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Matthew Hunter Of Eleven Madison Park On The Universal Allure (& Future) Of Cocktail Culture

For this Michelin-starred mixologist, it all boils down to hospitality, creativity, and an insistence on connection above all.



Matthew Hunter | Photo credit: Sarah Stanfield, *The Taste Edit* (<https://thetasteedit.com/>)

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FOODANDBEVERAGE



By Jacqueline Parisi 19 JUNE 2020

When Matthew Hunter speaks about cocktails, he does so with a degree of eloquence that never borders on pretension. An aura of expertise that is somehow rendered supremely approachable. A palpable fever and passion just intense enough to draw you in. And a graciousness

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and warmth to make you feel at home.

Indeed when you boil down everything there is to savor about Michelin-starred hospitality, *sans* any stigmas of stuffiness, you get Hunter, Head Bartender at New York City’s illustrious Eleven Madison Park (EMP), who, with over 25 years of experience, is no stranger to the restaurant world.

Stints at McDonalds and Baskin Robbins—the ultimate rite of passage—kicked things off in high school, followed by a slew of fast food joints during his college years at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Hunter’s early 20s were spent in Seattle before he traded in the Pacific Northwest for the Big Apple, hopping around everywhere from Dressler in Brooklyn (now Meadowsweet) to Frankie’s to Vandaag (now Mighty Quinn’s BBQ) to Market Table to Narcissa. Eventually, Hunter landed at The Nomad and, a few years later, EMP, which Daniel Humm and Will Guidara of Make It Nice Hospitality Group took over from Danny Meyer in 2006—11 years before it would top the World’s 50 Best Restaurants list in 2017.

“New York restaurants are always tricky,” says Hunter, “because you can have tons of experience, but you need *New York City* experience to get a job. So I bounced around a lot during that time until I settled on a culture that I really liked.”

Drawn to the structure of a 3-Michelin star establishment, Hunter began thriving off the focus on intentional design and reasoning behind every decision that was made—and from that reasoning, more meaning and fulfillment in his work. “Most jobs weren’t run with that attention to detail,” explains Hunter.

The team mentality at EMP fostered collaboration, communication and, for the first time in Hunter’s career, the ability to work towards a meaningful common goal that superseded turning tables.

“It was really about providing super attentive service that is warm and hospitable,” explains Hunter, “and almost anticipating what guests’ needs are before they ask you. It was about fostering a setting for people to step into your home and feel a sense of trust, which is really the foundation of hospitality. Trust that they’re going to be taken care of and treated with

respect—not just that they come in and pay money and are given an

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experience, which falls stale and flat.”

At the foundation of this culture of hospitality was a greater sense of family among the team—an ethos that informed every decision, from investments in staff education programs to mentorship opportunities.

“That,” says Hunter, “is what keeps me devoted to the brand.”

In 2017, two years after Hunter joined EMP, the restaurant reopened its doors following a months-long renovation. In an effort to infuse new life into the iconic space, uniforms were upgraded, the tasting menu was pared down, and the cocktail program overhauled in favor of an ingredient-focused, less-is-more mentality that still persists today. But behind the facade of simplicity—cocktails have been designated one-word names like “Mushroom,” “Barley,” and “Fennel”—is a methodical attention to detail that is anything but. Every element is carefully, painstakingly considered.



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Matthew Hunter behind the bar at Eleven Madison Park |

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Take "Fennel," for example, which comes together with a surprising combination of Berliner Weisse, aquavit, green apple, lime, watermelon, parsley, and vinegar. Or "Barley" which, yes, contains barley-based Genever, but also cream sherry, shochu, miso, smoked juniper, maple, and cocoa nib. There's even a cocktail with foie gras that pays homage to EMP's cult-favorite duck dish.

One look at the menu and it's clear that Hunter's creations exist at the same caliber of creativity as that of the food, together presenting an inventive, thought-provoking display of gastronomic harmony that you won't soon forget.

"I've always had a creative aspect to my personality," says Hunter, who draws inspiration from music and acting. "And I do think you need that in order for your life to be fulfilling, to a certain extent. All the education the cooks have done to gain as much knowledge, reasoning, and creativity behind their craft, that same philosophy applies to us."

Early in his career, Hunter sought to channel his creative spirit and penchant for hospitality into cooking and waiting tables. But it never quite satisfied his craving for a strong sense of connection. That would come later, in 2010, when he picked up bartending.

"When you interact with guests and talk about what they're looking for, you can immediately see the response when you make them a drink or pour

them a taste of wine," explains Hunter. "And that personal connection was

more gratifying for me as an individual than just taking an order. As a bartender, you create the energy that then creates the delicious cocktail.”

A menu predicated on boundary-pushing creativity, in a setting founded on the principles of hospitality, experienced through the lens of a personal connection is precisely what sets EMP apart, earning it the rare accolade of not one, not two, but *three* Michelin stars.

COVID may have temporarily shuttered the doors of EMP, but it has done little to taper the universal allure of cocktail culture which, according to Hunter, has seen a resurgence since the early 2000s. At the helm were bars like Milk & Honey, PDT, and Flatiron Lounge, which championed the once-novel concept of seasonality and attention to detail in the cocktail world. A walk through the streets of New York City alone is enough to convince you that cocktails occupy an indelible seat in our cultural zeitgeist, a position that was solidified in 2009 with the creation of the World’s 50 Best Bars list.

“Now, because of the internet and social media, we see that people are excited about cocktail culture,” says Hunter. “They know more and feel comfortable being able to express what their palate skews towards and what kinds of drinks they like.”

As the popularity of cocktail culture has grown, so too has its price tag which, for Hunter, renders high-quality service all the more important. “People are careful about what places they choose,” he tells us. “They want something that’s delicious and creative, something inventive that they haven’t tried. But they also want the service to be good. Because if you walk in somewhere and the people behind the bar don’t seem to care that you’re choosing their establishment, you’ll never go back. It’s that simple.”



Matthew Hunter mixing cocktails for bar guests mid-service /

@[elevenmadisonpark](https://www.instagram.com/elevenmadisonpark)

Over the past few years, Hunter has also noticed a movement towards lower or no-alcohol cocktails—less a fleeting trend than an enduring cultural shift that “is having its own seat at the table.”

“It’s just as important to have a delicious, balanced, alcoholic cocktail as it is to have a nonalcoholic cocktail made with the same intention and craft. People may be unable to drink or are choosing not to drink, and it’s our job to make sure that everyone leaves feeling like it was special—just as one would if they were a vegan, vegetarian, or pescatarian. Everyone deserves the same 3-star Michelin experience regardless of their choices.”

The question of where restaurants and bars go from here is a particularly daunting one at the moment. As New York City makes meaningful progress towards reopening, the looming reality for establishments like EMP is that financial viability is simply not feasible at less than 100% capacity.

But when we asked Hunter about his visions for the future of the industry, he remained optimistic, firm in his belief that the universal connection, camaraderie, and craft of cocktail culture will prevail. And if the popularity

of his virtual cocktail classes through Journy Online is any indication, we’re

inclined to agree.

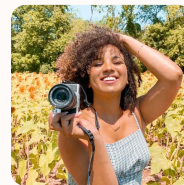
For more cocktail inspiration, [hear what Odd Strandbakken Of Oslo's HIMKOK had to say about sourcing locally, reducing waste, and building "a bar with a conscience."](#)



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