



# Singer, Songwriter, Bartender

*Decorah's Ember Schrag and the art  
of the cocktail*

*Story by Renee Brincks  
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*The "Little Trade Wind," one of Schrag's  
many creations at the Hotel Winneshiek.*

The inspiration for one of the newest cocktails at the Hotel Winneshiek came from Norway – more specifically, from a 25-foot Norwegian boat that brothers Hans and Harold Hamran sailed across the Atlantic in 1933. Decorah's Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum now displays the wooden vessel, named the TradeWind. The drink that bears its name blends the Scandinavian spirit Aquavit with Cointreau, sweet vermouth, lemon juice and hints of lingonberry and thyme.

"I was inspired by the story of these two Norwegian brothers and that spirit of adventure and joy that I found when I read the ship's log for the voyage," says Hotel Winneshiek bartender Ember Schrag. "So I call the cocktail the Little TradeWind, after the boat."

Schrag has been shaking up the local cocktail scene since she joined the Hotel Winneshiek's dining venues, Albert's Restaurant & Pub and its more casual counterpart, the Tap Room, in late 2011. Together with bar manager Sidney Bekeleski, she's revamping drink menus with each new season and continually incorporating an impressive selection of Iowa ingredients. Schrag works with Decorah's Oneota Food Co-op to source local honey and maple syrup; she and Bekeleski have also stocked their shelves with bottles from Mississippi River Distilling Company in Le Claire (see page 30), Swisher's Cedar Ridge Distillery and other in-state producers.

Rebound Hospitality President Chuck Paton, whose management group oversees Hotel Winneshiek operations, believes the new emphasis on craft cocktails pairs well with the property's farm-to-table food emphasis.

"We continue to see a younger audience, a more exploratory audience, and one that is more interested in experience and indigenous products than maybe it used to be. To a large extent, Ember and Sid both are representative of this level of sophistication and taste present in Decorah," Paton says. In the past few months, Paton has seen sales of the hotel's specialty cocktails outnumber standard mixed drinks by two to one.

That level of success is especially impressive given that Schrag is fairly fresh to the bartending world. She's a folk musician by trade – "The Sewing Room," her second full-length album, comes out this summer – but she calls the cocktail industry a logical extension of the music world.

"I'm always in bars, though I'm usually the singer," she jokes.

The Nebraska native discovered an interest in cocktails when she was organizing a music series at Lincoln's Bourbon Theatre. There, she befriended the bar's mixologist, Ian McCarthy.

"He was doing all kinds of wonderful classic drinks and infusions, making his own tonic water, muddling herbs and fruit that he grew in

his garden, and bringing all these beautiful jars into the bar,” says Schrag. “No one in Lincoln was really doing that at the time.”

When she later landed her first bartending job in a rural Minnesota town, Schrag tested her new drink-mixing skills on the locals. She continued researching ingredients, flavors and traditional techniques, and by the time she started at the Hotel Winneshiek, she was creating her own recipes.

In addition to the Little TradeWind, Schrag recently cooked up a sophisticated after-dinner drink that includes Iowa Coffee Company Liqueur from Mississippi River Distilling Co. and Zwack, a Hungarian herbal liqueur. Those two spirits are mixed with Bushmills Irish Whiskey, cream, egg white and house-made vanilla bean simple syrup. Schrag calls the drink the Hungarian Poet.

“What’s inspirational about cocktails, for me, is that each is like a poem,” she says, pointing to a drink’s title, ingredients and broader interpretation – from the glass and garnish, to the history of the recipe, to its country of origin and the emotions it inspires in people. As a nod to her English degree, Schrag often names drinks after literary personalities, as well.

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“It’s actually not hard, seeing as many literary figures were not strangers to influential bars,” she laughs.

Though she’s playful about the subject, Schrag takes her craft seriously. She continues to experiment with ingredients and explore the history of recipes and their cultural context, and she’s passing on that knowledge through a series of cocktail classes taking place this summer at the Hotel Winneshiek. Participants take an in-depth look at different ingredients and how they came to menus. They also learn basic drink-mixing techniques and try making their own cocktails.

Schrag enjoys sharing what she’s learned, even when she’s not teaching classes.

“When people are sitting at the Tap Room bar, they’ll have questions about what I’m using. It’s an age-old tradition, telling people the story behind the drink,” she says. “For some drinks, nobody knows which is the true story. They all have their own little legends.”

Hotel Winneshiek food and beverage team members keep a drink’s connotations in mind as they tailor menus to each dining venue. At Albert’s, classic cocktails and ice cream drinks suit the restaurant’s steaks, ribs and seafood dishes. In the Tap Room, with its popular afternoon happy hour and creative appetizers, Schrag and her colleagues mix more innovative drinks and home-grown recipes. Despite the differences, Schrag appreciates how both of the hotel’s restaurants factor into the larger cocktail culture.

“It’s fun to specifically be working at a hotel bar. Hotel bars, historically, have been so influential,” she says, explaining that when travelers suggest drink combinations they’ve tried elsewhere, it can eventually influence a bartender’s regular offerings. “I think about that a lot, with these lines of influence and the way that ideas move from person to person through these great old hotel bars. It’s really satisfying to be involved in that end of the tradition.” Schrag sees Decorah, a close-knit local community that also draws visitors from a variety of destinations, as an ideal setting for her work.

“Decorah is really good, and it’s getting better all the time. This is a hotel, but we have a lot of local regulars, as well. We have such a wide range of people coming in, and they bring stories from their travels elsewhere, and they talk about the drinks they got in this city or that city,” she says. “It’s getting to be on par with a craft cocktail bar that you’d see in a bigger city. I think it’s a standout in the region, and it’s pretty exciting.”



*The Hotel Winneshiek’s Ember Schrag, at home behind the bar or the microphone.*

## TRY A COUPLE OF EMBER’S LIBATIONS AT HOME:

### Little TradeWind (left)

1 1/2 oz. Aquavit  
3/4 oz lingonberry, thyme and sweet vermouth reduction  
3/4 oz lemon  
3/4 oz Cointreau

Shake and strain into a chilled cocktail glass. Garnish with thyme sprig.

### The Hungarian Poet (Above)

1 1/2 oz Bushmills Irish Whiskey  
1/2 oz Zwack  
1/2 oz MRDC\* Iowa Coffee Company Liqueur  
1/4 oz vanilla bean syrup  
1/4 oz cream  
egg white

Pour all ingredients but cream into a mixing glass. “Dry shake” without ice to incorporate the egg white. Add cream and shake again with ice. Strain into a chilled cocktail glass.

\*MRDC is the Mississippi River Distilling Company. See a feature about them on page 30.

## WHEN YOU GO

The Tap Room & Albert’s at the Hotel Winneshiek  
104 East Water Street, Decorah  
563.382.1837  
HotelWinn.com