

Style

## Cocktail club: Ottawa pals shake things up

*A group of former high school friends turn their penchant for making complex drinks into a popular blog*

Bruce Deachman • Ottawa Citizen  
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Ottawa bloggers Five Men Making Shit offer a seasonal twist to their Walnut Manhattan by using walnut bitters and a garnish of Maraschino cherries or orange peel. ASHLEY FRASER / Ottawa Citizen Style

Five men, each in his early 30s, stand around a kitchen island, watching a sixth, Emmanuel Kardaras, perform magic.

Kardaras, or Mano, as he's known, combines precise measures of bourbon, crème de cacao, Galliano vanilla liqueur, egg whites and chocolate bitters into a copper cocktail shaker, closes the top and shakes it for about half a minute. This first, dry shake, he explains, is important in any drink that calls for egg whites, allowing them to both mix with the other ingredients while also building to a nice froth. He then adds ice to the shaker for a second shake.



Sebastian Ortega, from left, Bruno Meliambro, Marco Provenzano, Mano Kardaras, Anthony Di Virgilio and Brandon Wright are the six friends who make up Five Men Making Shit, a numerically challenged group of St. Plus High School classmates who, as they hit their 30s, abandoned the bar scene in favour of families and careers, and embraced the resurgent popularity of cocktails as an excuse to stay in touch. ASHLEY FRASER/Ottawa Citizen Style

His friends remark on his technique much the way that serious baseball fans used to watch former Boston Red Sox first baseman Kevin Youkilis's peculiar but extremely effective batting stance: with a sort of ridiculous awe. Mano holds the shaker high above his shoulders. His strokes are almost comically vigorous.

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He then double-strains his concoction into a chilled coupe glass before sprinkling a pinch of nutmeg on top. The result — he's named his creation the Aztec Snow — is far more than the sum of its parts. The others take sips and nod approvingly. Neither too sweet nor too bitter, the drink is complex and luxurious, and perfectly conceived and built for the winter holidays.

"These," notes Bruno Meliambro, "are not your gateway cocktails."



Calling for a dozen ingredients, including plenty of fruit, this festive punch takes some time and energy to make, but the results are worth it. It's sweet without being cloying, and packs a wallop without tasting overly boozy. It would make an ideal table centerpiece when having guests over this season. ASHLEY FRASER/Ottawa Citizen Style



Prepping for the Holiday Punch, which is big on flavour and ingredients. ASHLEY FRASER/Ottawa Citizen Style

Bruno Meliambro, Emmanuel Kardaras, Sebastian Ortega, Marco Provenzano, Anthony Di Virgilio and Brandon Wright are the six friends who make up Five Men Making Sh!t, a numerically challenged group of one-time St. Pius High School classmates who, as they hit their 30s, abandoned the nightclub scene in favour of families and careers, and embraced the resurgent popularity of cocktails as an excuse and exercise to stay in touch.

"We started hanging out more at each other's places, and it just sort of naturally evolved," explains Mano, a federal public servant by day.

"We've always been big drinkers, but slowly, a few of us got into more complex cocktails. We were tired of the gin and soda."

"The cocktail revival started a few years ago," adds Wright, also a public servant, "and we just started dabbling in it ourselves, just trying to improve the drinks and make things a little better."

Like others who've developed a taste for drinks beyond the rum-and-cola and rye-and-ginger of high-school dances, they learned to walk before flying, initially mastering such basics as martinis, Manhattans and whisky sours.

From there they branched out. Prior to the evening's Aztec Snow, for example, Ortega offered a seasonal twist on the classic Manhattan by using walnut bitters.





After mastering such basics as martinis, Manhattans and whisky sours, the group has branched out and is now making their own bitters, syrups, cherries, tinctures, liqueurs and shrubs, and inventing their own cocktails. The holiday-themed Aztec Snow, above, combines precise measures of bourbon, cr  me de cacao, Galliano vanilla liqueur, egg whites and chocolate bitters. The secret, though, is all in the shaking. ASHLEY FRASER/Ottawa Citizen Style

The slope, of course, proved slippery, and soon they were making their own bitters, syrups, cherries, tinctures, liqueurs and shrubs, and inventing their own cocktails.

“We’re smoking now,” says Di Virgilio, referring specifically to smoke-infused spirits, but perhaps also generally to the group’s level of proficiency.

They all have well-stocked home bars. One of the group boasts a freezer full of glasses. At least half own Wintersmiths ice chests, \$200 shoebox-size trays that make perfectly clear ice cubes and balls. (“It’ll change your life,” promises Provenzano.)



