

## For Here or To Go

*By Katie Hickes*

In early 2002, I was laid off as part of a post 9-11 economic slump in New York City. My boss was very matter-of-fact about it. "We had our year-end meeting, and due to budget constraints, there's a need to eliminate a position from our department. Unfortunately, that position will be yours."

At first I tried to treat being unemployed like an adventure. I was 27 and living in New York- the world was my oyster! Well, I was broke, so maybe the world was my cup of fried clams.

But as the stream of unemployment checks threatened to end, the shine began to wear off my adventurer's badge. I did have a freelance job as a food reviewer for a start-up Web site that never really started up. (Or paid me.) But one of the guys there hooked me up with a weekend bartending gig. It was at an old Italian restaurant called Mama Rosa's in one of Brooklyn's newly-hipsterfied areas. The manager, Sal, told me he wanted to try to draw in a younger crowd by creating a bit of a bar scene. He was a big guy in his late 40s, personable and energetic, and eager to take this classic mom 'n' pop joint into the current century.

My job was to look cute, and attempt to produce drinkable drinks. The thing was, I had absolutely no experience in bartending. I was now a living example of a button I'd ONCE found amusing: "Liberal Arts Major- Is that for here, or to go?"

My first day, I hid a cheat sheet in my pocket. The very first drink I served was to a well-coiffed blonde who came in with a stern-looking fellow in a suit. One of the waiters, a friendly stoner named Frankie, whispered, "Just so's you know, that's Mr. Romano's wife. Y'know, he's like, *The Boss*." Not the bar boss, I gathered, but the other kind of boss. Great.

Mrs. Romano asked for a cosmo, and I diligently followed the cheat sheet's ratios of vodka, cranberry, and triple-sec. "Looks pretty red," Mr. Romano frowned. "Oh shit," I thought. I felt like I was in one of those dreams where you're back in school and haven't studied for a test, except the teacher might decide to break your pinky fingers. Luckily Frankie came to my rescue with a new, more acceptably

translucent beverage. I quickly learned that no matter what ratios are outlined in the book, mixed drinks should be about 99% alcohol.

Turns out, tending bar is a lot more complicated than memorizing what goes into a long island iced tea. You don't want people to feel neglected, but you also don't want to ask if they want a new drink every five minutes. Your job is to make them feel like a cherished guest, not a human ATM.

With the guys, you need to flirt just enough to get good tips, but not so much that the dollars are wrapped around a room key.

Aside from the customers, I also had Sal's parents to contend with. Sal Senior and Rosa owned the place, and every night they commandeered the front table by the window. They hunched over their long thin European cigarettes, and silently judged every move I made. They didn't say much, but when they spoke it was generally devastating.

One night Rosa crooked a finger at me, summoning me to her table. "You touch your hair too much," she said. She was attempting to come off like a helpful girlfriend, but with her gravelly voice and grim expression, she was more of a film noir villain. "I do?" I chirped. "Yeah. It's turnin' people off." I tried to explain that I just needed to tuck it behind my ears sometimes. "Try a hairnet." I settled on a ponytail, figuring a lunch-lady hairnet would not help my tip situation much.

But the hairnet was just the beginning. Sal Senior and Rosa were chock full of suggestions for improving my apparently crappy performance. Through the haze of smoke by the window I could see their beetle eyes fixed on me, waiting for me to make the inevitable Huge Fuckup. "It's only a matter of time," their expression said. I tried avoiding looking in their direction but that only made it worse. I'd get all relaxed, slinging drinks and chatting, and BAM. Laser beam gaze of doom. It was like having a couple of Skeksis from that movie Dark Crystal lurking in the corner. ("Gelfling! Gelfling!")

One afternoon, I came in to find everyone staring at the television, a buzz of excitement in the air. "Belmont," explained Frankie.

"I bet on all the long shots," said Sal, showing us his neat stack of tickets. Sal Senior and Rosa had even left their usual command station to sit at the bar. I didn't

follow horse racing, but I'd seen a few as a kid. I have a really scientific method for picking my favorite, involving careful analysis of which horses look pretty, and which names are the coolest.

"Sarava," I announced, getting into the spirit of the day. "I like that one!" Sal slapped down his tickets and raised his index finger at me. "That horse BETTA not win. That's the only long shot I DIDN'T bet on. It's too long." The starting bell rang. One of Sal's long shots was in the lead for a while, but tired and dropped back. Meanwhile, the announcer got more and more jazzed up as "Big Long-Shot Sarava" steadily gained. "That's not too good," I thought. One of the other long shots was sharing the lead with War Emblem, the horse favored to win... but then..."saRAVA has come on THROUGH to take the LEAD!!!!" He was neck and neck with yet another long shot, and all the other horses had dropped back. A heady mix of triumph and horror began to brew in my gut. "A HUGE upset is looming here....under the line....SARAVA HAS WON!! The biggest long-shot in the history of the Belmont!!! Seventy to one!"

"How'd you pick that horse again?" asked Sal.

"Um. I liked the name?"

Frankie clapped me on the shoulder. "How much didja win?"

"Ah, I didn't actually bet anything? I just um, thought that one looked nice?"

I'd never heard the bar so quiet.

If I'd had a small chance at fitting in before, it had been trampled under Sarava's flying hooves. Sal had probably been planning for this race for weeks. I had jinxed it, and worse, I hadn't even cared enough about it to bet. A two dollar win ticket on Sarava paid \$142.50, which is STILL a Belmont record. Sal had bet big on every long shot- all but that one. I wasn't sure how much he'd lost, but I did know it was somehow all on me.

But for now, I was still there, and I meant to make the best of it. I'd been hired to make the place more hip, so as the summer went on I started making suggestions to attract more young people. Like, perhaps, a fun cocktail menu, or playing some CDs that didn't include Volare.

Sal seemed interested, I'd bring in some Sinatra-free albums, but they somehow never made it to the stereo.

"It's Sal Senior and Rosa," Frankie told me over martinis one slow night. "They don't want nuthin' to change." I started to understand that I was NOT an up-and-coming bartender in a soon-to-be sizzling hot Brooklyn nightspot. I was just a pawn in a slow, doomed chess game between Sal and his parents. They had long arguments in Italian; I couldn't understand what they were saying but Sal usually ended up throwing up his arms and pouring himself a shot.

Sal is a dreamer, I realized, and he had big dreams for Mama Rosa's. But the restaurant wasn't really HIS. For me, working there was like being a tourist in a foreign land. And like all tourists, I blundered around, annoying the locals by walking too slow and butchering the pronunciation of their favorite cheeses. But eventually, I'd go home. For Sal, this was it, this was his life, and it wasn't going according to the itinerary.

So, my tour of Mama Rosa Land came to an end like this. Sal always had me call him on Wednesday to find out which days he'd need me that weekend. One Wednesday in August he said, "I don't think we're gonna need you this week, babe. Gimme a call next week." But next week it was the same. I called a third time before I realized it was over. It was a much gentler (yet more confusing) firing than had happened at Pfizer. It was a, "No hard feelings, but this ain't workin' out" kind of firing. Possibly also a, "NOW we're even about the Belmont thing," kind of firing.

Last I heard, the restaurant's still going strong, still serves a mean penne ala vodka, and still plays the greatest hits of Andrea Bocelli at least once a night. It turns out the Skeksis in the corner may have been right- some things really don't need to change, after all.