

"Femeile frumoase si bautura": renumitul bar barul Coyote Ugly sarbatoreste 20 de ani



NEW YORK- Liliana "Lil" Lovell a fost doar 25, atunci când ea a plecat de la o carieră în sus-și-vin de pe Wall Street pentru a deschide Coyote Ugly ei bar în East Village din New York în 1993.

Barul marcheaza aniversarea a 20a in acest week-end, iar Lovell are mai mult de câteva povești de spus.

Lovell, care tocmai a obtinut o diplomă în psihologie și comunicații de la Universitatea din New York, a trebuit sa lupte ca să trăiască pe un salariu săptămânal 250 dolari ca ucenic la o bancă de investiții .

Soon, Lovell was earning the equivalent of her weekly salary in tips in a single night working at a grungy dive called The Village Idiot, where the owner was known to drink Guinness by the gallon and pass out by the front door. When a tax issue closed that bar temporarily, Lovell

scrounged up her tips and found an investor to help her open her own place in a vacant Italian restaurant directly across the street.

Her business plan at the time was shockingly simple: “Beautiful women and booze,” Lovell recalled in an interview. “It seemed like the most obvious way in the world to make money.”

But it was also groundbreaking. As Coyote Ugly prepares to mark its 20th anniversary, it’s easy to forget Lovell’s dingy little honky-tonk—which eventually spawned a Jerry Bruckheimer film, a chain of spin-off nightclubs around the world and, briefly, its own CMT reality show—was once a rarity in the nightlife world.

In those days, even in New York, it was unusual for a bar to be staffed entirely by female bartenders—even more so for one of those bartenders to be the owner and manager of the place.

“It was virtually unheard of for a woman to be bartending. There were very few women on the scene. It was almost impossible to get a job,” Lovell recalls. “[But] what I found were that women were better sellers. I can get them with practice to be fast, but they were able to chat with the customers and created better sales. But it was considered very odd at the time by most people.”

That impression didn’t last long. Soon, Lovell’s tiny First Avenue joint was attracting big crowds—largely because of the legend of Lovell herself.

Cute and petite with the tenacity of a fearless drill sergeant, Lovell laid down strict rules for what was allowed at her bar.

For one, there was to be no girly drinks—a tough call during the coming of age of Cosmopolitans and other fruity concoctions made popular by “Sex and the City.”

What was permitted was a jukebox of loud country music, endless shots of Jack Daniels and

Patron, and a stream of constant torment aimed at the bar's male clientele by a staff of scantily clad, gorgeous bartenders—known as Coyotes—who were encouraged to dance on the bar and make the scene as lively as possible.

It's a business model that Lovell has fiercely perfected and protected. In expanding her business around the world, she has become something of an eternal Coyote guarding a brand that is as much her own identity as anything else.

"She was born to run an empire, with an iron first, a wickedly charismatic smile and a unique vision," says writer Elizabeth Gilbert, who, before her "Eat Pray Love" days, worked as a bartender at Coyote Ugly.

"I was shocked at how young she was and how terribly sexy," Gilbert recalled of her first meeting with Lovell. "And how commanding she was for somebody who was quite dainty and feminine. ... I think she is one of the powerful people I have ever met. We became friends over time, but I was initially very intimidated by her."

Gilbert was 23 when she began working as a Coyote and was initially lured through the door by the sound of the blaring jukebox. Back then, Gilbert said, she lived in constant fear of being canned by Lovell, whom she says "was not shy about firing people who did not satisfy her."

"I was so afraid of being fired for not making enough money for Coyote Ugly that I used to steal money out of my own tip jar and put it in the cash register, so Lil would think I was attracting more customers than I actually was," Gilbert said. "I cannot imagine another boss so formidable that you would embezzle from yourself in order to keep her happy."

It was an experience Gilbert later chronicled in a 1997 GQ article—a piece that made the bar famous outside New York City and attracted the attention of Bruckheimer, who optioned Gilbert's article and used it as the basis for the 2000 film "Coyote Ugly."

It also made Lovell famous—who then found herself in the position of trying to protect her brand from others eager to replicate the bar's image and success in other cities.

"I never sought fame or celebrity," Lovell says. "I just wanted to be financially successful. I never imagined what this would turn out to be."

Soon, she took the Coyote Ugly bar national—eventually licensing outposts all over the world, including Las Vegas, New Orleans, Germany and Romania. With profits in revenues and licensing fees at one point exceeding an estimated \$20 million a year, Crain's named Lovell one of its top entrepreneurs under 40 in 2003.

Over the past decade, Lovell admits the business "hasn't always been easy."

Many businesses besides the Coyote Ugly franchise make money off sexy strong-willed bartenders and people dancing on the bar. As a result, some of the Coyote Ugly bars, licensed to independent operators, have closed.

But many have been replaced by outposts in other cities, including three new locations in Russia that opened last year. All told, the company has 21 licensed Coyote Ugly locations all over the world—and Lovell is looking to open a new location in Los Angeles later this year.

"I always saw bartending as a means to an end," Lovell says. "But I think it never really hit me how far this thing had gone until I was sitting in the middle of Siberia in one of the bars I had just opened. Only then was I really like, 'Wow.'"

Lovell, who now lives in New Orleans with her 13-year-old son, has ceded day-to-day management of the business to others. But she still plays a direct role as president of Ugly Inc., making sure that the bars adhere to the strict style she has laid down.

She admits changing some of those rules over the years. Before the movie, Lovell says, there wasn't choreographed dancing—but when customers came into her bar looking for the experience they had seen in the film, she put more emphasis on hiring people who could actually move.

"I was like, well, we have to Hollywood it up!" she says.

And she continues to pay close attention to the numbers each bar generates on a daily basis. When new outposts open, Lovell is usually there to help coach the new Coyotes on how to do their jobs.

Over the years, Lovell has rejected criticism of the style of her franchise—which critics, especially women, have derided as everything from a "flashier Hooters" or a "PG-13 strip club" because of the way the employees use their sexuality to make money. But Lovell insists that Coyote Ugly should be viewed as a form of "female empowerment."

"My brand of feminism (is) is that I am an empowered woman. I have never had to rely on a man to make money for me. And I think sexy is powerful. I think funny is powerful," Lovell says. "You combine all of this, and you are powerful as a woman."

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