

5 THE OUTSIDER

Despite a lack of natural ability, I did have the one element necessary to all early creativity: naïveté, that fabulous quality that keeps you from knowing just how unsuited you are for what you are about to do.

—Steve Martin, *Born Standing Up*

DON LEE'S CREATIVE journey began with a broken heart. In the winter of 2005, Don was a computer programmer for a large insurance firm. He spent nine hours a day in a Manhattan skyscraper staring at a flickering computer screen and writing code. "It was a pretty nice life," he says. "After work, I'd hang out with the cat, sit on the couch with my girlfriend, watch some television."

But then the girlfriend left—"She even took the cat," Don says—and he found himself with lonesome evenings and too much free time. His empty apartment made him sad. And so Don turned to a substance that's long been a Band-Aid for the brokenhearted: alcohol. He started frequenting a local bar after work, sitting at the counter and ordering a few stiff drinks. "I never went to get drunk," Don says. "I would sip very slowly. I guess I just wanted to be around other people."

At first, Don didn't know what to order, so he watched the bartenders work. He quickly grew enchanted with their cocktail rituals and the exacting way they crushed the ice cubes and squeezed the lemons and measured the shots. And then Don started paying attention to the taste of the drinks as he tried to memorize the subtle flavors of all the expensive liquors. He began to appreciate the smoky haze of rye, and the peaty tang of good Scotch, and the medicinal taste of gin. And then he watched as the drinks came together, as the alcohols were shaken and stirred and strained and poured. "I had nothing else to do but observe," Don says. "And I had no one else to talk to, so I talked to the bartenders."

Don was lucky: his local bar was the Pegu Club, a swank New York lounge widely celebrated for the quality of its (fifteen-dollar) cocktails. Audrey Sanders, the club's chief mixologist, was intent on bringing back classic drinks, finding inspiration in the recipes of vintage cocktail guides. Instead of listing neon green appletinis and margaritas from a mix, Sanders's menu featured obsolete libations like the gin-gin mule and the burra-peg and the Tom and Jerry. "It was only later that I realized how lucky I'd been to learn at the Pegu Club," Don says. "I learned about the importance of perfect technique and perfect ingredients. I learned about the importance of tasting and then tasting again. Those first drinks [at the Pegu Club] taught me what drinks are supposed to be."

After six months of educational imbibing, Don decided that he was ready to start making his own cocktails. Although he had virtually no bartending experience, he was asked to cover a few shifts at Death and Company, a new speakeasy in the East Village. (Brian Miller, the head bartender, had been charmed by Don's enthusiasm.) After a few months, the bartending shifts multiplied, so Don was working five nights a week while still holding down his job at the insurance firm. His routine was exhausting: he'd put

in a full day of programming and then take the subway downtown and pour drinks until two in the morning. Then he'd break the bar down and catch a cab home, slinking into bed around four in the morning. After a few months at Death and Company, Don was asked to help run PDT (aka Please Don't Tell), a hip basement bar that could be entered only via a phone booth in the back of a hot-dog joint. "At first, the bar was just famous for the weird entrance and all the secrecy," Don says. "But then we started getting serious about the drinks. I wanted to develop a bar that was all about technique, so that we'd serve classic cocktails better than anyone else."¹ Although Don was still working at the insurance firm, his bartending renown was spreading. Cocktail snobs started waiting in line outside the phone booth.

Don, however, was getting restless: there was something tedious about his pursuit of alcoholic perfection. "I guess I realized that I didn't want to spend the rest of my life making the same drinks over and over," he says. "I could make an excellent martini, but it was still just a martini, you know? At a certain point, it didn't matter if I was using the best gin, the best vermouth, and the best olives. I was still just following someone else's recipe. There was nothing new. It was kinda boring."

