

A WORKING GLOSSARY OF BAR EQUIPMENT

The Toolkit

Paul Walker



THE TOOLKIT

*"A drink is only ever as good as the worst tool
used to make it."*

— PAUL WALKER

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The Kit Is the Tell

Walk behind any bar in the world and you can read its ambition in about ten seconds.

Walk behind any bar in the world and you can read its ambition in about ten seconds. Not from the back-bar bottles, which are mostly chosen by a buyer in an office, but from the tools within arm's reach of the person making the drinks. A weighted Japanese jigger, a properly tinned mixing glass, a Hawthorne strainer with a tight spring, a knife that has been looked after — these tell you that someone here takes the work seriously. A bent julep strainer, a sticky speed pourer and a single dented shaker doing the job of three tell you something else.

The kit is the tell. It always has been.

This book is a glossary of that kit. It sets out, in plain commercial language, what each piece of equipment behind a modern bar actually is, what it is for, what separates a good one from a cheap one, what it costs as a starting point, and — the part most equipment lists skip — when you genuinely need it and when you are buying it to feel professional rather than to be more profitable.

I have spent much of my working life specifying, buying and arguing about this hardware, a great deal of it for high-end venues across the Gulf, and I have watched more money wasted on equipment than on almost anything else in a bar fit-out. Beautiful machines bought for menus that never used them. Three different ice systems where one would have done. Hand tools chosen for a photograph rather than for a shift. The aim of this book is to help you spend that money once, and well.

I have organised the glossary the way a bartender's hands move through a service rather than the way a catalogue is arranged. The early chapters cover the core hand tools — the things you measure, mix, strain, cut and prepare with — because these are used on every drink, every night, and because getting them right costs surprisingly little and pays back immediately. From there the book moves outward: ice and chilling, where more programmes go wrong than anywhere else; the straining and fining tools that sit between a cloudy drink and a clear one; the heat, smoke and theatre kit that finishes a serve; the powered and technical machines that have moved from the laboratory to the back bar over the last decade; and the glassware and service hardware the guest actually touches.

The frameworks I return to throughout are deliberately simple. The first is suitability: every tool has work it is made for and work it merely tolerates. The second is the alcoholic and non-alcoholic question — almost none of this equipment cares whether there is ethanol in the glass. The third is cost and consequence: not just the purchase price, but the cost per shift, the training the tool demands, and the maintenance it needs.



BAR TOOLS UNPACKED AT A NEW VENUE — EVERY NUMBER IN THIS BOOK IS A STARTING POINT FOR A SUPPLIER CONVERSATION, NOT A QUOTATION

THE TOOLKIT — INTRODUCTION

Who is this book for? I have written it for the people who actually make these decisions: bar managers and beverage directors specifying a new programme; operators and owners trying to understand where a fit-out budget is really going; consultants and trainers who need a common vocabulary to work from; and the serious bartenders who want to understand their tools properly rather than inherit opinions about them.

You do not need an engineering background to use it. You do need to be willing to ask, of every shining object a supplier puts in front of you, the only question that matters: what does this let us do that we cannot do now, and is that worth what it costs to buy, run and maintain?

Paul Walker

Beverage consultant specialising in high-end bar programmes across the Gulf and international markets. The chapters ahead move from the smallest tool to the largest machine and close with the part that turns a pile of equipment into a working bar.



Reading the Glossary

The bars I admire most are usually under-equipped by catalogue standards and over-trained by industry standards. They own fewer things and use them better.

The Tools Are the Tell

Equipment is the most honest part of a bar. A menu can promise anything; the tools reveal what the bar can actually deliver, night after night, when it is busy and tired and short-staffed. This is why I begin a glossary of bar equipment not with a list but with a way of thinking about the list, because the difference between a well-equipped bar and an over-equipped one is rarely the number of tools. It is whether each tool is used, looked after, and matched to the work in front of it.

The temptation, particularly when opening a new venue with a fresh budget, is to buy breadth. The result is drawers full of single-use tools that come out twice a year, machines that hum in a corner earning nothing, and a team that has never had time to master any of it properly. The bars I admire most are usually under-equipped by catalogue standards and over-trained by industry standards.

