

# LAST THE STITCH

## THE LIFE (AND CAREER) SKILLS LEARNED FROM BARTENDING

**K**aren Horton, MD, MSc, San Francisco, earned her researcher stripes as a member of ASPS and the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada. But for all her published accomplishments, Dr. Horton reveals swagger about only one thing: That she mixes “a really mean martini.”

It’s a skill honed through hundreds of hours in restaurants and bars in Toronto and now San Rafael, Calif., where she occasionally serves as a bartender at the “volunteer only” Loch Lomond Yacht Club. “When I was an undergrad in the college town of Kingston, Ontario, I started waitressing and bartending, and it was really fun,” says Dr. Horton, who was born in Canada but has since become a naturalized citizen. “I don’t need a lot of sleep, it was social job, and I got to see a lot of my friends and make money. When I started medical school, I was newly married and needed extra money for textbooks, so I went back to bartending.”

Nevertheless, bartending provided benefits far beyond financial compensation. “It’s allowed me to hone my short-term memory skills, as I’ve often had 10 orders I needed to keep straight, and my long-term memory skills, as well,” she notes. “I’ve had customers come in who I hadn’t seen for two years and I’ll immediately make their drink — which surprises them. It’s also taught me how to navigate through a roomful of drunk people while holding my own as a tall, thin, blonde woman, and stay professional. You can’t reason with a drunk, so sometimes you have to pick your battles. I definitely picked up many life skills.”

The give-and-take between patron and bartender occasionally leads her to reveal her true profession, which has turned conversations into mini-consults that she’s learned to quickly neutralize. “When people learn I’m a plastic surgeon, the first question they ask is: ‘What do I need?’ They think I’m analyzing them and what they need for surgery. I say, ‘You need a beverage; let’s go to the bar and I’ll shake you a cocktail.’ I get asked that all the time, and it’s kind of funny.”

A bar is far removed from the O.R., so a caring colleague once asked Dr. Horton if she truly wanted to include bartending in her professional CV, as she had during her residency pursuit. “I said, ‘I know how to talk to all different types of people, ages and levels of intoxication. If I can handle myself that way in a bar, I can definitely handle the doctor-patient relationship.’ Then the doctors who interviewed me for residency asked me how to make different drinks, which was fun. It allowed the interview to be a little more lighthearted.”

Being both waitress and bartender provided Dr. Horton a unique perspective on the world of servers, the vast majority of whom are paid minimum wage and are forced to live mainly on tips. “I typically tip 30 percent,” she tells *PSN*. “Even if it’s bad service, I’ll tip 20 percent. It’s really important to me, as servers live on ‘peanut’ tips. There’s a loyalty among service-industry workers.”



*Away from the office, Dr. Horton still performs occasional bartender work for the Loch Lomond Yacht Club.*

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For those who’ve read this far to learn how to make that “mean” martini, here’s Dr. Horton’s recipe: “Fill the shaker with ice and add three ounces of gin or vodka, whichever they prefer,” she says. “If they ask for ‘very, very, very dry,’ that’s no vermouth at all; if they like it ‘dirty,’ try to dissuade them, because that involves olive juice and it’s gross. Shake that for about 30 seconds — then walk away for about two minutes. Letting it sit creates all these tiny ice crystals in it, and it doesn’t matter what type of ice is used. But it’s amazing.” **PSN**