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Delano Las Vegas' Franklin Lounge

Photo Courtesy of MGM Resorts International

Valentine's Day is about showing loved ones just how much they matter. But if your passions also include cocktails, education and charity, Las Vegas has you covered. From February 12 through 14, For the Love of Cocktails takes over the Delano Las Vegas for three days of parties, seminars with master bartenders and a gala tasting. The event's founder, Tony Abou-Ganim, is Las Vegas' five-star general of mixology, author of two books on the subject and the passionate creator of the Helen David Relief Fund for Bartenders Affected by Breast Cancer. He spoke with Forbes Travel Guide just as the final preparations were being put in place for the big affair.

Last year's inaugural event centered around an incredible cocktail tasting on the 64th floor of THEhotel, now the Delano at Mandalay Bay. Now that the event is three days long, what's the lineup looking like?

This year we are expanding, piggybacking on the **Meet the Masters Wine Dinner**, which is going to be fabulous. Myself and Francesco Lafranconi and Dale DeGroff will be featuring welcome reception cocktails at that event, as well — just a beautiful way to kick it off. We have **Cocktails & Conversation** after the wine dinner, from 9 p.m.-midnight at the Franklin lounge in the Delano, so you'll be able to come in and have cocktails, shake hands and get a book signed.

After that we're gonna shuttle people to Herbs & Rye for **Life of a Bartender**, [giving them] a chance to see after-hours [life], when industry people get off work, and have an opportunity to share in some camaraderie at a great bar. Owner Nectaly Mendoza is just fabulous. What he's done for the city and for the profession through his commitment and passion to make Herbs & Rye a nationally recognized cocktail bar today is amazing. I'm very proud of Nectaly.

Following that are the **Cocktail Seminars & Interactive Classes**. Dale DeGroff will do his "I'll Take Manhattans" seminar, as well as participate in the gala. Las Vegas' own Francesco Lafranconi from Southern Wine & Spirits of Nevada will be doing a rum seminar, "For the Love of Rum & Rhum." Julio Bermejo, probably one of the best-known tequila experts in the world, will be doing a "Tacos & Tequila" seminar. Bridget Albert — she was one of the Day One bartenders at Bellagio in 1998 — will be doing her "Seeds to the Cocktail" seminar along with Debbi Peek. And I'll round it out with my "Making Great Cocktails at Home: Hands On With Tony Abou-Ganim" seminar for ladies only.



Tony Abou-Ganim, *Photo Courtesy of Tony Abou-Ganim*

Wait — hands-on? Ladies only? Your idea or a publicist's?

Well, you won't get any pushback from me to do a hands-on ladies seminar. I get tired of talking to guys. [Laughing.] But it really is all in good fun. And being that the entire weekend is geared at bringing awareness and raising funds for my charity, the Helen David Relief Fund, which benefits bartenders and their families who've been affected by breast cancer, it just seemed like a nice fit. All the ladies attending will get pink Helen David aprons, copies of my book, *Vodka Distilled*, and fun little tools to take home with them. They are gonna learn hands-on how to craft three different cocktails.

Outstanding. And then, of course, there's the For the Love of Cocktails Gala itself at Mix.

I don't know if there is a finer view of our beautiful city anywhere in town. It's going to be even bigger this year. Last year we had about 500 guests. We're looking to double the attendance for that. Last year we had 30 bartenders with at least 16 stations. We will probably be at least that if not more this year, featuring all of our sponsored brands in specialty cocktails created by top bartenders. We have bartenders coming in from Chicago, New York and San Francisco. There will be great food from Mix's executive chef Bruno Riou. There will be live entertainment, great cocktails and great people watching. And for those who are up early on Saturday, we are gonna have a Bloody Mary brunch from noon-3 p.m. at Della's Kitchen. Come, get a room, spend three days in Las Vegas, enjoy the festivities and leave a better, more knowledgeable imbiber at the end of it, and feel good about contributing to something that is very important to all of us.

You've mentioned that For the Love of Cocktails raises money for your charity, the Helen David Relief Fund for Bartenders Affected by Breast Cancer. How do those critical funds help bartenders?

The Helen David Fund has been something I've been working on for the past five years. For a lot of bartenders, unfortunately, a lot of times you're working without the benefits of health insurance. Breast cancer screenings is one thing we really are going to be making a big stand on this year, to help bartenders who might be in need, or have a history of breast cancer in their family, to get prescreening. The other real element that we're going to focus on are those costs that don't go away while you're going through cancer treatment or recovering, while you're out of work and you still have to pay the rent, you still have to buy groceries, the electric bill needs to be paid, your kid needs a new pair of shoes. This is really where we hope to do the most good with the Helen David Relief Fund.