Suitability: The Right Tool, Not the Most Tools

The first and most useful framework in this book is suitability. Almost every tool behind a bar has a sibling that does a similar job differently, and the skill of buying well is matching the tool to the bar rather than ranking them against each other in the abstract. A Boston shaker suits a fast, high-volume craft bar where speed and capacity matter; a cobbler shaker suits a quieter room, a less experienced team or a service where the built-in strainer saves a step.



BOSTON AND COBBLER — DIFFERENT TOOLS FOR DIFFERENT BARS, NEITHER SUPERIOR IN THE ABSTRACT

Training and the Idle-Tool Trap

A tool is only an asset if someone can use it well at speed, and every piece of kit carries a training cost that does not appear on the invoice. Before any equipment line is approved, the right question is not only whether the bar can afford to buy it, but whether it can afford the time to make it pay.

Measuring and Mixing

The tools in this chapter touch every drink the bar makes. They are also, mercifully, among the cheapest to get right.

Jiggers and Measures

The jigger is the most important inexpensive object behind any bar. Consistency begins here: a drink built by eye varies from bartender to bartender and from the start of a shift to the end of it, and that variation is the enemy of a programme that wants to charge a premium and taste the same every time.

The Japanese jigger — tall, weighted, narrow, with internal gradations — is the choice of most serious cocktail bars because it pours accurately, sits comfortably in the hand and reads clearly. For Gulf and international programmes I generally specify millilitre gradations over ounces, since the rest of the kitchen and the recipe book will be metric. A serviceable jigger costs a few dollars; a beautiful weighted one perhaps twenty-five to forty. The gap buys feel and longevity, not accuracy.



A WEIGHTED JAPANESE JIGGER — PRECISION IS IN THE DISCIPLINE OF USE, NOT THE PRICE

A careful bar can equip an entire station with good jiggers for the price of one show-piece machine.

Bar Spoons

The bar spoon does more than stir. Its twisted shaft, long reach and small bowl let a bartender stir a mixing glass smoothly without bruising or over-aerating, layer a drink over the back of the bowl, measure small dashes, and reach the bottom of a tall glass. The differences that matter are length, weight and the design of the end: a weighted teardrop or disc gives balance and a tamping surface, while the length must match the tallest mixing vessel on the station. A spoon that is too short is a daily irritation; one that is well-chosen disappears into the hand.



SMOOTH, CONTROLLED TECHNIQUE — THE SPIRAL BAR SPOON MID-STIR IN A CRYSTAL MIXING GLASS

THE TOOLKIT — CHAPTER TWO

The Mixing Glass

For stirred drinks — the Martinis, Manhattans, Negronis and Old Fashioneds that anchor most serious lists — the mixing glass is where the work happens. A good one is heavy, stable, and made of clear glass thick enough to insulate the drink slightly from the hand while it chills. The seamless, weighted Japanese and Yarai-cut styles are the standard at the premium end. A stirred drink built in front of the guest is part of the theatre; a beautiful mixing glass earns its keep on the bar top as well as in the drink. The commercial note here is breakage: treat the mixing glass as a consumable with a long but finite life, not a permanent fixture.



THE YARAI CUT — CLARITY, WEIGHT AND QUIET THEATRE

Shakers: Boston, Cobbler and Parisian

The shaker is the defining tool of the working bar. The Boston shaker — a large metal tin paired either with a smaller tin or with a glass — is fast, high-capacity, easy to clean and easy to replace. It requires a separate strainer and a learned technique to seal and break, which is precisely why it suits experienced teams and high volume. The cobbler shaker — three pieces, with a built-in strainer — is self-contained and forgiving. The Parisian or French shaker sits between the two in feel and is chosen as much for elegance as for function.

None of these is the right answer everywhere. Match the shaker to the team and the volume, carry enough of them that a busy station is never waiting on a wash, and accept that tins dent and seals wear — they are working tools with a working life.



