own bar, hand-mix their pre-submitted recipe, explain the inspiration and present it to the judging panel. Afterwards, each made a batch to be served to the enthusiastic crowd of supporters, in Absolut replica Chinese tea cups, by servers wearing white tea dresses.

Our panel of judges was led by the toughest critics available: Absolut's own West Coast Brand Ambassadors, Michaela Norrman and Malin Karlsson, alongside Pernod Ricard's Mike Karich and Southern Wine & Spirits' Tom Fell and Leanne Chau. Each entry was judged for presentation/appearance, taste and creativity on a 1-10 scale.

Slidebar owner Jeremy Popoff was enthusiastic about hosting THE TASTING PANEL'S Absolut Wild Tea competition. The drummer of the platinum-selling band Lit envisioned the bar/café/performance space as a tribute to Orange County rock, filling it with local music memorabilia. "Anything we can do to get the bartenders being creative is good," he says.



Competition winner Ricky Yarnall with Absolut Brand Ambassadors Michaela Norrman (on left) and Malin Karlsson.



"I'm a big fan of Absolut flavors," says Natalie Burke, Bar Director of Envy Ultra Lounge, which hosts an Absolut Happy Hour. "I've blind-tasted them against other flavored vodkas and they always come out on top." While her Wild Orchid Martini placed third, she liked it enough to put it on Envy's summer menu.



Cherch Lounge's Marit Towne described her second place Wild Tea-quila Punch as "something that could be made quickly, but like nothing you've ever tasted." It combines Absolut Wild Tea with La Pinta pomegranate tequila, Grand Marnier, grenadine, sour mix and several fruits.



Jason Denny of Rembrandt's.



Vanessa Lui of The Venetian, Fullerton.



Timmy Morley from Slidebar. ■■