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# Making the Good Lion Roar Again

by Mitchell Kriegman

Novelist *Being Audrey Hepburn*, *Things I Can't Explain*. Creator Clarissa Explains it All and more. Writer for *The New Yorker*, *LARB*, *National Lampoon*, and *Saturday Night Live*



Brandon Ristaino with partner and wife Misty Orman prepare cocktails to go

When Brandon Ristaino and his partner and wife Misty Orman started The Good Lion bar on State Street, no one believed there was a market in Santa Barbara for a stand-alone drinkery featuring the fine art of mixology. Five years later with three local establishments, including Test Pilot in the Funk Zone and Shaker Mill on Lower State Street, and another venue soon to open in Ventura, the owners of Good Lion Hospitality have made their mark on the restaurant and bar culture of Santa Barbara. Their personally trained mixologists prepare some of the most creative cocktails in town and are well-versed in the palate-pleasing, ever-changing culinary ingredients that farm to table require. They have developed a loyal following.

No one with the exception of Sherry Villanueva and Acme Hospitality has entered the competitive restaurant and bar scene on a tear like Brandon and Misty. Good Lion has developed a business designed with the fewest moving parts, compact, independent with discrete units devised to be profitable within a month of opening and to survive, maybe even a pandemic.

"Not that we would ever have predicted what's happening now, but each venue is small, compartmentalized, and lean," Brandon explains. "There's a lot less risk involved in each one of them. We're finding at times like this, the Thomas Fire, or whatever crazy thing might happen, we don't have a huge amount of fixed costs to ride through."

## The Biggest Crowd Sourcing Endeavor in Human History

Brandon and Misty are exactly the kind of businesspeople Montecito and the City of Santa Barbara must support in order to invent the bar and hospitality business of tomorrow and lead us into that future. "Reopenomics" is an enormous world-wide thought experiment that people locally and the world over are analyzing and deciphering, perhaps the biggest crowd sourcing endeavor in human history, designed to solve our social un-easing. Good ideas are being hatched as far away as Latvia, Stockholm, and in New York City simultaneously. Smart minds in Montecito and Santa Barbara are every bit as likely to make a breakthrough. If anyone can solve the problems posed by a cocktail bar designed around six feet of separation, it's the two creative and resourceful owners of Good Lion Hospitality, but it will certainly take more than a zest of lemon and a twig of rosemary to make it work.

Having spent 22 years in the bar business in Los Angeles, Brandon was considerably ahead of the curve when he began using fresh ingredients and alluring blends of fresh juices before others got on the bandwagon. Those years gave him a lot of time to think about re-engineering the business from the bottom up.

Upon reaching Santa Barbara, Brandon and Misty envisioned the kind of

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big city bar that didn't exist here, targeted the kind of demographic that wasn't served, hired the kind of employee that wasn't fully appreciated, and proceeded to make their mark.

"I remember a lady telling me on our third day that we were awfully young, and to be prepared to last only a few months," Misty recalls. "I thought that was a strange thing to say to someone who just opened their dream bar in their dream city. But a lot of people told us there just wasn't a lot of young blood here, it was an old town. Now we're looking at the tech companies, and our three bars all in five years."

The couple managed to strategically snag a prime piece of real estate next to the Granada Theatre that will always be valuable, even if the rest of State Street doesn't get its act together. Their other locations are also prime, especially Test Pilot at the site of the bar formerly known as Reds, which had been a vastly under-utilized property in the heart of the economically exploding Funk Zone.



The Good Lion will roar again

## Converting Baristas to Mixologists

Brandon is a tall, poised, soft-spoken man with a perfectly groomed beard. He's prone to incremental innovations that are the hallmark of his business. One insight he had that proved immediately useful was that great baristas could make great bartenders. It didn't take long after placing a poster offering Mixology Courses in the windows of The Good Lion before opening to tap into the wealth of talent in the thriving espresso bars and cafés of Santa Barbara. He managed to do so while continuing to work cooperatively and have great relations with Dune Roasters, Handlebar Coffee, and Low Pigeon on Haley.

The synergies in skills and timing between pulling a great espresso shot and blending the perfect mix of frothed almond milk and shaking up a Tequila Negroni were considerable, right down to the same honest and friendly customer relations and flawless presentation. Importantly, his employees represented the demographic he was looking to attract. In the meantime, he developed new concepts in drink production and fresh juicing to the point where Good Lion was about to launch a new juice distribution business when covidization imploded the economy.

## Good Lion's Secret Weapon

Brandon always had an additional asset as he developed concepts for a neo-classic cocktail bar, the secret weapon in launching his business: his wife, Misty. Misty Orman is singular in so many ways it's hard to know where to start. Vivacious is the word that first comes to mind. What do you say about an avowed Southern Belle from Garland, Texas whose entertainment career spans hand modeling for Bratz and Barbie to Buzz Lightyear? Yes, she's the hand in all those toy commercials that makes those playsets come to life. Then there's a number of acting gigs in television series like *Boston Public* and the campy late-night cult film *Zombie Campout*.

