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During her year-long sabbatical from Davidson College, the author is tending bar at Kudzu because she "desperately needed the chance to miss teaching before returning to it."

What I'm Doing Here

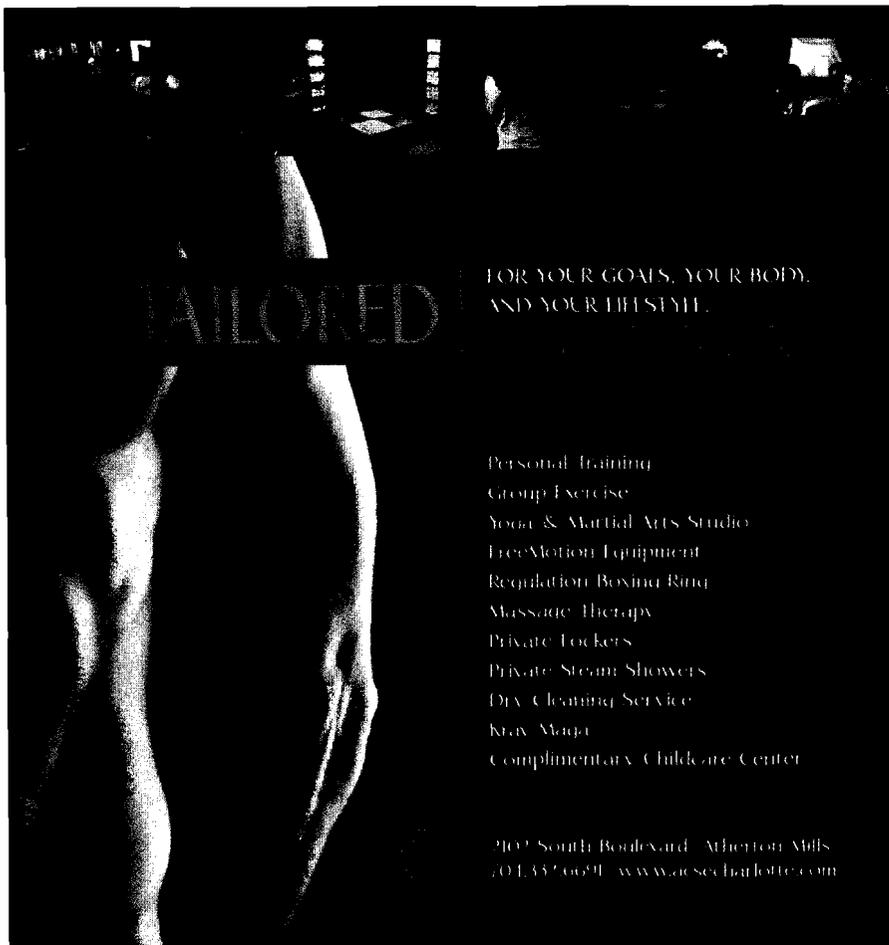
A Davidson English professor takes a year off and rediscovers a long-lost career—bartending. Now, if only those servers would speak up when delivering drink orders

BY CYNTHIA LEWIS



It's orientation week at Davidson College for new students, and, on this especially sultry August night, I'm standing behind the bar in Kudzu on the Green, a restaurant across from campus on Main Street. Parents, ragged from a day of moving in their offspring, hearing speeches from college officials, and saying goodbye, drift in, looking to relieve the day's stress with that glass of wine or frosty beer. One couple heads toward me, and, as the mother and I take a second look at each other, we squeal with joy. More than two decades ago, she was a sophomore in one of my English classes at the college where she and her husband are now depositing their son in the class of 2011. Although I'm surprised to see her, she's downright shocked to find me tending bar. As I take her in my arms to hug her, she asks, "What are you doing here?"

The simplest answer to that



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Perspective

question is that I'm alternatively employed at Kudzu while on a year's sabbatical from Davidson College, where I've taught Shakespeare and nonfiction writing in the English Department for some twenty-eight years. In July, when I called Kudzu proprietor Chip Potts about tending bar for him on weekends, I told him that my goal was to spend some of my year off just having fun. Many of my colleagues leave town for exotic destinations during their sabbaticals—whether to conduct research or teach at another school—an option closed to me as a single parent of a senior at North Mecklenburg High School. So why not bring a little exoticism to me?

