

New-generation cocktails get gourmet treatment

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There's a certain mystique about the bar. Rows of bottles hold a nuanced alchemy of herbs, botanicals, grains, fruits and even hints of wood, while the all-knowing bartender holds the key to a complex interplay of liquors, liqueurs and fresh ingredients that can make a cocktail truly great. While many bartenders in the Bay Area have long resigned themselves to pouring straightforward gin and tonics, or alarming concoctions of artificially flavored neon-tinged ingredients, a few stalwart mixologists are fighting back. A new type of bar is emerging where cocktails made with seasonal ingredients, artisan liqueurs and craft spirits are winning over drinkers seeking the same complexity and quality in their cocktails as they do in their restaurant meals.

While this new generation of cocktails — spiked with such ingredients as jalapenos, cucumbers, fresh grape juice, essential oils and handmade infusions — seems very New World, it's actually very retro, says Scott Beattie, bar manager at Cyrus in Healdsburg and author of the new book "Artisanal Cocktails" (Ten Speed Press, \$24.95). "Bars have been a neglected part of the restaurant business for a long time," he says. "Before Prohibition, making great drinks was sort of considered a craft, and you spent years being an apprentice: You measured every ingredient, you dressed the part, it was kind of a serious business."

Beattie has been a leader in a movement of restaurant bartenders and bar managers who want to make their beverage programs on par with their food programs. "I think enjoying a good drink is a sensory experience; it's like eating good food," says Beattie. "For the past 30 or 40 years, starting with people like James Beard and Julia Child and going all the way up to Alice Waters and Thomas Keller, these influences have made people become more conscious consumers of gourmet things." Metro Lafayette owner Scott Moore has noticed an increase in the popularity of retro cocktails such as the classic daiquiri, Aviation and Sidecar at the restaurant's bar. "I think there's a lot of public interest in old cocktails, as well as a lot of interest in artisanal spirits," he says. "It's really nice to see that there are some people taking the beverage side of things as a profession and really putting some time and effort into it."

Reviving the craft

At Flora, a one-year-old art deco-style restaurant and bar in Oakland's Uptown district, a roster of retro cocktails and modern creations is gaining a fierce local following. Bartender Troy Bayless says he gets equal requests for the bar's seasonal, signature cocktails as he does for classics such as the Dark and Stormy or Corpse Reviver. The bar's focus on hard-to-find handcrafted spirits — including locally produced vodka from Alameda's Hangar One, absinthe from St. George's Spirits and gins from San Francisco's Anchor Distilling and Distillery 209 — has also caught the attention of patrons.

Bayless says whiskey is a big seller at Flora (the bar stocks a variety of craft-distilled bourbon and rye), and he thinks part of the spirit's popularity has to do with its historical context.

"People dig it because it's an American cultural throwback, in a sense," he says. "People see all these old whiskeys up there and they become enticing. There's something beautifully archaic about being a bartender in that realm, because you're bringing almost kind of a lost

culture back to the forefront, kind of digging it up, and that part's exciting."

At the Walnut Creek Yacht Club, new bar manager Windsor Wong is also seeing public interest in craft spirits and classic cocktails. "We just put three classic cocktails, made the original way, on the menu," he says. "One of them is the Papa Doble, one of Ernest Hemingway's favorite cocktails," which Wong calls "a drink of history." Wong has also added an absinthe-based cocktail called the Absinthe Minded Martini to the Yacht Club's menu and is offering revamped versions of the Old Fashioned and Sazerac cocktails. By taking the basic flavors of classic cocktails and finding ways to replicate or enhance those flavors with some of the new and exciting liqueurs on the market, Wong pays homage to the time-honored formulas for classic cocktails while adding a new, modern twist. His take on a Bourbon & Ginger is a combination of Southern Comfort and a brand-new ginger and spice-infused liqueur called Domaine Canton, with a splash of ginger beer and lemon juice. Wong notes that the peach flavors in Southern Comfort are a perfect companion to ginger, a flavor combination he enjoys in desserts, so he decided to build a cocktail based on the flavors.

Similarly, Bayless and the Flora bar staff updated the classic French 75, now dubbed the Luxe 77, with the addition of housemade brandied cherries. "The cherries add this cinnamon-orange tangy kind of flavor to the drink," he says. "It ultimately changes the drink so it's a new cocktail, more or less."

