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## MAXIMIZING YOUR BAR BUSINESS WITH COLOR, FLAVOR AND EXCITEMENT

BY NANCY BACKAS

*The new cocktail culture is coming of age. Today's drink flavors run the gamut from sweet and exotic to savory and dry. New products are on the market to help make these new drinks possible, and mixologists are taking their profession more seriously, working with the back of the house to discover ingredients while getting the culinary staff to support their efforts. "A properly executed bar program, like a professional kitchen, creates, cooks and shakes to bring the biggest 'wow' to the consumer," says Kathy Casey, chef and owner of Kathy Casey Food Studios, Seattle, WA, who creates cocktail menus for many restaurants. It's an energetic new spirits world where color, and well-developed, fresh, balanced flavor is key.*



It began back in the early nineties. That's when cocktail king Dale DeGroff dates the beginning of the new excitement for cocktails, back before Sex and the City. That's when he was involved in a challenge where a writer, a chef, Candace Bushnell (whose book was the basis for the HBO TV series Sex and the City) and several other people gave him the task of taking everyone in the group's least favorite spirit and least favorite liquid and coming up with a drink they liked. That's where he met Bushnell and thus began his long association with the famous TV series. The whole cocktail craze was just beginning, and then continued to evolve until that very television show introduced the Cosmopolitan to the masses, a drink DeGroff claims he did not invent, but improved, and it's his recipe for the Cosmo that made its appearance on the show. (He was the consultant for subsequent cocktails used on the show.) You could say, the rest is history, except that like any trend, the new cocktail excitement has continued to evolve.

### THE NEW COCKTAILIERS

Enter the newest coming-of-drinking age generation, called the Millennials or Generation Y (see Cheers story, April 2004) aged 21 to 25. They are the hip-hop crowd and they want it flavorful, colorful, high energy, a little on the sweet side, with fun monikers. They were brought up on sweet beverages and soda, and on caffeine. It's no wonder then that provocatively-named shots and shooters, and colorful Martinis made with flavored vodkas and sweet syrups are all the rage with them. It also explains the interest in highly-caffeinated Red Bull mixed with vodka. Will Jacobus, director of beverage operations at Dave & Buster's says his company's sales for Red Bull went up a whopping 370% last year. And then there are the odd concoctions such as Hpnotiq (premium French vodka mixed with Cognac and tropical fruit juices) and Hennessy that was invented to appeal to men who thought the blue color of Hpnotiq alone was too girly (the color is green and it's called the Hulk).



But that's only part of the story. There has also been an emerging interest in all things Latin due in part to our expanding Hispanic population and in other exotic ethnic cuisines. Americans today are also sophisticated about food and drink and they want it fresh. "It's the kind of society we live in today. People know a lot about flavors and they want something new all the time," says Paul Tanguay, corporate beverage director for Sushisamba, a Latin-Japanese restaurant company with units in New York, Chicago and Miami. Sushisamba, in fact, is a perfect example of what's happening in that it's a melding of Brazilian, Peruvian and Japanese cuisine, music and design (a reflection of what really happened in Brazil with the emigration of Japanese in the early 20th century).

It all comes back to why the cocktail culture is so historically uniquely American. As DeGroff says, "The cocktail is an American invention. It's perfect for our country which is a composite of many people, just like cocktails are a mixture of wine, liquors and flavors, all in one glass." The new cocktails today, however, have a cleaner finish, are fresher and less sweet.

### AIMING FOR NEW, ADD-ON SALES

"Cocktails have a number of purposes. They get people to drink, number one, but they also advertise the restaurant. Most people have a cocktail before they eat any food. So, the more unique you can be, the more you can say about the cuisine of the restaurant in advance, the more you get your customers to appreciate your restaurant in general," says Eben Klemm, director of cocktail development for BR Guest Restaurants, New York.

