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Hotel Julien Dubuque Beverage Manager Wins Mixology Regional

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Downtown Dubuque was brimming with bartending talent Thursday, as a half-dozen drink makers convened at Hotel Julien Dubuque to compete in the Iowa Restaurant Association's annual Top Mixologist contest.



This year marks the first time Dubuque served as one of the six regional sites for the statewide contest, which will conclude Aug. 26 in Des Moines.

Ryan Manka, who bartends at Cobble Hill Eatery & Dispensary in Cedar Rapids, made the trip to Dubuque to show off his mixing skills and acquire some ideas from other mixologists. He said the contest at Hotel Julien Dubuque illustrated the growing popularity of the "craft cocktail" movement.

"Most people think of a traditional cocktail as taking a bottled mixer and a bottled liquor and pouring them together," he said. "Where craft cocktails come in is we are coming up with new techniques and new flavors. It's about learning new ideas from others and also putting your own twist on things."

Brian Neis, the beverage manager at Hotel Julien Dubuque and the night's winner, certainly put a personal twist on the drinks he submitted Thursday, with homemade rhubarb syrup and egg whites serving as ingredients for two different beverages. Neis said it was exciting to see Dubuque take part in the latest cocktail trends. "I think the craft cocktail trend is still in its infancy here in Dubuque," he said. "It's neat to see an event like this taking place under our roof."

Kelly Williams, manager at 1st & Main in Dubuque and the night's runner-up, said the mixology contest was as much about camaraderie as competition.

Four of the six participants came from Dubuque, including three who represented Hotel Julien Dubuque. "We're not necessarily out to compete with one another -- especially here in the lower end of Main Street, we are all like a family," Williams said.

The luckiest people at Hotel Julien Dubuque might have been the two judges. E.J. Droessler, co-owner of L. May Eatery in Dubuque, and L. May employee Lexie Sheridan sampled the beverages from all six bartenders before selecting the winner. "I've been in the restaurant business for 10 years, but I've learned so many new things (from being a judge)," Sheridan said. "The drinks are all so different, and it is amazing how much work the participants have put in."