

THE
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Competitive Spirits

How a hotel bar in Indianapolis is using hands-on mixology to spark creativity and engagement with groups.

BY ELAINE POFELDT

WITH LOS ANGELES ARTIST and MacArthur Fellow Jorge Pardo's colorful array of acrylic pendant lamps dangling, UFO-like, from the ceiling, the sleek Plat 99 mixology lounge that he designed at The Alexander Hotel in Indianapolis is a popular draw for art lovers. Original contemporary art, curated by the Indianapolis Museum of Art, appears at every turn in the 209-room boutique property located on the Indianapolis Cultural Trail.

Amid its creativity-inspiring tableaux, the

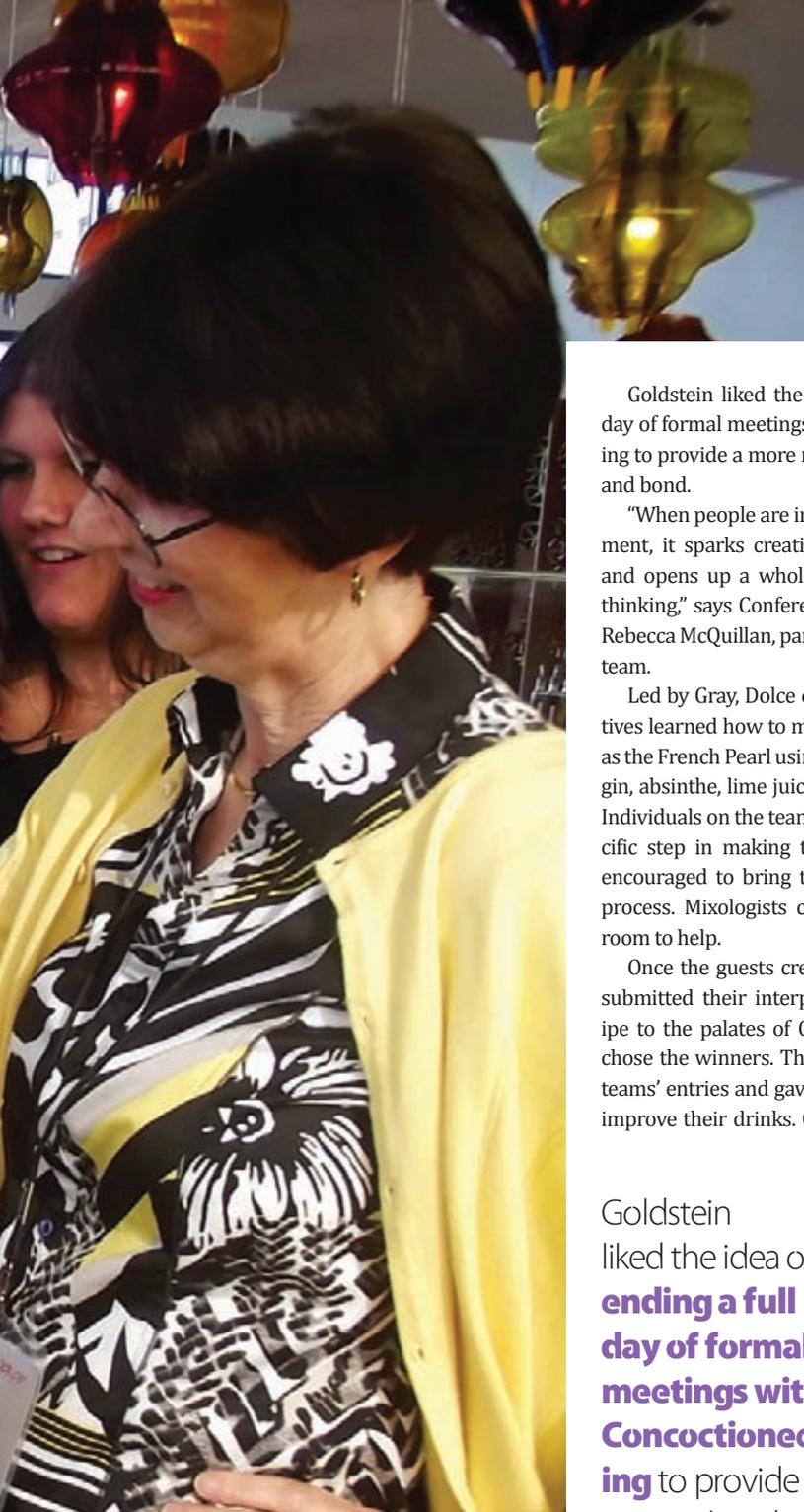
hotel has developed a signature "Concoctioneering" event, where Plat 99's mixologists teach guests the art of making cocktails using locally sourced spirits and herbs.