Okay, bartending strains the definition of "exotic," but it was what I had. In 1980, I left Boston for my dream job at Davidson, having worked my way through graduate school as a bartender and caterer. I'd also been the first woman to teach bartending school for Harvard Student Agencies (the outfit that produces *Let's Go!* travel guides). Although I'd left such employment without thought of ever returning, little did I realize just how intense teaching was going to be and how attractive, as a result, pouring a drink would become.

When I say I've always loved my job teaching bright undergraduates, I mean that, to borrow language from my second job, I'm besotted by it. But the many responsibilities attending it burn up untold hours, including weekends, and burn out professors. At Davidson, when a sabbatical rolls around every seventh year, we can have one semester off at full pay or a year off at half pay. I'd never had the nerve to take off a whole year, but recognizing that I now desperately needed the chance to miss teaching before returning to it, I closed my eyes and Thelma-and-Louised myself into a full year at reduced pay. In addition to giving me a break from academic overload, then, bartending would also help me pay bills.

Luckily, I've wound up in the perfect place for me. Kudzu, a smoke-free, urban village bistro, lies just two blocks from my house in Davidson. The building, which dates to 1912, spent a good number of its early days as Johnston's Grocery Store. Inside, original, patterned, tin ceiling squares, painted white, set off modern, celery walls. In addition to Kudzu's excellent fare, its location rounds out its appeal. From my perch in



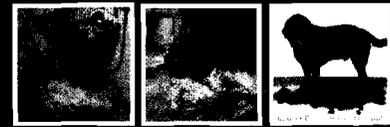
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the bar, which faces the wide front windows looking out onto the center of town, I never grow tired of watching the activity where Main Street meets Concord Road. For the first time in decades, I have leisure just to observe.

The peaceful quiet doesn't last long. Around 6 p.m., diners queue up at the hostess' station and drinkers claim the stools at the bar. I'm supposed to fix drinks for these multitudes, plus serve food to the bar crowd? And I have to register every order on a computer that, as the oldest employee at Kudzu (I even have a few years on my boss), I don't know how to operate? What am I doing here? Servers whiz by, calling out orders for a dirty dry martini, a Flying Dog Pale Ale, and two house chardonnays. Hold on. Was that *chardonnay* or *cabernet*? They sound so much alike. I make a mental

My reverie is interrupted when Chip flashes his Cub Scout smile and asks if he can borrow my "tool"—aka my corkscrew.

note to check in with that server, Maggie, when she breezes by again. But first, I need to send a food order to the kitchen for a crab cake appetizer and tonight's special, pan-seared ahi tuna, for one of my bar customers. I try to get on the computer, only to discover that I forgot to clock myself in an hour earlier when I arrived for work. I clock in now, make a mental note to get credit later for that missing hour, and attempt to place the food order. Frozen as a daiquiri, I stare at the computer screen. After two wrong guesses, the third hit is the correct choice. I punch "Send to kitchen."

In the meantime, servers continue adding new drink orders and reminding me about the dirty dry martini, the Flying Dog, and the ... chardonnays? I snag Maggie, explain that I'm a little hard of hearing, and ask her again what she's ordering while I look her in the face, the better to read her

lips. By now, a Davidson student and her parents have joined me at the bar. They're hurrying to catch a play and need to eat something in the next forty-five minutes. I leave them with menus while I trek into the kitchen to be sure the chefs have received my crab cake and ahi order. (I don't trust the computer.) I return to take the food order for the folks in a rush and, once they've ordered, the daughter says, "I'm thinking about majoring in English. Can you tell me about the curriculum?"

Word reaches me that my appetizer is

up, so I smile at the student, say, "Sure, in a minute," and return to the kitchen to fetch the crab cake. The trouble is that I erroneously entered it in the computer as "Cal Cake," for California Cake, an appetizer I hadn't even realized was on the menu. I apologize profusely to the chefs. They look the other way as I devour the tasty evidence of my mistake.

I collect the soup and salads for the hurried family, run them back to the bar, and start filling the seven drink orders that have accumulated. A lovely couple