Who was Helen David, and what did she mean to you that you have named your charitable organization after her?

Helen David was my cousin. Growing up it was always "Aunt Helen," but come to find out Helen was my cousin, although much older than me. Helen was the first person to teach me to be a bartender; she ran the Brass Rail Bar in Port Huron, Michigan, from 1937 until her death at the age of 91 in 2006. So, nearly 70 years.

Amazing.

Imagine: It's 1937, three years after the repeal of Prohibition, in the throws of the Great Depression and her father dies. Helen, at the age of 21, and her mother turned an ice cream parlor they inherited into a saloon. For two women to even be in a saloon was kind of new, but to run one was very, very new. Helen's father was always a philanthropic person, and always gave back to the community. The community then supported her and her mother at the Brass Rail, and Helen continued that philanthropic lifestyle and always supported Port Huron, the hospital and the church

in any way that she could. There is actually a Helen David Day now in Port Huron; she was known as the Lady of Port Huron, Miss Port Huron.

I'm guessing she had breast cancer?

She was a two-time survivor back in the days, when the odds of surviving cancer were nowhere as good as they are today. She was really an amazing woman, and a very big advocate of the cause. I know she is looking down and she is very humbled and proud to have this honor bestowed upon her. My selfish goal is that this is something that will go on long after I'm done bartending and walking the earth, something that benefits our profession and those less fortunate who are suffering with this terrible disease. This is a great way I get to build awareness as well as raise much-needed funds.

What advice do you have for attendees who are not bartenders? Might they be intimidated by the hands-on nature of some of the events?

We're really trying to get away from that intimidation factor, really trying to gear this toward the general consumer who has an interest in cocktails. Because, as we both know, cocktails are huge right now. Bartending as a profession is huge right now. Consumers are better educated, they're more demanding. This is a great way to meet some of the people that I think are very influential — not only in Las Vegas, but nationally — in this resurgence of the profession of bartending classic and contemporary cocktails. It's such a great opportunity, not only to give to a great cause, but to just have a lot of fun and expand your knowledge as an imbibor who enjoys finer cocktails and to be able to meet some of these people.



Delano Las Vegas, *Photo Courtesy of MGM Resorts International*

Why is the Delano the right home base for this event?

We're proud to be back at the Delano. Mix has been so supportive of the event, and we were so impressed with last year's event. Plus, with the opening of Franklin — a beautiful lounge featuring great craft cocktails — it shows the [property's] commitment to the cocktail world and the cocktail scene here in Las Vegas. It just has all the elements for a successful, glamorous evening.

Joining you in the task of putting on this event is Back Bar USA and the United States Bartenders' Guild. Who are they and what do they do?

I've been working with the United States Bartenders' Guild, of which I'm an active member since

1996, since there was only one chapter in the U.S., the Southern California chapter. Today we are quickly approaching 50 chapters nationwide and soon to expand beyond that.

And Back Bar is a locally based marketing and consulting company focused on the spirit world. The execution they are able to provide — promotions, the website, selling the tickets, working with the suppliers, decorations, photography, entertainment, everything it takes to execute an event — is great. Without them, there wouldn't be For the Love of Cocktails.

Back Bar does throw a very good party.

A *great* party. My cousin Helen always said, "For a nickel more, you go first class," and working with Back Bar really is going first class.

Do you know any of the cocktails you'll be making that weekend?

I'm going to serve a drink I call the Monkey Shine, based on vodka and two of my favorite modifiers: Campari and Cointreau. I think those two work so beautifully together with fresh guava and fresh lemon and just a touch of simple syrup. It's a beautifully refreshing, fun, easy-drinking libation that I think will be the perfect welcome drink when people arrive at my seminar.

When did you know that you could actually make bartending your career, not just a job?

[In] 1993, I moved from San Francisco to New York City. I'd been bartending 13 years, during a stretch of time between 1980 and 1993 where, when someone would ask and you said you were a bartender, their follow-up question would be, "Well, what do you *want* to do?" I was in New York pursuing a theatrical acting career when I started working for Mario Batali at his very first restaurant, Babbo, at Cornelia Street in the Village. He introduced me to a gentleman by the name of Dale DeGross, who was then the head bartender at the Rainbow Room and was beginning this resurrection of pre-Prohibition cocktails. I went and watched him work and, at that moment, I had a revelation: "Wow, there is more to this craft of bartending than I realized." And from that day on I just set out to be the best bartender that I could be. Again, at that time, there were no prospects for a book deal, radio, TV or even being seen in a newspaper or magazine. You know, it's just funny: When you just follow something you love doing, it no longer becomes a job. And amazing things can happen.