



travels with charles

New York City baby. **Charles Vexenat** offers up some of his recent experiences from the Big Apple

After a big one for my last supper at the Lonsdale, I flew to the Meatpacking district in New York for the first international St Germain Bar exchange program. I have always been excited about the vibrant Big Apple bar scene. And now I was gonna be a part of it.

The deal was that two bartenders would swap bars for three shifts, an amazing project that's the brainchild of Robert Cooper (creator and owner of St Germain), who kindly took control of all the logistics. And if ya wanna swap then log on to www.stgermain.fr and put your name down.

The joint hosting me was Death & Co, located on 6th St & 1st Ave on East Village; the name comes from the Prohibition era and the Temperance movement. There's a drawing on the wall of the bar from these times that shows a sinner on the slippery slope from moral weakness, sliding into the arms of booze and into the chilly embrace of Death & Company.

The bar is run by Phillip Ward and Brian Miller (the swapper), both ex Pegu Club bartenders, and offers about 40 mixed drinks on the menu, with sections including Scotland Yard, Friends & Family, Cocktails and Punch Bowl, not to mention a fizzy list entitled 'Champagne or Death'.

They are also creating some great infusions such as bourbon & pecan, bianco vermouth & camomile and Scotch & apple as well as numerous homemade syrups and bitters featured in ancient wooden cabinets with all sorts of other modifiers.

There's room for 60 covers and interestingly they won't allow you to stand up sipping cocktails – or without a reservation.

The talented bartenders there take their time to make tasty drinks in the most efficient way possible with the help of three different ice shapes (which is something special) and 95% of drinks served are cocktails (alors ça; Bravo).

All of that adds up to something very different from the American bartending norm. Usually, the faster you bang 'em out, the more tips you make and the more the quality goes out of the window.

And guess what else!?!? Death & Co. does not carry cranberry

juice and has only got one type of vodka (which they told me was to clean the two bar stations at the end of the shift!).

Yes, admittedly there is a little bit of ego there – but this is New York City we are talking about and some very passionate bartenders at work.

American customers are easy going and educated about mixed drinks and sometimes it can all get a bit geeky at the counter. Never mind though, as we had a great response from the crowd and most of them were friendly industry characters like Allen Katz, Simon Ford and Avery Glasser, all with their names stamped on to the back of the barstools.

So there I was behind the marble stick with my Lonsdale menu which was being genuinely pushed by the very enthusiastic staff (and of course I brought a little Picon & Amber along with me for the patriotism). I did not make one spirit/mixer all night, and the only beer I opened was for the team at the end of the shift.

Happy times then, and after that it was time to go the sister bar, known as PDT (Please Don't Tell) - a real prohibition style bar where you have to enter into a hot dog joint called....oh wait a minute...I'm not meant to tell...

Once inside, enter the phone booth on the left, pick up the receiver and a lovely hostess will open the doors and direct you to a table (if there is space).

A fantastic experience. Here, Jim Meehan is running the show along with yet more ex bartenders from Pegu Club. I think the Libation Goddess is spreading the love, nice.

Some weird & tasty concoctions feature on the menu, such as buttered popcorn infused rum & coke – a wonderfully boozy cinema drink.

But what I liked most was the Black Flip, consisting of Cruzan Black Strap rum (one of my favourite dark rums) shaken with double chocolate stout, one whole egg and some Demerara sugar. Flavoursome, textured and absolutely full of character, just delicious. n