Culinary mixology

While tying the culinary world to the craft of mixology often gives both chefs and mixologists the willies, stronger ties are developing between restaurant kitchens and bars. "You can take a lot of culinary techniques like dehydrating fruits or using essential oils and apply them to cocktail making, too," says Scott Beattie.

Just like chefs, bartenders are starting to seek out quality seasonal ingredients and design cocktail menus around what's available in local markets. Beattie has divided "Artisanal Cocktails" into seasonal sections and recommends citrus-based cocktails, such as his signature creation called the Waverly Place Echo, for upcoming winter cocktail parties because mandarin oranges and Meyer lemons will soon be abundant at farmers markets. "Good citrus juice makes amazing cocktails, and you cannot replace it with anything that comes in a bottle," he says.

Seasonality is also important to Luis Sivira, mixologist at Metro Lafayette, who says his prior experience as a cook in restaurant kitchens gave him a different vision of the potential for cocktails and what the flavor profiles can be. Sivira's creations — such as his Chipotle Pear cocktail — reflect culinary trends seen at Bay Area restaurants.

"I love trying to put flavors and ingredients together to come up with something that is unique." Sivira's current favorite at Metro is a cocktail called the Organic Green, a refreshing concoction of organic cucumbers, mint, organic Square One vodka, sugar cane and lime juice. "People love it," he says. "They say it reminds them of a relaxing day at the spa."

Fearing the glass

At Luka's Taproom in Oakland, creative cocktails such as the spicy Green Hornet and aromatic Rosemary Martini

are gaining a following, yet proprietor Rick Mitchell says when it comes to new flavors and new types of liquor, some barhoppers still remain tentative.

"What we have found over the years is that basically people will try vodka cocktails," he says. "Vodka is extremely popular, and as a result we sell tons of Hangar One, which is great; they're friends of ours and we're happy to support them," Mitchell says. Luka's Buddha's Hand Martini, made with Hangar One's Buddha's Hand citrus vodka, is particularly popular at the bar, but when it comes to cocktails made with other spirits such as gin or bourbon, customers seem to fear the glass.

It's a phenomenon that's also familiar to Bayless at Flora, who has noticed a particular apprehension toward gin among some of his customers. "Gin is a great mixer because of the botanicals in it, and it adds a lot of complexity to cocktails that vodka doesn't," he says. "What we tend to do is offer to make the cocktail with gin and, if you don't like it, we'll make you a vodka cocktail."

Both Bayless and Mitchell note that once customers try a new cocktail, they're often converted and are more open to trying new drinks and liquors. "People are generally receptive," says Bayless. "I think they trust us because we've established ourselves within that market. If you want something new, you can come here, and the bartender is more than glad to help you with being adventurous."

Cocktails at home

As pioneering bars continue to awaken the palates of customers with new flavor combinations and spirits, the craft of the cocktail is likely to gain popularity at home, says Jacob Blaeser, bartender at Zephyr Grill & Bar in Livermore. He's already met a variety of budding mixologists among the regulars at the restaurant's happy hour.

"I have a lot of people asking about ingredients of certain drinks that they'd like to make at home," he says. "I also have people telling me about new drinks that they've discovered or created on their own."

Scott Beattie says making great cocktails at home is easy, as long as amateur mixologists keep a few things in mind. "The thing that is paramount to everything when building a good cocktail is using quality ingredients and measuring everything," he says. "If one of those two things isn't happening, you're going to screw up and you won't learn from your mistakes. I would encourage everyone to invest the one dollar to purchase a jigger; that's all it takes." Balance is also another key component of making good cocktails. Beattie says a little trial and error is involved in balancing the base liquor flavors with a type of acid, such as citrus juice; and some kind of sweetening agent, like simple syrup or a liqueur. Beattie recommends writing recipes down as they're being tested, lest the perfect cocktail be lost forever.

For those who prefer to let the professionals handle the drinks, it's doubtful that there will be any shortage of good bartenders in the near future. As Metro Lafayette's Scott Moore notes with a laugh, "You look back at the history of bartenders and it's really amazing all the different roles that a bartender plays: He's your psychologist, he's your best friend"... sometimes he's your pharmacist."