But those credits, while colorful, distract from her intellect and understanding of the customer's cocktail experience. Misty is the Khaleesi of Santa Barbara bar design. She's expert in assessing the nuances that people look for when entering an establishment, especially the underserved women who enjoy going to bars.

"A lot of bars and breweries are built towards men. Women are a little different. I always want things that inspire women to come in, cozy custom-made seating that feels authentic and true," she explains. "Today it's all about Instagram and having different areas where they'll want to stand with their girlfriends and take photos, whether it's cool wallpaper, bright plants, it's all very visual. Even older ladies in their sixties and seventies come in. It's awesome when there's a hipster group in one section, then right next to them a group of women having cocktails in their sixties."

Misty and Brandon are an essential team, a collaboration of focused individuals who seem to be playing a secret game, pushing each other to refine and problem solve in ways that other bars and bartenders just improvise. You have a sense talking to them that they are highly entertained by their lives, their challenges, and are deeply rooted in their loyalty and caring for each other.

It's a good thing they've got all that going for them because they'll have to up their game another couple of notches to match the challenges ahead. Reinventing the bar in the age of COVID is far tougher than making a Fat-washed Del Maguey Mezcal with an orange zest.



Misty Orman on set with her magic hands making toys come to life

## The Challenge of the New Normal

What is a bar but a place where you mingle shoulder to shoulder and chat each other up while sharing libations? No one ever brags about going to an empty bar, it's a failed enterprise.

There are a lot of contradictions to square in creating a new version. Since the closures, Brandon and Misty have been working solid 10- to 15-hour days, non-stop with bankers, lawyers, investors, accountants, and bookkeepers wrapping their heads around the various stimulus packages, familiarizing themselves with new legislation, working with their employees, and developing a new plan to find a way to keep alive the business they had so successfully developed against all odds.

## Everything at Risk

Everything they had built, all their savings and investments in the business were at risk.

"Most folks in our industry are on what they call 'terms.' Meaning 28 days after we purchase alcohol, we pay for it. So, we knew we had four weeks of heavy alcohol bills coming at us with no revenue, and of course, labor, payroll, all the taxes and sales tax and rent, all these big bills coming in. That was incredibly intense."

One concern was how some of the property owners were behaving. They've offered abatements but not forgiveness. Some on the landlord side expect the business tenants to carry the shutdown alone.

"We understand that property owners are not endlessly wealthy," Brandon adds. He has been on both sides of the landlord tenant equation. "Landlords can't take this all on themselves, but it should be a partnership and taking on a portion of this pain, each on the tenant and the landlord side, is our view."

Instantly with the shutdown, Brandon has obligations he would not have had otherwise.

"We were debt free on March 14 of this year. We had no debt anywhere. Now we've taken on the PPP loans and any rent we've abated."

Additionally, the couple were in the middle of opening a new bar in downtown Ventura in the Bank of Italy building on Oak and Main. They were already past the point of no return.

"It's just a gorgeous building," Brandon remarked. "We had been looking around there because everything that we saw in Santa Barbara, we see in Ventura now. We're going through the process. We were about to submit for plan check, which is a much faster process in Ventura than Santa Barbara, I mean way faster and less headaches."

This is the litany heard countless times. Ventura and San Luis Obispo are far faster and more competitive than Santa Barbara.

## His Forecast of the Future

"I'm probably in the tiny minority, but I believe at some point between twelve and eighteen months from now, the bar of the future will be the bar it was two months ago," Brandon reflects. "It's going to take a vaccine and a lot of things to get back to that point."

We take the contemporary bar for granted, but in fact an earlier pandemic, the Bubonic Plague, actually gave rise to first pubs and taverns. Until that time women home-brewed beer, because the water was not safe to drink. After the

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Black Death some of the women who made beer at home became full-time brewers and their houses became a “public house” where anyone could go buy a beer and socialize. After the fear and devastation of the plague, the pent-up desire to socialize exploded.

The behavior of the human species is changed by disease. Like all animals, changes in the environment, diseases, natural events, change where we live, what we do, and how we do it. Our history is simply not independent of the natural world. Nothing proves this more than the current coronavirus pandemic.

## The Next 18 Months

Brandon believes that for the next 18 months they’ll be functioning near 50% capacity. Because his bars are lean and small, he believes they’ll still be attractive and potentially profitable.

“Our projects were built to feel cool and comfy even if there’s only ten people in the bar,” Brandon remarks. “Our playlists are probably going to change to music that feels right with so few people. We have to think what is going to be cool during this time.”

## Spilling Out into the Streets

Around the world cities are finding ways for bars and restaurants to spill out into the streets, where contagion should have a harder time. While European countries have had open air plazas and cafés since the 1700s, North America has never fully absorbed the tradition, perhaps due to our Puritanical forefathers. Who knows what evolution drove Europe to open its streets, but it’s an easy fall back in cities from Riga, Latvia to Stockholm, Sweden.

