

FAMILY TIES

BY ALIA AKKAM

Father's Day is around the bend, and as we search for those imported cigars and the perfect bottle of Scotch for Dad, we're proud to break away from industry trends to present our annual June Father's Day feature. Undoubtedly, the wine & spirits industry is dynamic, so it's not surprising that someone who grew up watching their dad get energized by an impending sales meeting or dressed for a night serving cocktails across the bar to discerning drinkers would want to follow in their footsteps and build a career in this realm, too.

Each year at *Beverage Media*, we profile a few industry dads from the Tri-State area, and their sons who have joined the trade.

On the next few pages you'll meet a son who was so motivated by his dad's work ethic, it inspired him to switch career paths; a father and son who chose pounding the pavement over sitting in an office; as well as a legendary mixologist and his son who is quickly carving out his own path behind the bar.

Sometimes, Dad does know best. Happy Father's Day.

DALE & LEO DEGROFF

In 1986, when Dale DeGross first started working at Aurora, one of legendary restaurateur Joe Baum's restaurants, only



two cocktail lists existed in New York City: at The Waldorf=Astoria and The Oak Room. "And even those were tucked away in drawers," Dale recalls. "The only time you saw a cocktail on the menu was at brunch when you ordered a Mimosa."

Twenty-five years later, a customer would be hard-pressed to find a bar without a cocktail list at the ready, and Dale, aka "King Cocktail," certainly had a little something to do with that. Over the course of his storied career, which includes years helming the bar at The Rainbow Room, he has inspired myriad up-and-coming bartenders to execute quality classic and modern cocktails. One of them is his son, Leo, who works at Steve Olson's renowned consultancy, *AKA Wine Geek*.

Dale came to New York from Rhode

Island in 1969 as a starry-eyed actor, doing everything from loading furniture onto a moving truck to washing dishes at Howard Johnson's to support himself. The most serendipitous of these odd jobs was the one he got through his friend's older brother: working in the mailroom of the ad agency that handled Baum's Restaurant Associates account. Soon, food and drink began to replace thoughts of Broadway, and he witnessed Baum's revolutionary approach to hospitality firsthand. For example, "I watched Joe put wine back on tables and introduce Pisco Sours and Mojitos to New Yorkers," he points out.

Venturing to Hollywood, Dale snagged a job at the posh Hotel Bel Air because of his experience at Baum's lauded Charley O's. Here he served celebrities—and met

his artist wife Jill. Back in New York at Aurora, Baum tasked Dale with making fresh, 19th century-era cocktails, a then-unheard of bar approach, grooming him for the Rainbow Room chapter where he would rekindle the allure of an old supper club with his made-to-order classic cocktails.

For Leo, his father's inevitable celebrity was a boon. When Dale taught at the former Peter Kump's New York Cooking School, it was a teenage Leo who helped his dad squeeze fresh juices and set up the giant stainless steel table. "He was too young to drink, but his prep was fast. He sat in on class and had an inside look at products and techniques," notes Dale.

It wasn't the drinks Dale made that impressed Leo as much as his father's vast community of friends. "He knew everybody—even the taxi drivers," Leo points out. "They came from all economic walks of life."

After working in the kitchen of a restaurant near the DeGroff's Long Island home, Leo then headed to NYC mastering prep skills under chef Waldy Malouf at Beacon, followed by a stint at Taj. The moment Leo realized he was destined for a path similar to his father's was working at the former nightclub B.E.D., under the direction of Willie Shine and Aisha Sharpe who would later establish the well-known consultancy Contemporary Cocktails. "I was at the service bar, which I think is the only place to start; I'd never even made a Gin & Tonic before," he recalls.

These days, Leo has perfected the G&T and flies around the country training bar staff, while Dale educates bartenders in locales from Denmark to India ("reminding extraordinarily talented craftsmen that none of this means anything if we're not having fun") and taking his On the Town series, where he plays the guitar and regales crowds with saloon tales in intimate theaters, on the road.

Dale is thrilled with how far the mixology world has evolved since Baum first took him under his wing, but until every margarita is flaunting fresh-squeezed lime, he says, "We haven't gone far enough."

JAKE & JARED PASERMAN

Jake Paserman of **Empire Merchants** has been a salesman with The Charmer Sunbelt Group for 33 years, and he wouldn't have had it any other way. "I could never be behind a desk all day," he reveals. "I enjoy spending time with people too much."

While a student at Baruch College, the Queens native worked in a wine & spirits retail store, and seeing the various salesmen walk in and out of the shop, Jake "realized I could do a better job than them."

