

Award-winning Panda & Sons launch new cocktail freezes

There's cocktail bars and then there's Edinburgh's Panda & Sons which transcend the ordinary and where you're guaranteed the best of Scottish hospitality.

Opened in 2013 by award-winning bartender Iain McPherson, aka the Cocktail Panda or the Willy Wonka of the drinks industry, this bar sits in the top 100 of the world's Top 500 Bars at number 57. It's not hard to see why.

Gaining a degree from the Gelato University in Bologna and also completing the "Science of ice cream course" at The University of Reading in 2016, McPherson found a passion for exploring the world of sub-zero temperatures and applying them to the world of drinks and cocktails in a never-before-seen approach for the industry.

McPherson purchased a freeze dryer and set up their creative space, the aptly named 'The Brain Melting Society' in the basement of sister bar, Nauticus. Alongside Nicky Craig, Panda & Sons bar manager, they experiment with freezing techniques with the aim to increase the flavour spectrum that is currently available to the bar industry.

It's taken five years of development but these aren't cocktails that your average customer will be able to replicate at home. Instead think of the experience as a theatre in cocktail making. And despite currently being a unique offering at Panda & Sons, which McPherson could patent for exclusivity,

The Cocktail Panda believes in the opposite, explaining, “I want to keep our industry progressive, so knowledge sharing is paramount to achieve this and to encourage others to do the same”. You have to love his generosity.

Disguised as an old barber shop, Panda & Sons is accessed down a set of stairs, through a mock bookcase and you’ll find yourself in one of the city’s best secret bars. It’s full of quirky retro paraphernalia and plenty of panda references, including the friendly staff who wear panda-adorned aprons.

This bar has innovation at the heart of every drink they serve. Their focus is on exploring and pioneering the largely unknown world of sub-zero flavour techniques, invented in-house.

Sitting at the bar, our bartender, the knowledgeable and entertaining Sam, who’s youthful good-looks deceive the years of experience he has, mixes us an array of innovative cocktails to showcase the range on offer.

We marvel at his ability to skilfully multi-task, whilst maintaining banter with his curious audience of two, as he explains the techniques and elements that have gone into making these incredible concoctions. I just wish I’d paid more attention in chemistry lessons as the techniques were highly technical and I got lost along the way – but that might have been the number of cocktails consumed, all in the spirit of discovery, I hasten to add.

Their new menu, ‘Transcend’ uses four core techniques; Switching, Sous Pression, Freeze Drying and Cryo-Concentration to create elevated flavour, texture and sustainable solutions for the 16 new cocktails.

Their now renowned, Coconut Daiquiri, uses the ‘switching’ technique. The team freeze and extract the water content in Bacardi Blanca White rum and replace it with roasted coconut milk which is then clarified. The end result offers a

delicious smooth and creamy finish unlike any daiquiri you've had before! It's served with a white chocolate and coconut wafer. It can only be described as 'sublime'.

'Sous Pression' uses the extreme force of freezing by containing the process in a 2l stainless steel keg, freezing fruit in this way leeches flavour for a highly concentrated result.

'Freeze Drying' extracts 99% of the water from an ingredient to create a dried product that maintains the cell structure and maximises its fresh flavour. Unlike the more common dehydrator, freeze drying is reversible and allows the team to break the barriers of seasonal products and expand their flavour routes all year round. It also allows them to do a pure flavour infusion without any dilution, which is showcased in their Seville Negroni. Sam let us try the mandarin crisp, which is used in the drink – it oozed intensity.

Finally, 'Cryo Concentration' is a technique which mimics the process of ripening of fruit by freezing and extracting the water content from the juice. This gives a consistent level of ripeness and can be repeated to make flavourful cordials. Cryo Concentration reduces the dilution of juice and spirits, in turn lowering the freezing point which allows drinks to be made colder and fresh flavours (normally lost in the cooking process) to be maintained.

I finished the evening with their famous Birdcage cocktail. A theatrical serve, it's a whisky based drink, with a rhubarb and lemongrass shrub, Aperol and Angostura bitters, served smoked with a cinnamon and clove mix – which surprisingly scents the air but not the drink. It plays with your senses.

You might not be able to get a haircut here but you'll have one of the best bar experiences ever. Book to avoid queuing but once inside you're guaranteed incredible cocktails, a fantastic vibe, friendly staff and generally a good time.

Transcend is available in Panda & Sons at 79 Queen Street,
Edinburgh, EH2 4NF – 0131 220 0443