Here, in Santa Barbara, despite a popular groundswell of community support, it’s been like pulling teeth to get our city government to open the streets to accommodate the natural environment, even when it’s good for commerce, even when it allows people to maintain the integrity of social distancing in one of the most gorgeous natural settings in the world, even when it creates joy. If Santa Barbara businesses could integrate the outdoors with architectural integrity and urban planning, it would be a permanent attraction for the city. Hopefully the Mayor’s Task force will propose exactly this important new direction, after all open plaza dining is very much in keeping with the founding aesthetic of Spanish Colonial design.

“I’m going through that exact thing in the Hamptons right now, literally having this conversation,” **Eric Lemonides** remarked. He is the owner of Almond in Bridgehampton, arguably the most successful restaurant on the East End of Long Island. He had opened a new establishment in Palm Beach just as the economy went covidtose. “I’m trying really hard to re-envision the side area by the road, which doesn’t get going except on Friday nights when it becomes a madhouse inside.”

It’s no coincidence that restaurateurs and bar owners the world over are considering the same issues and potential solutions.

In Manhattan, talking to a NYC City planner summoned up the same concepts, street closings to enhance social love while at the same time honoring social distancing.

“I can see closing between 14<sup>th</sup> Street and 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, just to see what happens,” the planner remarked. “Let people come out, keep their masks on until they sit down at a table six feet away from the next. String up a bunch of lights and music, everyone would have a blast.”

Palm Beach, Manhattan, Bridgehampton, Montecito, Santa Barbara all have the luxury to truly experiment with new business models that could serve their economies for the future. It’s not like Europe hasn’t been doing so for the past 300 years, attracting tourists by the thousands.

## Testing is Still a Thing

Let’s not pretend it’s not. The cost of testing 90,000 people, the approximate population of Santa Barbara, is not vast. Foundations in Santa Barbara have made greater investments in the community. Perhaps the city’s greatest fear is finding out the truth of testing. At some point, we have to know. Similarly, ratings of eateries and bars for COVID compliance would be a great public benefit. Everyone could feel reassured walking into a bar or restaurant that has been tested. Why shouldn’t Santa Barbara be a leader in this regard? It might help support our hospitals and medical community as they suffer financial losses having converted from profitable elective surgery to COVID treatment and profit businesses.

Why not develop a state-of-the-art testing and verification system? Between UCSB and Cottage and Sansum it certainly seems possible. At some point there will be industrial COVID experts with all the protocols and multiple testing procedures to assure that businesses are safe. It will be a highly profitable service.



Hand model Misty Orman on the miniature set for a recent toy commercial

## Who Are Cities For?

It has become the prevailing contradiction of Santa Barbara’s City government that while City Administrators bemoan the Governor’s regulations and prevaricate about their inability to change their own process, they fail to understand who cities are for.

No one in fact appreciates the police, the fire department, the water authority, or department of sanitation more than business. They need that support to thrive. But in times like these, businesses are the savior of a city. City coffers will not refill without the work of businesses who have to risk it all to serve their customers. Tourism will not return because a well-meaning Mayor patrols local beaches or a City Administrator teaches civic lessons or because the City strikes a highly questionable partnership with a failing shopping mall, a relic of the past, like Paseo Nuevo.

These times call for the kind of thinking that combines the meticulous problem-solving approach and innovation The Good Lion folks brought to town. You can be sure Brandon and Misty would have a lot of thoughts if they didn’t have their shoulders to the wall figuring out how to save their businesses and get their employees working.



Eric Lemonides, owner/operator of Almond Bridgehampton, one of the most successful restaurants in the Hamptons

## Economic Recovery is Competitive

Santa Barbara is no longer sitting in the catbird seat. Recovery is a competitive business. Cities don’t last without innovation. Ventura and San Luis Obispo have been working for decades to compete for business. Being a beautiful, attractive, architectural wonder by the sea, isn’t enough in “Survivor: the City Edition.” Santa Barbara has coasted on its good looks for too long. If the alarms aren’t ringing in City Hall right now, it’s time for an intervention. City leaders should take a cue from The Good Lion.

“Frankly we’re feeling optimistic. We love this community. We moved here for a reason. We think that the city is going to bounce back,” Brandon reflected. “This will cause more change for the better and is a real opportunity for the city to emerge stronger.”

The thought drives Brandon Ristaino to contemplate the essential nature of his craft and business.

“Does it make complete logical sense for someone to go into our bar and drink a cocktail they could easily make at home, at close to the level we’re doing it?” Brandon asks. “They’re coming for the social interaction, for the vibe, for the way that it makes them feel to interact with our bar team and other people in the community. I think it’s pretty much ingrained in this generation and the generation before it.”

As after that other plague, the black one, there will be a huge pent up need and demand for social activity. That demand will drive the adaptation to a new normalcy. The desire that happens when the breeze is blowing, and the sun is out, and friends are nearby, is not going to be stopped.