"The development of this property was always based around the idea we would bring local, fresh artistic influences to everything we do. That's spilled over to food and beverage," says Michael Gray, the hotel's well-known mixologist, who previously opened the Libertine Liquor Bar in Indianapolis and

grew up in his family business—Gray Brothers Cafeteria, a local landmark.

To spark competitive spirit, the hotel divides participants into small teams and asks each to create the best version of a single recipe. Gray and General Manager Michael Moros act as judges.

The concept for the event, the first of its kind at the hotel, immediately appealed to the team planning the annual Customer Advisory Board meeting for Dolce Hotels &



Resorts, The Alexander's Rockleigh, N.J.-based parent company. At the two-day gathering in June, executives at the hotel met with a roughly 20-member group of key corporate and association customers to get candid input on programs and innovations that the company is considering.

"They provide honest and earnest feedback that helps shape our ideas as we move forward," says Barry Goldstein, chief revenue and information officer for Dolce Hotels & Resorts.

Goldstein liked the idea of ending a full day of formal meetings with Concoctioneering to provide a more relaxed way to mingle and bond.

"When people are in that type of environment, it sparks creativity in your meeting and opens up a whole different avenue of thinking," says Conference Service Manager Rebecca McQuillan, part of the hotel's launch team.

Led by Gray, Dolce customers and executives learned how to make a cocktail known as the French Pearl using ingredients such as gin, absinthe, lime juice and a sprig of mint. Individuals on the teams each took on a specific step in making the drink—and were encouraged to bring their own flair to the process. Mixologists circulated around the room to help.

Once the guests created the drinks, they submitted their interpretations of the recipe to the palates of Gray and Moros, who chose the winners. Then Gray critiqued the teams' entries and gave feedback on how to improve their drinks. One common mixology mistake is overdoing ingredients such as citrus, sugar and mint and not adding enough alcohol.

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All guests came away from the event with postcards featuring shots taken around the city by New York photographer Andrew Bordwin, printed with recipes for the lounge's signature drinks on the back. Each participant also received a decorative cocktail shaker with The



**MARY
BLALOCK**
MPI Indiana Chapter

TEAM EFFORT

"Participants are inspired to think creatively and work together as a team to assemble a unique and flavorful beverage that everyone will enjoy."

Alexander's Plat 99 logo. Later, members of the winning team received a bar set with a larger cocktail shaker, jigger, muddler and strainer, mailed to their homes.

Goldstein says the event was a great way to bring the group together in a different setting.

"It was fun, in terms of team building and working together," he says.

The hotel—located near the Bankers Life Field House, where the city's National Basketball Association and National Football League teams play—has since held the Concoctioneering event for about 10 groups.

"We typically cater to groups that are a smaller size," says Mary Blalock (MPI Indiana Chapter), corporate sales manager at The Alexander, attributing the trend to the hands-on nature of the Concoctioneering event.

So far, she says, the event has been an easy sell to meeting organizers, thanks to the fun it offers and its venue.

"Plat 99 is probably the biggest attraction when showing our corporation and association clients around," Blalock says. "They want to be in that space." ■