And so his longtime sales career began with Charmer Industries, working on specialty ethnic brands like Wild Irish Rose. "It was a time when the company didn't have a dedicated on-premise segment; the industry basically wasn't as volume-driven," he recalls. This presented an opportunity for the young Jake. Walking up and down busy Austin Street in his Forest Hills neighborhood, he acquired an entrepreneurial stance and introduced his liquor accounts to the restaurants there as well, racking up more sales along the way.

Certainly, the competitive on-premise market today is far more complicated to navigate than those carefree days Jake recalls, but his business acumen has also

greatly sharpened over the past three decades. "You can't just have a nightclub anymore. You have to know about cost, food and drink," he explains. "Any place can do well for five months, but what about five years from now? You have to design it for success."

Like his father, Jake's son Jared knew a 9-to-5 job was not in the cards for his future. When he was a teenager on Long Island, the focused Jared sought out the University of Delaware's Department of Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Management ("He only applied to one school," his father marvels). Internships at Empire Merchants, Justin Timberlake's Southern Hospitality and Chatham Imports under the guidance of Joe Magliocco followed. "It's rare to meet someone who is both so knowledgeable and humble," Jared says of his former Chatham boss. He then headed to **Proximo Spirits**, where as area manager, he works with New York Metro accounts and develops the company's more eclectic brands such as Hangar One Vodka, Maestro Dobel Tequila and Stranahans Colorado Whiskey.

These days, Jake and Jared get to spend time together far more often than at family dinners, all in the name of work; it is not uncommon to see the two of them at Jake's accounts introducing staff to Jared's brands.

"I was exposed to this industry early on," Jared points out. "I would come along with my dad and unintentionally shadow him when he was visiting accounts, so it's something I became comfortable with." Jared also became impressed by the industry connections his dad nurtured at a young age: "He knows everybody. I would go to restaurants with him and he'd get VIP treatment without even trying."

This love of people is still what keeps Jake out most evenings, spending quality time with his accounts. It's also one of the reasons Jake isn't entirely hooked on today's prevalence of social media. "The best and worst part about today versus when I started is technology. My customers are my friends and I'd rather talk to them in person. But you have to evolve now," he adds.





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FAMILY TIES

"When you're my dad's age, you hope you have a job you love," Jared points out. "He's lucky."

DENNIS & JARED **RESNICK**

Growing up in the food retail business was a good thing for Dennis Resnick. "An interest in consumer goods and behavior is in my genes," he says. Before Dennis embarked on a 30-year career at New Jersey's **R&R Marketing, LLC**, a member of The Charmer Sunbelt Group, he worked as an educator. (Dennis actually began at Reitman Industries before it merged with Royal to become R&R in 1994.) But as the New Jersey native recalls, "It was sales I was drawn to," working his way up from sales administration to sales manager to his current role as director of sales & marketing.

Dennis, however, did not envision a similar path for his son. "No, I didn't see him in the industry; I wanted him to be a lawyer." Jared wanted to be a lawyer, too, and followed his (and his father's) wishes by getting his J.D. and eventually becoming a commercial litigation associate. Except, after four years of practicing in New York and New Jersey, Jared felt ready for a new challenge, and his thoughts kept returning to this industry that had so gripped his father. "Unlike law, wines and spirits meant building up something from scratch; it was the more intriguing side of the coin," he notes. One of Jared's earliest jobs was working at Wine Library one summer; while a student at Boston University he also spent time as a bartender. "I had been exposed to both the on-premise and off-premise sides of the business, and I was ready for my own opportunity in the industry."

Jared found that opportunity at **Carriage House Imports** in Springfield, NJ, where he serves dual roles ("I have two business cards," he jokes) as general counsel, tapping into his legal expertise, and as brand director for products like Figenza Vodka.

"There's a real interest in the industry today," shares Dennis. "Jared got in at an exciting time, with social media playing such a prominent role. It really presents a great opportunity for a medium-sized supplier to thrive and create and develop niche brands that whet the appetite and appeal to consumer tastes today. It keeps evolving, so you have to be well educated, a strategic thinker and hold yourself accountable, which was not the case when I first started."

Jared says he was prepared for his job's challenges because he was inspired by his dad's own devotion to hard work. "My dad always stayed one step ahead of the market. His work ethic is insatiable. He worked nights, weekends, even when he had the flu. I admire that passion and dedication," he noted. "A lot of people hate what they do, but my dad is someone who truly loves his job."

Today, father and son meet for dinner regularly, and conversation often turns to work and mutual colleagues.

"Building brands—from pricing to marketing—has been quite challenging, but an incredible adventure," Jared shares. "The industry has certainly lived up to my positive expectations." ■