*Energy, frost and speed — the tin-on-tin Boston shaker
at full pace on a busy station.*

CHAPTER TWO — MEASURING AND MIXING

Cutting, Peeling and Prep

A blade is a quality tool and a safety liability in the same object. The bar that treats its knives casually pays for it eventually.

Bar Knives and Boards

A bar does not need a chef's full knife roll, but it needs a small number of good, sharp knives and the discipline to keep them that way. A medium chef's or utility knife for general work, a small paring knife for detailed garnish, and a serrated knife for citrus and soft fruit will cover almost everything a bar does.

The single most important fact about bar knives is counter-intuitive to most new staff: a sharp knife is safer than a blunt one, because it cuts where it is aimed instead of slipping. A bar that keeps its knives sharp has fewer accidents and better-looking garnish at once. Boards matter more than they seem — choose a material that survives a commercial wash without warping and designate boards to avoid cross-contamination.



A MAINTAINED EDGE — PRECISION CUTS AND FEWER ACCIDENTS

Replacing peelers and channel knives before they dull is a small cost with a visible payoff in every garnish.

Channel Knives, Peelers and Zesters

A channel knife cuts the long, fine twists of citrus peel that define a well-finished stirred drink; a Y-peeler takes the broad strips used for oils and expression; a fine Microplane produces the aromatic dusting of zest over the top of a serve. None of these is expensive, and the difference between a cheap one and a good one is the cleanness of the cut and how long the edge lasts. A blunt peeler tears rather than cuts, taking bitter pith with the oil-rich zest.



CHANNEL KNIFE AT WORK — THE LONG TWIST THAT FINISHES A STIRRED DRINK



MANDOLINE PRECISION — CONSISTENT DEHYDRATED SLICES, PREPARED IN ADVANCE



Trays of citrus wheels in a dehydrator — prepared in advance, more uniform and more reliable than fresh-cut garnish under service pressure.

Ice and Chilling

If I could persuade an operator to spend properly on one category in this book, it would be this one.

Why Ice Is Equipment, Not a Consumable

Ice is the largest single ingredient in most cocktails by volume, the main agent of both chilling and dilution, and the most visible component of many serves — and it is the category where I see more money wasted on the wrong things and saved on the wrong things than anywhere else. A bar can buy a beautiful spirit and a beautiful glass and ruin both with cloudy, fast-melting, badly stored ice.

The instinct to treat ice as a consumable is the root of most ice failure. Ice is a manufactured product whose clarity, density, shape and temperature directly determine how a drink chills, how fast it dilutes and how it looks — and all of those are controllable with the right kit.



THE COLD CHAIN — HYGIENE AND HANDLING ARE HALF THE SYSTEM; THE MACHINE IS ONLY THE OTHER HALF

Ice Machines and the Cold Chain

The headline mistake is undersizing: a machine that cannot keep up on a busy night forces a bar onto bagged ice or, worse, warm drinks. The type matters too — full cubes, half cubes, nugget, flake — because each chills and dilutes differently and suits different serves. Ice picks up odours and freezer-burn readily; scoops must be dedicated and stored hygienically. For Gulf sourcing, a tool you could replace in a day in London may be a three-week wait, which changes how many spares you carry.

Clear Ice and the Block Programme

Clear ice — dense, slow-melting and optically clear — has moved from a specialist flourish to an expectation at the premium end. It is made by directional freezing, which forces impurities and air to one end of a block, either in a dedicated machine or in insulated moulds, after which the block is cut and carved into cubes, spheres and spears.

A clear-ice programme consumes freezer space, labour and a band saw or proper ice tools. But for a bar where the spirit and the serve are the show — a whisky bar, a high-end Martini list — clear ice is one of the most visible upgrades available. Guests notice it immediately even when they cannot name what they are seeing.



CARVING CLEAR ICE — CRAFT, LABOUR AND THE PREMIUM OF A BLOCK PROGRAMME

A programme that understands ice specifies it the way it specifies its spirits.

Moulds, Stamps and the Ball Press

The ice ball press — a heated metal block that melts a rough cube into a perfect sphere in seconds — produces the dense, slow-melting ball prized for spirits served neat or in an Old Fashioned. A mould is a few dollars; a quality ball press is a serious investment justified only where the spherical serve is a genuine signature. As ever, the question is whether the guest is paying for the difference.



