



ONE-EYED MIKE'S

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

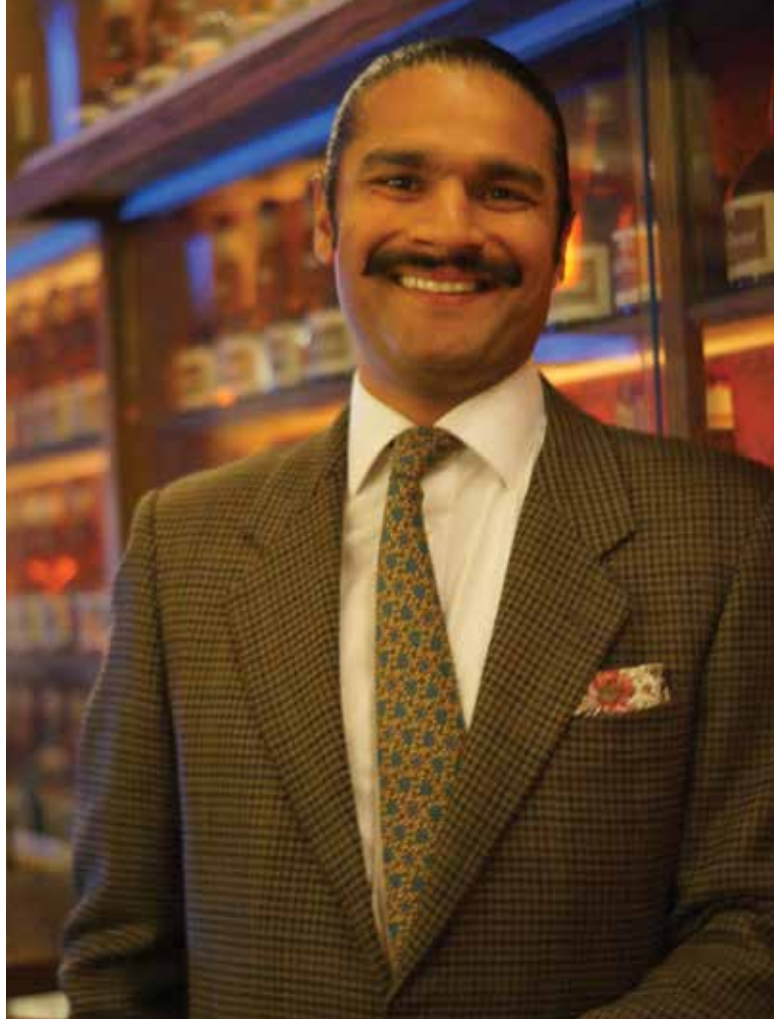
WRITTEN BY TEDDY DURGIN

Usually, I interview owners, operators, and managers of bars, pubs, taverns, and restaurants before or between busy periods at their establishments. In the case of One-Eyed Mike's owner Akbar Vaiya, I got him to sit down and chat right after he finished playing golf. Fresh off the driving range, we laughed and agreed that he would need to be careful not to throw in too many golf metaphors and references when answering my questions.

After all, it would be so easy to say that this bar and restaurant in Baltimore's historic Fells Point neighborhood boasts customer service that's so consistent, you might say it's "always on par." Or, there's nothing like Happy Hour at One-Eyed Mike's when "it's in full swing." But Vaiya was focused throughout, and he was a great interviewee to kick off this new series of articles on restaurants, bars, pubs, and taverns throughout Maryland and Washington, D.C., with funny or quirky names.

We talked about the name right away. It didn't originate with Vaiya. "The original owner and founder named the bar, and his name was Mike [Michael Maraziti]. And, yes, it initially had a pirate theme, which we have kind of moved away from. But with the kind of staying power

Akbar Vaiya
owner and operator
One-Eyed Mike's



One-Eyed Mike's has had over the years, there's never been any reason to rename it."

One-Eyed Mike's is best known for its Grand Marnier Bottle Club, which has grown to a global community of more than 3,500 members. The club is a prime example of history and a shared love for a beverage coming together to create something truly special and interconnected as evidenced by a collection that extends beyond One-Eyed Mike's first-floor showcase with a fully stocked basement and new additions located upstairs.

Vaiya, a French-trained chef who was born and raised in Washington, D.C, remarked, "We have people who have had bottles there for over 20 years. I know for a fact that we have members from all 50 states. We have a bunch of international members, as well. We have, for example, folks who live in Kentucky and come in for Preakness every year. We had some people this past week who come in for a conference annually this time every year."

Food wise, One-Eyed Mike's is known for its fresh crab cakes, savory mussels, and locally sourced Black Angus steaks and burgers. From a drinks standpoint, the beverage menu includes craft cocktails and 11

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rotating craft beers on tap.

Vaiya, who has owned One-Eyed Mike's since 2016, acknowledged, "People know us as the 'Grand Marnier Bar.' Even if they forget the name, they'll say, 'Oh yeah, the bar with all of the Grand Marnier bottles on the wall.' But we're a lot more than that. In recent years, we've devoted ourselves to a more craft-oriented approach. At least one ingredient in all of our cocktails is scratch-made, like the fresh ginger juice that we put in our Perfect Storm, which is a riff on the Dark and Stormy."

One-Eyed Mike's biggest fans and most loyal customers are members of the 1827 Club. Membership is \$200 per year, billed

quarterly. Members get an engraved card with their name and their Grand Marnier bottle number. They can present that card to the bartender, and the bartender will grab the club member's bottle from its allocated shelf designation. The bottle must be purchased by the member as well, and the cost will vary depending on the iteration of Grand Marnier chosen. Membership also gets them discounts and, most importantly, invites to One-Eyed Mike's social events. "We have a social calendar that includes wine dinners, golf outings, cigar-rolling events, an annual holiday party, and so forth," said Vaiya.

In addition, One-Eyed Mike's has become extremely well known for Shot in the Dark.

No, it has nothing to do with the Ozzy Osbourne song from the 1980s. Vaiya describes Shot in the Dark as "the last, last call in the neighborhood. When everyone else turns their lights up and kicks you out of their bar at 1:40 or 1:45 a.m., we turn our lights down and invite you in for one last drink before 2 o'clock. Shot in the Dark is usually around 1:55 a.m. every night. We kill the lights, our bartender hops up on the bar, gives a toast, and then kicks everyone out."

Part of One-Eyed Mike's old-school charm is that it's not located among the other taverns and eateries in the heart of Fells Point. It stands alone on a cozy block of Bond St. The Shot in the Dark tradition is so popular that local bartenders and managers from that core of the neighborhood will kick their customers out at 1:45, lock their doors, rush down to One Eyed Mike's, do Shot in the Dark, and then return to their establishment to finish cleaning up.

Whether it's rival proprietors, first-time newbies, or long-time club members, Vaiya says he and his staff put customer service first. He noted, "One of our philosophies is 'You're a stranger here but once.' It's really important that we learn first names. I personally love engaging with our guests. We have a really great community. A lot of people who started out as first-time curiosity seekers have become good friends. That's true for me and for the staff, as well." ■