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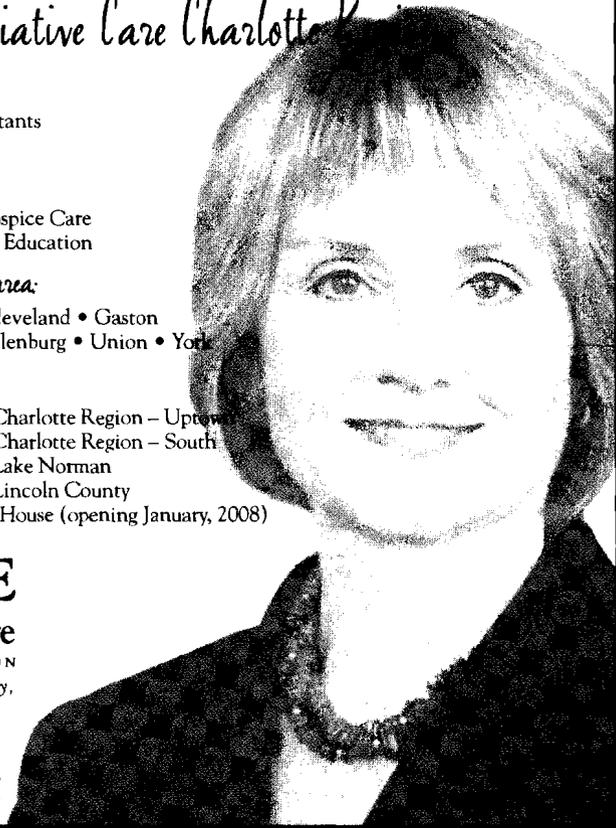
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Perspective

who have been drinking Campari cocktails with intertwined arms ask for their tab. Approaching the computer to put in their drinks, I realize that I've misplaced my reading glasses, which are usually on top of my head, tucked in the top of my shirt, or sitting on the inner rim of the bar. I get down on my hands and knees behind the bar and feel around, finding my glasses on the floor. Now that I can make out the computer screen, I realize that I don't know where "Campari" lurks in the morass of liquor options before me.

The minutes palpably drain away. Maggie comes up to the bar and calls out a new order: "JD on the rocks with a splash of ginger and a twist; Falling Star chard; a Grey Goose cosmo with extra cran; and a Highland Gaelic Ale."

For a moment, I reflect on how, in my youth, my mind could clamp down on a list like that and remember it cold. In the next moment, I realize that I'm kidding myself—my memory was never that sharp. Whatever. I need Maggie to help me find the Campari. Although I still owe her two

drink orders in addition to the recent one, she indulgently helps me search for the item for the oblivious love birds.

Just when I think things can't get crazier, in walks the boss. A boyish, robust fifty, Chip, although hobbled by an arthritic knee, still barrels through the kitchen and past tables, greeting customers, delivering food, and dispensing directions to his staff. Charging behind the tiny bar, he dwarfs me. I ask him where the heck Campari is on the blasted computer. He looks at Maggie and me as if we're daft and says, "It's easy . . . I'll show you . . ." Five minutes later, he concludes that it's not there. By that point, Maggie and I have long since fled, and I've consulted her three more times about that last complicated drink order.

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On any given night, an old wound can flare up, a new flirtation can sizzle, or a breakup can threaten broad collateral damage.

How can I be the same woman who lectures confidently about *Othello* to a class of twenty-five? Am I really the person who, thirty years earlier, could see and hear just fine and who probably would have been helping everybody else with computers had we been using them? My reverie is interrupted when Chip flashes his Cub Scout smile and asks if he can borrow my "tool"—aka my corkscrew. With a "Please give it back," I pass it to him, knocking over one of the tea candles on the bar and spilling white wax all over my black shirt and down one leg of my black pants.

Ever try to wipe candle wax off your clothes? Barry, another server, approaches me with an expression of skepticism befitting his impression of me as someone challenged to hear the difference between *chardonnay* and *cabernet*. "Can you make a gimlet?" he asks. "Sure!" I grin. "You can?" I don't blame him for doubting. How is

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he to realize that my training in mixology dates to the Neolithic Age, when people's tastes included ingredients like Rose's lime juice, Angostura bitters, and Cinzano sweet vermouth? I whip up the Grey Goose vodka gimlet and notice that Barry watches carefully as the customer takes her first few sips. Victory! She likes it.

With a renewed feeling of competence, I set about making a sour mash manhattan for an older gentleman who's headed to a Davidson basketball game. At Kudzu, I get an uncommon number of orders for drinks like gimlets, manhattans, and old fashioned—staples of my stint in the 1970s while catering at the Harvard Business School. I gather that they're no longer in most bartenders' everyday lexicon. Tonight, I luck out. The gentleman is so pleased by the authentic taste of the manhattan I've served him that he praises my bartending skills to Chip and asks me to write down my recipe. I'm glad to, but a bit embarrassed, since the drink is very simple to concoct: three parts bourbon to one part sweet vermouth, topped off by a maraschino cherry. Simple or not, the genuine manhattan has, from this gentleman's report, gone the way of balloon-tire bikes and Mighty Mouse cartoons, a relic from an earlier age.

