

In the 19 year history of the prestigious [James Beard Foundation Awards](#), the gaze has fixed on food and wine. This year's awards ceremony, held in early May in New York at Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall, marked the induction of the culinary cousin: the cocktail. The godfather of the classic cocktail renaissance, **Dale DeGross**, scored the medal for **Outstanding Wine and Spirits Professional**, beating out John and Doug Shafer of Napa's Shafer Vineyards and Garrett Oliver, brewmaster of Brooklyn Brewery, to name a few. (The 2008 publication of his gorgeous book, "The Essential Cocktail: The Art of Mixing Drinks" surely helped - that, and the fact that every bartender in America looks upon him in the deference conservatory students reserve for John Coltrane.)

DeGross attributed the recognition in part to the restaurant industry's appreciation for fine drinks as a means of compensating for lost revenue at the dinner table in times of economic hardship. "Small plates and cocktails tend to be the business plan for the next few years. People not really into cocktails are starting to pay a little more attention." Even Steve Olson, who teaches with DeGross in the [Beverage Alcohol Resource](#) and Pernod-Ricard's [BarSmarts](#), a traveling bartender education program declared "I'm excited tonight that Dale won because it changes everything."

But that was only half of it. The theme of this year's event was "**Women in Food**" and during the multi-floor walk-around reception (a gastronomic extravaganza if Lincoln Center has ever seen one!) 13 of the country's top female mixologists helmed tables where they mixed signature cocktails. Among them were Southern Wine & Spirits' Bridget Albert (from Chicago), author and [Liquid Architecture](#) founder **Kim Haasarud** (Los Angeles), **Julie Reiner**, who recently opened [Clover Club](#) in Brooklyn, and **Patricia Richards** from the Wynn on the Vegas Strip – and that's just to name a few. Their tables were sprinkled in among those of James Beard Award-winning chefs (past and that night's winners and nominees) dishing out bite-sized morsels of their seasonal specialties and vineyard owners pouring their wines. And if there's any everyday wisdom to be taken away from the reception, it's that mixologists are most naturally inclined to win guests' hearts and guarantee their satisfaction than any of the bunch.

Why? They offered "normal" sized cocktails while everyone else distributed samplings.

Each of the mixologist's creativity was on display. Perhaps, like deGross noted, it was an instinctive strategy to get those not used to cocktails to pay attention. [Aisha Sharpe](#) of NYC's Contemporary Cocktail, Inc., which recently created drink list for the Big Apple's rising hotspot, [Pranna](#), was busy crushing pink peppercorns for her tequila-based Pink Panther. **Josey Packard** of [Drink](#) in Boston (my neighborhood bar, thankyouverymuch) communicated her knowledge with the WiFi, a contemporary riff on the Marconi Wireless that she built on a base of Laird's Applejack. **Misty Kalkofen**, also of Drink, created a heady, enthralling concoction that balanced the malty richness of Bols Genever with a spoonful of seductive, smoky Mezcal.

One of the night's highlight was the liquid tour de force created by [Elayne Duke](#), luxury spirits ambassador for Diageo. The Duke, served on the rocks, was a mix of Don Julio Reposado, fresh grapefruit juice, maraschino liqueur, honey syrup and, to seal the deal, celery bitters. The layers of flavor revealed themselves in what seemed a choreographed progression. I marveled as I chatted with her husband, Ian Duke, who owns [Prohibition](#) on the Upper West Side. "It's going on my cocktail list," he said.