The ice ball press — a perfect sphere forming in seconds, water beading on polished metal. Premium ice hardware at its most considered.

Straining, Fining and Clarification

Between a drink as it is shaken or stirred and the drink as it reaches the guest sits a stage that separates competent bars from precise ones.

Hawthorne, Julep and Fine Strainers

The three classic strainers each do a distinct job. The Hawthorne — the spring-edged strainer that fits over a shaker tin — holds back ice and large solids and is the workhorse of shaken drinks; the tightness of its spring determines how fine it strains, and a slack spring is a common, quietly degrading fault. The julep strainer sits inside a mixing glass to hold back ice from a stirred drink. The fine strainer — a small, fine-mesh cone — is held over the glass for a second straining that catches the small ice shards and fruit pulp a Hawthorne lets through. A serious bar owns all three and knows which the drink demands.



LEFT TO RIGHT: HAWTHORNE, JULEP, FINE MESH — THREE TOOLS FOR THREE DISTINCT JOBS

A shaken drink with a fine, clean surface and one freckled with ice chips are separated by a single fine strainer and thirty seconds.

Superbags and Fine Filtration

For finer work — removing the fine haze from a juice, straining a nut-milk or pressing the last clean liquid from a pulp — reusable fine-mesh bags do the job that a strainer cannot. A sanitised paint-strainer bag does the same job for a fraction of the price: this is a category where the improvised solution is often genuinely as good as the branded one, provided it is clean and food-safe. Paper filtration through coffee filters in a funnel produces brilliantly clear liquid by letting gravity do the work over time.



CLARIFICATION BY HAND — THE FILTERED LIQUID VISIBLY BRIGHTER THAN THE CLOUDY PRESS ABOVE

Heat, Smoke and Theatre

These tools carry the most operational risk in the whole glossary. Theatre that involves an open flame is a training and liability decision as much as an equipment one.

The Blowtorch

The bar blowtorch caramelises sugar, chars citrus and herbs, toasts the surface of a garnish and releases aromatic oils with heat. The relevant qualities are a stable flame, adjustable intensity and a reliable ignition — a torch that sputters in front of a guest undoes the theatre it was bought for. The non-negotiable point is safety: a torch is an open flame near alcohol, fabric and people, and it demands a designated safe area and clear rules. Specified and trained properly it is inexpensive and transformative.



CONTROLLED THEATRE — THE FLAME AND GLOWING SUGAR AGAINST A DARK BACKGROUND

The Smoking Gun and Cloche

The smoking gun burns wood chips, herbs or spices and channels cool smoke into a vessel — paired with a cloche, it infuses a drink with aromatic smoke released theatrically at the table. The technique is genuinely effective and genuinely overused: a smoked serve should taste of considered aromatics, not a bonfire, and the restraint is in the training rather than the tool.



THE SMOKING GUN IN ACTION — DENSE WOOD SMOKE FILLING A COVERED GLASS BEFORE THE REVEAL

A smoked serve should taste of considered aromatics. The restraint is in the training, not the tool.



Powered and Technical Kit

Over the last decade a category of equipment has migrated from the laboratory and the professional kitchen onto the back bar.

Carbonation Rigs

Carbonation has become a defining capability of the modern bar — behind house sodas, tonics and carbonated cocktails served with a precise, lasting sparkle. House-carbonated mixers taste fresher and cost less per serve than bought-in cans, and a carbonated cocktail is a serve a bar cannot otherwise offer. This is also one of the highest-value capabilities for a non-alcoholic programme, where carbonation and dilution control do much of the work that alcohol would otherwise do.



FINE BUBBLES RISING — THE FRESH, LASTING SPARKLE A CARBONATION RIG DELIVERS



THE CREAM WHIPPER — FOAM, INFUSION AND RAPID FLAVOUR EXTRACTION IN ONE TOOL

The Cream Whipper

Beyond whipping cream, the nitrous-charged canister produces foams and airs to top a serve, carbonates and infuses under pressure, and rapid-infuses spirits and syrups in minutes rather than days. It is inexpensive relative to what it does, entirely indifferent to whether the foam or infusion is destined for an alcoholic drink, and punches well above its price for any bar interested in texture and fast infusion.