But Don wasn't bored for long. His frustration with the strict traditions of bartending—there was only one way to make everything—soon gave way to a creative epiphany. He remembers the moment clearly: "I was prepping the bar before we opened. Cutting limes, making syrup, that sort of stuff. And I was looking up at all our bottles, all these beautiful bottles behind the bar, and I suddenly realized that I could invent a new drink. I could come

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 1. *The work paid off: in July of 2009, at the Cocktail Spirit Awards, PDT was voted the best cocktail bar in the world.*

up with my own cocktail. It sounds so obvious now, but for me it was a pretty big idea."

Don immediately went to work on his new cocktail project. He turned Monday and Tuesday at PDT into experimental nights during which he tested his strange new concoctions on customers. Most of the experiments were utter failures, like his attempt to carbonate a cherry. "Wouldn't it be cool if you got a Manhattan but the maraschino cherry was fizzy inside?" Don asks. "The only problem was that the fruit kept on exploding." Another experiment involved a gel cap that propelled itself around the drink—"Like a little submarine," Don says—and kept the cocktail properly mixed. Unfortunately, the propulsion system altered the flavor of the drink; the martinis tasted like baking soda.

But Don refused to get discouraged. "I was having so much fun," he says. "I was like a little kid in a candy store, except my candy was ninety proof." And so he continued to experiment, searching for new techniques and ingredients to work into his avant-garde cocktails. For Don, the research was a chance to combine his long-standing interest in chemistry—he had been an engineering major at Columbia University—with his new bartending obsession. "I was really a novice behind the bar," Don says. "Unlike the bartenders, I didn't have an encyclopedic knowledge of vodkas or single-malt whiskeys. I knew much less about liquor per se. But I knew a fair amount of chemistry, and that let me think about bartending in a slightly different way."

Look, for instance, at one of Don's first successful inventions: the bacon-infused old-fashioned. The drink relies on a process called fat-washing, in which a fatty food (like cooked bacon) is combined with an alcohol. The mixture is then chilled—the greasy globules solidify on the surface—and strained, so that no lard remains in the liquid. While fat-washing might seem like a

weird concept, Don saw the experiment in terms of its elementary chemistry. "I was pretty confident it would work," he says. "Alcohol and fat have very particular atomic properties." Don then launches into a lecture on chemical polarity, a phenomenon that's caused by the separation of electrical charges within a molecule. "Polarity is why oil and water don't mix," Don says. "The fat is nonpolar and the water is polar, and so the molecules stay far apart from each other. I knew that the same principle applies to alcohol, which is also polar." However, the flavorful compounds embedded in the fat—those stray molecules that give the bacon its savory taste—are polar too, which is why they easily dissolve in the bourbon.

It took Don a few weeks of careful tinkering—he had to adjust the ratio of lard to alcohol, and then figure out how long to refrigerate the mixture—but he eventually developed a booze that made him drool. "It was a delicious drink, a perfect combination of those oaky bourbon flavors with the saltiness of breakfast meat," he says. "Unfortunately, it was a little much straight, even with ice." And so Don began testing out cocktail recipes, whisking his flavored bourbon with a variety of mixers. After adding a dash of bitters for balance, he started searching for a sweetener, as the standard squirt of simple syrup just seemed too, well, simple. His breakthrough arrived at breakfast: "I was eating pancakes and I thought about how when you pour the syrup on the pancakes and you get some maple syrup on your bacon by accident . . . That's pretty fucking tasty. So I decided to try maple syrup with the bacon-bourbon instead of straight sugar. And it worked. It worked really, really well."

Don added the bacon-infused old-fashioned to the PDT cocktail menu, serving it to his bravest customers on the experimental nights. It was an instant hit. The fat-washed bourbon soon became

the bar's signature drink, garnering praise in *Gourmet*, *Saveur*, and *New York*. Don is now the chief mixologist at the Momofuku restaurants in New York, run by the chef David Chang. His latest cocktails make the bacon-infused old-fashioned seem conventional. There is the celery nori, in which Don steeps dried seaweed in apple brandy and then removes the seaweed and adds a dash of celery-flavored simple syrup. "I don't know how this drink works, but it does," he says. "Sometimes, you have to suspend your better judgment and just taste it." Or consider his sesame-candy cocktail, which involves mixing cognac with toasted sesame seeds and a burnt-caramel syrup. Or his pickled-ramp martini, in which tangy onion juice takes the place of olive brine. And then there is Don's clever riff on rum and Coke, which begins by fat-washing white rum with melted butter and then steeping freshly popped popcorn in it. The drink is finished with a dash of Coke. "I call it the 'movie theater,'" he says. "On the one hand, it's composed of really familiar flavors. On the other hand, it's bizarre to taste them all together in a liquid. I like inventing stuff that's just weird enough to make you think."