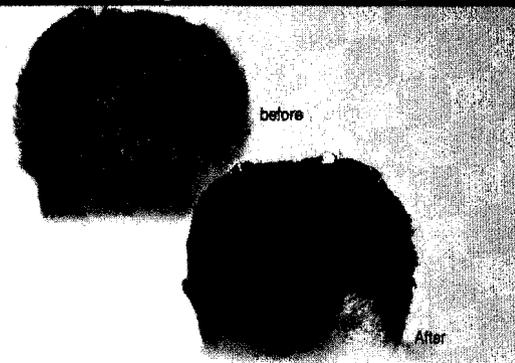
As Chip claims his nightly seat at the bar next to Pete, one of my regulars, I'm hoping he'll mention the gentleman's compliment about my manhattan. Or maybe he'll agree with Pete's observation that he's hired somebody to work the bar who appears knowledgeable and polished. In fact, when I resumed tending bar after a thirty-year hiatus, muscle memory prevailed: my hands instantly displayed the maneuvers of a pro as surely as dexterity distinguishes the experienced smoker from the rookie. Long-term repetition also teaches bartenders how to pour an ounce or a jigger (one and a half ounces) simply by feel.

Back at the bar, Chip and Pete give me their dinner orders. Chip has opened a bottle of 2004 Privada Argentine red and, hands flailing, is discoursing on it at length while sharing a glass with Pete. When I was waiting tables as a college student in the Midwest, even most pricey restaurants offered little more than three kinds of house wines—Chablis, Burgundy, and rosé, served in small or large carafes—and a list

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Perspective

of finer wines comprising maybe fifteen labels. Today, the tally of wines by the glass can approach three dozen, and the spectrum of bottled wine can number in the hundreds. To do my job well, I must become newly versed in a staggering list of wares.

As I hurry to the kitchen to confirm Chip's and Pete's orders, Ellen sees my wax-soaked outfit and whispers, "Love what you're wearing." The chefs ply me with questions. "Is one of these for Chip?" "Which one?" "Who's the other

one for?" As I return to the bar, I overhear Chip explaining to Barry where he might find a bottle of Hermitage for one of his tables. Scooting my slender frame around the bar's corner, I trip over Tom, a server who's about six-two and 300 pounds. He's on his knees, searching the wine cooler for a bottle of Matua sauvignon blanc. I get down on my knees and help him look. The small cooler is jammed with way more white wine than it's built to accommodate and is hopelessly disordered. Tom and I remove more than a dozen bottles

before finding the Matua. Barry's task of locating the Hermitage is more Herculean. Chip has hundreds of reds stored all over the building according to a code that might be thought of as a New Age Dewey Decimal System that only he himself can divine.

At the point in the evening when Chip eats at the bar, activity has begun tapering off, and the mood at Kudzu is mellower. I still face Chip's unflinching gaze, but Pete helps me soften and deflect his running critique. My boss gradually unwinds. Tom swings by to order a glass of Hogue Genesis merlot, and, noting that I'll need to open a new bottle, I slip away to get it. Chip fusses at me for not having stocked enough bottles behind the bar. I glare at him in mock indignation, flip back my dark hair with an index finger, and snarl, "Give me back my corkscrew."

In the later hours of the evening, groggy, satisfied diners glide out the door. Inside, the tendency of restaurant culture toward internal intrigue, whether romantic or antagonistic, peaks. Sure, every workplace has its subterranean goings-on, but something about the food milieu (perhaps the fast pace that whips its way through busy restaurants and feeds emotion?) propels those complex entanglements out in the open with the force of a shaken bottle of Mumm ejecting a cork. On any given night, an old wound can flare up, a new flirtation can sizzle, or a breakup can threaten broad collateral damage.

