Mai Tais, Tribe Called Quest & Kelly Slater: Drinking with Gabe Orta
By Tara Fougner

There are people whom you just vibe and would be friends with regardless of industry clout, one of those people is Gabe Orta. Co-Founder of Bar Lab, Gabe’s first bar, Broken Shaker Miami, opened in 2011 and there is no denying that it changed the bar game forever. Followed up by the Broken Shakers Chicago, LA & NYC, 27 Restaurant, Exchange Restaurant and The Anderson, his bars have won series trophies including Spirited Awards and landing on World’s 50 Best. Regardless of his success, this Columbia born industry veteran has paved his own way through his passion starting out from humble beginnings in hospitality and truly working his way up through real hustle.

A little story about Gabe and I … about 4 or 5 years ago, TSA decided I needed to go through additional security screening at Miami Airport after connecting from Guatemala City and I missed my flight. Out of a group of about 20, I luckily got stranded with Gilberto Marquez and we decided to go straight from the airport to Broken Shaker Miami at Freehand. Like magic, the moment we sat down, Gabe appeared and sat with us the whole time (mind you, the Shaker was slammed) showcasing his unique style of hospitality in making sure that we felt that his home was now our home. Gabe is quite the global citizen and since he might be hard to actually catch at one of his beloved bars, let’s get to know him and go drinking with Gabe Orta …

LET’S START BY TELLING US ABOUT THE OVERALL PHILOSOPHY / ETHOS AT BAR LAB.

We (Bar Lab) first started out as a beverage consulting company and have evolved into a full F&B hospitality group. Our passion is all about attention to detail on everything related with F&B – lighting, music, design, vibes, food, drinks etc. We also surround ourselves with

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people whom we feel are “better” than us to let them run with our concepts and grow with Bar Lab.

HOW DID YOU GET STARTED IN THE BIZ?
I started cleaning floors and dishwashing at a nightclub in South Beach in the late 1990’s. One night, the Barback didn’t show up, so I took his job and fell in love with the bar side and the people in it.

WHAT IS YOUR CURRENT GO-TO BOOZY DRINK ORDER?
Anything Tequila.

COFFEE OR TEA?
I am more of a tea kind of guy. Lately, I am really into white tea.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR FIRST BOOZY EXPERIENCE?
When I moved to Hawaii at 16 years old, I discovered the Mai Tai at Dukes in Waikiki, puked so many times.

HOW DO YOU GET OVER A HANGOVER?
A jump in the ocean and then eat a heavy egg breakfast sandwich, never fails.

WHAT IS YOUR SHAMELESS IDGAF PLEASURE DRINK?
A Painkiller for sure.

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IF YOU COULD HAVE DRINKS WITH ANYONE DEAD, ALIVE OR FICTIONAL, WHO WOULD IT BE AND WHAT WOULD YOU BOTH BE DRINKING?

Shaun White, Kelly Slater and Tony Hawk. We would all be drinking some kind of rare mezcal.

WHAT’S YOUR BEHIND THE BAR THEME SONG AND WHAT IS YOUR CLOSING SONG?

Tribe Called Quest on repeat and my closing song is The Specials “Message To Rudy.”

WHO IS THE BEST INDUSTRY DRINKING BUDDY FOR A FUN NIGHT?

Naren Young, but only when he’s in a good mood.

IF YOU COULD CREATE A DREAM TEAM COMPRISED OF ANY OF THE BARTENDERS YOU HAVE WORKED WITH BEHIND THE THROUGHOUT THE YEARS FOR A GUEST SHIFT, WHO WOULD BE ON IT?

Christine Wiseman, Yael Vengroff, Virginia King, Ivy Mix, Jillian Vose, Charlotte Voisey, Camille Austin and Angela Laino.

IF YOU AND I WERE TO GO ON A GLOBAL COCKTAIL BAR CRAWL (PRIVATE JET INCLUDED DUH) WHERE WOULD WE GO?

We’ll start in Buenos Aires in Florería Atlantico, then to Oaxaca to Mezcaloteca. Hop on the plane for a quick stop in Barcelona to Boadas for a proper martini. Next, off to Berlin’s Club der Visionaere for dancing all night kind of vibe. Then over to Tokyo to Golden Gai and we need to visit every kind of tiny bar. Last stop would be Bali and some kind of surf shack … probably just stay there forever lol.

WHAT IS THE COOLEST EXPERIENCE THE BAR WORLD HAS AFFORDED YOU THUS FAR?

There have been so many unforgettable experiences throughout the years, but the most important has been the ability to create our own business and work alongside so many remarkable people.

IF A GUEST GAVE YOU A MILLION DOLLAR TIP, WHAT CAUSE WOULD YOU DONATE TO AND WHY?

I would donate to non-profits that do good work with children and saving animals.

SOME INCREDIBLE TALENTS HAVE BECOME GLOBAL SUPERSTARS THROUGH YOUR BARS, WHO ARE SOME OF THE UP & COMERS TO WATCH WITHIN YOUR PROGRAMS?

YOU ARE THE DADDY OF A SUPER ADORABLE LITTLE GIRL, HOW DO YOU KEEP FAMILY LIFE BALANCE WITH SO MANY MASSIVE BAR PROJECTS AROUND THE GLOBE?

The key for me is balance. Eating healthy, daily exercise, meditating and making sure to take plenty days off to go surf and spend time with my family. Also, saying “no” to a lot more things then “yes,” time is precious and how you spend it is very important.

SOCIAL MEDIA CAN MAKE OUR LIVES LOOK SUPER GLAMOROUS, WHAT ARE SOME “REAL TALK” DOWNSIDES TO THE INDUSTRY THAT FOLKS THAT FOLLOW ALONG MIGHT NOT SEE?

Our industry can be very dark if we spend all our time drinking and following up false idols. Seek balance with a hobby or anything that doesn’t have anything to do with booze and reach out of to industry vets for mentoring and moral support.

WHAT ARE SOME TIPS FOR YOUNG’UNS LOOKING TO BREAK INTO THE INDUSTRY?

Learn different positions within the industry; put in the work and take that extra step in everything you do.

SHAMELESS PLUG TIME, WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON RIGHT NOW THAT SHOULD BE ON THE RADAR OF THIRSTY READERS?

We are very excited to be working on two new different concepts in Miami and also working on a book … so stay tuned for news on all of that.