The six friends behind Five Men Making Sh!t, who all have well-stocked home bars, meet monthly, for what they describe as a cocktail version of show-and-tell, with feedback.

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“We chill, hang out, make some drinks, take some pictures and drink,” says Wright. “And catch up. It’s a side-thing that’s getting bigger now, but it was always meant just to be a fun thing.”

Provenzano’s preferred cocktail is a Corpse Reviver (#2), with gin, Cointreau, Lillet Blanc, lemon juice and absinthe. The others list more traditional drinks as their favourites: Old Fashioned, Negroni, and gin or Vesper martinis, the latter made famous by James Bond in Casino Royale.

Yet they also love experimenting. Meliambro once incorporated broccoli into a drink, the general consensus being that it wasn’t such a great idea. “We don’t condone his behaviour,” jokes Kardaras. Peppers and vinegars are popular inclusions now, as are cucumbers. Greek yoghurt, meanwhile, found some, although not universal, traction.



Emmanuel Kardaras prepares his "magical" Aztec Snow creation, a complex drink conceived and built for the winter holidays. Neither too sweet nor too bitter, the group nodded with approval after the first sip. ASHLEY FRASER/Ottawa Citizen Style

"That worked," says one.

"Yeah, that was really good," recalls another.

"That was OK," counters a third.

The results of their get-togethers are posted on their blog ([fmmms.net](http://fmmms.net)). The site was originally intended to feature both food and drink, but the former has largely been ignored. The blog is aimed, they say, at enthusiasts like themselves.

"We've never thought of ourselves as professionals," says Wright. "We try to focus on home bartending and we want our post to say, 'Here's how you make it at home.' We're not targeting bartenders, mixologists or infusers."

That said, they have ventured into the professional realm: For the past two years they've created cocktail menus for EVOO Greek Kitchen on Preston Street, where feedback from customers helps them further refine their skills.



The six friends behind Five Men Making Shit, who all have well-stocked home bars, meet monthly, for what they describe as a cocktail version of show-and-tell, with feedback. "We chill, hang out, make some drinks, take some pictures, and drink," says Brandon Wright. "And catch up. It's a side-thing that's getting bigger now, but it was always meant just to be a fun thing." ASHLEY FRASER/Ottawa Citizen Style

And while there seems to be no consensus on what makes a great cocktail, they won't post any that they feel falls short. And when asked how they'll know when they've taken things too far, Ortega barely misses a beat before replying, "When I'm muddling broccoli. Then I know it's over."

## HOLIDAY COCKTAILS



### Walnut Manhattan

**Ingredients:**

- 2-ounce rye
- ¾ ounce Martini & Rossi sweet vermouth
- 4-5 dashes walnut bitters

**Garnish:** Maraschino cherries or orange peel

1. Add all ingredients to an ice-filled stirring glass and stir well.
  2. Strain into a short glass with one large ice cube.
  3. Garnish with maraschino cherries or orange peel.
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### Aztec Snow



**Ingredients:**

- 1.5 ounce bourbon
- ¼ ounce crème de cacao
- ½ ounce Galliano (or other vanilla liqueur)
- ¾ ounce egg white
- 2 dashes Aztec chocolate bitters

**Garnish:** Grated nutmeg

1. Add all the ingredients to a shaker (without ice) and dry-shake vigorously.
  2. Add ice and shake again. Double strain into a coupe and garnish with grated nutmeg.
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## Punch



The Holiday Punch is packed with ingredients, flavour and makes an ideal centrepiece on a table when having guests over this season. ASHLEY FRASER/Ottawa Citizen Style

### Ingredients:

- 25 ounces gin
- 25 ounces Champagne (or any sparkling wine)
- 1 cup Heering Cherry liqueur
- 3 navel oranges (cut into quarter-wheels)
- 1¾ cups lemon juice
- 3 lemons (cut into half-wheels)
- 3 limes (cut into wheels)
- 1 pint raspberries
- ½ pineapple (cut into cubes)
- 1¼ cup simple syrup
- ½ cup orgeat syrup
- 2 cups water

1. Add all ingredients, except for the Champagne, into a large punch bowl, then refrigerate (ideally for at least 4 hours).
2. Before serving, add the champagne and ice.



The fellas of Five Men Making Shit mix it up with ideal cocktails to toast the upcoming holiday season. From left, Marco Provenzano, Bruno Meliambro, Mano Kardaras, Anthony Di Virgilio, Sebastian Ortega and Brandon Wright. Their blog can be found at [fmms.net](http://fmms.net) ASHLEY FRASER/Ottawa Citizen Style

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