The success of Don Lee is a story of creativity coming from an outsider, a person on the fringes of a field. It's a parable about the benefits of knowing less—Don was a passionate amateur—and the virtues of injecting new ideas into an old field. After all, when Don invented the bacon-infused old-fashioned, he wasn't a cocktail expert. He hadn't taken any fancy bartending classes or mastered the subtleties of Kentucky whiskey or studied the history of the old-fashioned. (In fact, he was still working as a computer programmer.) "Basically, I experimented with fat-washing because I was bored and nobody told me not to," Don says. "I'm sure most bartenders would have told me it was a terrible idea, that it would never sell, that I was wasting perfectly good bourbon. But the

laws of chemistry told me it should work, so why not try? I guess my only secret is that I didn't know any better."

I.

In the late 1990s, Alpheus Bingham was a vice president at Eli Lilly, one of the largest drug companies in the world. He was in charge of research strategy, helping to manage thousands of scientists working on hundreds of different technical problems. At the time, Eli Lilly's business was booming—the company was flush with "Prozac profit"—but Bingham was starting to worry about the future. The company was throwing vast sums of money at its scientific problems, desperately trying to develop the next blockbuster drug. Unfortunately, this expensive investment was producing tepid results; Bingham was beginning to wonder if there wasn't a more efficient approach to drug research. "After spending years on a problem, we'd often end up with a solution that was so imperfect it was virtually useless," he says. "And those failures weren't cheap."

For Bingham, the most troubling aspect of the drug-development model was its complete unpredictability. He had no idea which problems were solvable and which ones weren't; he couldn't anticipate how long the questions would take to answer, or where these answers would come from. "That's what really worried me—I had no idea how to manage the R and D process," Bingham says. "I didn't know who should be working on what. And that's when I started to wonder if all these supposedly impossible technical issues were really impossible. Maybe we just had the wrong people working on them? Maybe someone else could solve them? I always assumed that you hire the best resumé and give the problem to the guy with the most technical experience. But maybe that was a big mistake?"

These troubling questions led Bingham to a radical conclusion: if Eli Lilly couldn't predict which scientists would find the answer, then it needed to ask *everyone* the question. Instead of assigning its problems to particular experts inside the company, the corporation should make the problems public. "Needless to say, this strategy broke every rule of corporate R and D," Bingham says. "Like every other company, Lilly was very secretive about its research projects, for competitive reasons," he says. "You didn't want anyone else to know what you were working on." Bingham, though, was convinced that this secrecy came at a steep cost.

And so, in June of 2001, Bingham launched a website called InnoCentive. The structure of the site was simple: Eli Lilly posted its hardest scientific problems online and attached a monetary reward to each challenge. If the problem was successfully solved, then the solver got the reward. (The money was the incentive part of InnoCentive.) "Mostly we just put up these really hard organic chemistry problems," Bingham says. "I assumed there was little competitive risk, since a lot of these technical problems had also bedeviled our competitors. Frankly, I didn't expect many of these challenges to ever get solved."

A few weeks passed. The InnoCentive site was mostly silent; Bingham thought his pilot project had failed. But then, after a month of nothing, a solution was submitted. And another. And another. "The answers just started pouring in," Bingham says. "We got these great ideas from researchers we'd never heard of, pursuing angles that had never occurred to us. The creativity was simply astonishing."

After less than a year of operation, the website had become an essential R & D tool for Eli Lilly, allowing company scientists to benefit from the input of outsiders. By 2003, the site was so successful that it was spun off from its parent company and be-