The Heavy Machines: Rotovap, Centrifuge and Beyond

The rotary evaporator distils delicate flavours under vacuum at low temperature; the centrifuge clarifies juices to brilliant clarity in minutes. These are serious capital purchases with serious learning curves. They earn their place only in a programme — usually a group with central production or a flagship with a genuine avant-garde menu — that will use them enough to justify both the money and the mastery. Bought on ambition and left idle, they become the most expensive dust-gatherers in the building.



A rotary evaporator at work — distilling delicate aromatics under vacuum at low temperature. The technical frontier of the modern back bar.

Glassware and Service Hardware

Glassware is the most visible kit in the bar and the most frequently broken — a design decision and a running cost at once.

The Glassware Families

A cocktail list is served in a surprisingly small number of glass families. The coupe and the Nick and Nora serve up drinks without ice; the rocks glass holds spirit-forward drinks over ice; the highball and Collins carry long drinks; the flute and tulip serve sparkling. The decisions that matter are quality and consistency: a well-made glass of the right weight and clarity flatters a drink and survives service. At the premium end, glassware is part of the brand and the photograph. Buy in enough depth that a busy night never runs out of coupes.



THE COUPE — GLASSWARE AS PART OF THE SERVE'S PRESENTATION

The operators who are surprised by their glass costs are usually the ones who specified beautiful glasses and forgot they break.

Polishing, Storage and Breakage

Most of what determines how glassware looks in the guest's hand happens after the wash. A spotted or fingerprinted glass undermines an otherwise excellent drink, so polishing cloths and a polishing routine are part of the service standard. Storage that protects glass from chipping, racks that let it dry and breathe, and a realistic breakage allowance in the budget all follow from accepting that glassware is a consumable.

The Organised Station

Bar mats define the working surface and protect glassware; garnish caddies bring prep within reach and off the surface; speed rails hold the bottles a bartender reaches for most. An organised station is not an aesthetic choice — it is a speed and consistency decision that the guest experiences in every drink.



Specifying the Kit

This is the chapter I would read first if I were buying. How to assemble everything into a coherent, affordable, maintainable whole.

Buy by Guest, Price Point and Menu

The discipline of specifying a kit is the discipline of saying no. Not to quality, but to breadth. A bar whose menu is thirty stirred drinks and a short list of highballs needs a different kit to one running frozen cocktails, tiki serves and tableside theatre. Start from the menu, not from the catalogue, and buy backwards from the drink to the tool.

Three Tiers of Investment

Foundation tools — jiggers, bar spoons, shakers, strainers, knives, peelers and service hardware. These are used on every drink and are the cheapest category to get right. Skimping here is the most expensive mistake in the book.

Mid-range machines — the ice machine, blender, dehydrator, cream whipper and carbonation rig. Choose these by the menu they will serve and the volume they must handle. Undersizing the ice machine is the commonest and most damaging error.

Premium and technical — clear ice programmes, centrifuge, rotovap. Justified only where the menu genuinely uses them and the team has the time to master them. A machine bought on ambition and used once a month is a liability, not an asset.



HONING A BLADE BEFORE SERVICE —
DISCIPLINE IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PIECE
OF KIT A BAR OWNS

Before any equipment line is approved, ask not only whether the bar can afford to buy it — but whether it can afford the time to make it pay.



A drink is only ever as good as the worst tool used to make it.

That is the case this book sets out to make, and the kit it sets out to explain. The chapters move from the smallest tool to the largest machine and close with the part that turns a pile of equipment into a working bar: matching the tool to the team, to the menu, and to the guest.

Whether you are specifying a rooftop bar in Abu Dhabi, a neighbourhood cocktail room in a second city, or a single station in a hotel lobby, the answer is the same: own less, use it better, train it harder. The tools that earn their place do so every shift. The ones that do not will always find a way to tell you.

Paul Walker

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