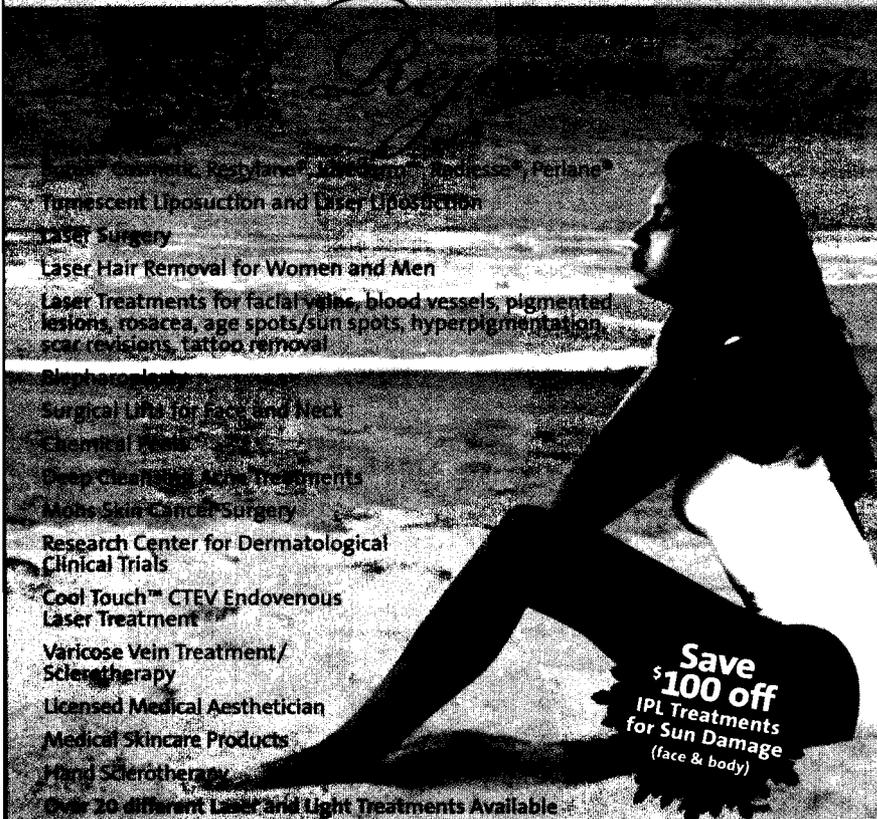
When I began at Kudzu, I solemnly promised to remain aloof from this drama. Alas, like Shakespeare's Rosalind, I've proved falser than vows made in wine. While I attempt to be Switzerland when both Maggie and Barry tell me how the other one has completely messed up their relationship, I find my capacity for gossip alarmingly unchanged from its prodigiousness during high school. I would say that this penchant, too, amounts to a recess from my academic job, but anyone who's ever attended an English Department meeting—or heard rumors about one—would know better.

In truth, from my vantage point at the bar, I can view all manner of liaisons among strangers, acquaintances, and colleagues who spend an entire evening in the restaurant without recognizing me. As another of my regulars plops on a bar stool across from me and starts telling me about his day,

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Perspective

the bar also becomes a means of virtual dating. A guy comes in, doesn't actually have to risk asking me out, and, for the cost of dinner and drinks for one (instead of two), plus tip, can spend almost as much time with me stag as if I were sitting across a table from him with my own dinner. Such are the sorts of lofty theories that fill my head when I take time off from teaching *Love's Labor's Lost*.

My two careers blend often, most memorably on another evening when a group of my students, several of whom have graduated just last May, materialize at Kudzu's bar to visit. Once I've served them items ranging from Riesling to Sierra Nevada to a killer dessert known as "Chocolate Delicacy," I take them in like a big glass of my favorite pinot noir. Having them all there, I tell them, is like a dream. No matter that I'm forfeiting one-on-one conversations with those I haven't seen in months. No matter that, when tally time arrives, I have to produce six separate checks (and fail to pull it off). They've come through the looking glass with me, entering a cherished world that doesn't so much cancel out the other world we share as it offers a rich—and, I've come to feel, necessary—complement. Somehow, I want them to know that education isn't confined to academe.

What am I doing here? I'm using my hands to concoct simple pleasures. I'm enjoying returns on my effort that far exceed my exertion of energy: no other occupation I know of requires so little to make people happy. I'm throwing and attending a party every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday night. I'm witnessing the limits (and frequent impracticality) of scholarly learning, remembering a time when, like one of my co-workers, I couldn't afford to buy books for my classes until I'd worked several weeks, and rediscovering that the cost of an evening out with friends is roughly equivalent to two nights' tips. I'm marveling that, nevertheless, the servers at Kudzu generously share their tips with me and lend me their help. I'm having my vision of almost everything completely and justifiably readjusted, and, whatever I'm revealing about the state of my erstwhile social life by saying so, I'm having a blast. ■

Cynthia Lewis last wrote for this magazine about the unsolved murder of Kim Thomas.