There is a lot more effort in today's restaurants to meld the flavor of cocktails with the cuisine of the restaurant, and even with its decor and ambience. So, for example, Klemm developed three cocktails for the James Hotel, Scottsdale, AZ that reflected the three major colors that the hotel and restaurant were using--light blue, bright pastel green and lavender. The drinks are: a light green cocktail with candied blue frosting garnish that with light refraction turns light blue; a special Mojito made with a mint-flavored foam that comes out a bright, intense, minty green color; and a stone fruit swing made with peach, rum and cherry that has a lavender hue.



Klemm makes sure to work closely with the chefs when developing cocktails for a restaurant. For BR Guest Restaurant's Dos Caminos in New York, he came up with creative brightly colored Margaritas that matched both the decor and the cuisine including a prickly pear-strawberry Margarita, passion fruit Margarita and guava cranberry Margarita.

Sushisamba offers an array of drinks that reflect the Latin-Japanese theme using both tropical fruit flavors and South American spirits (cachaça, pisco) and Japanese liquors (shochu and sake). The result is cocktails like the Mora Negra (rum with muddled blackberry, sugar, fresh lime and mango juice), Honeyed Shochu Chu-tini (shochu with a dash of honey) and the Capairinha (lime juice, sugar and cachaça).



### Mint, San Francisco, CA

Many restaurants keep patrons interested by continually changing the cocktail menu. Sammi Scott, bar manager at Sonoma County's Mixx, Santa Rosa, CA, brings out a new list once a month. The entire staff is involved in the tasting and decision process, including the culinary staff. "I come up with the ideas and the staff does the testing and what everyone likes, we put on the menu. Even some of the waitstaff who don't drink are part of the process so they can answer customers' questions about what's in a drink," she says. "People these days are good consumers. They pay a lot for a cocktail so they want something made properly with a healthy balance between alcohol and flavor."

Lucy Brennan, owner of Mint and 820 North (located next door), created 40 custom cocktails for the 820 North lounge. She changes the bar menu seasonally, but has some staples such as her Avocado Daiquiri and a cilantro-laced Ad Lib. Seasonal drinks include a Rhubarb Cooler made with a hand-made rhubarb simple

syrup and gin and Absolut Mission (Ruby port, fig puree, lemon-lime juice and Absolut Vanilia). She recently started sharing her knowledge teaching cocktail classes one Sunday a month at 820 where groups of 8 to 10 participants learn how to make three unique cocktails, a perfect sugar rim, how to pour and measure and what Brennan's key cocktail ingredients are, while nibbling on appetizers.

The cocktail menu is becoming as important as the food menu. Mixologists are just starting to consider that their profession can be serious, as serious as being a chef with their own requisite set of tools, just as a chef has a tool kit. Taking the cocktail menu seriously means figuring out what purpose the cocktail holds in the context of the restaurant. "When I was at the Rainbow Room, a lot of people asked me what to drink. No one had a clue. When I go to a bar, I go there because I like the bartender, not the bar," says DeGross.

People want bartenders to help them make selections, educate and excite them with new flavors. Bartender knowledge as well as the cocktail menus are starting to reflect more depth of understanding of how flavors work, and what cocktails belong at what part of the meal. "Pre-dinner drinks should be on the dry side. If you are going to have a canape, for example, you have to have a dry cocktail that matches the salty, creamy nature of the appetizer. You should not be having a chocolate Martini prior to dinner. It's a matter of education," adds DeGross. His biggest criticism of many of the popular Martini menus today is that they are too sweet. When he teaches mixology classes, he focuses on the sour drinks and how to make them properly, and that means with fresh juices.



"Even the chains need to experiment with how they can install a fresh juice program in the bar. It makes a difference. How can you justify serving fresh, seasonal fruits and vegetables on the menu and then using the green stuff that comes out of a tap to make a Margarita," he says. "The way I approach developing new cocktails is to take something classic or historical and use it as a beginning. I'll go back into the 19th century to see if there are applications of a particular beverage. I'm a missionary of fresh, fresh, fresh. It's a waste of time to not use the fresh fruit and fresh juices today."

*Lucy Brennan has just opened an addition to her popular Portland, Oregon restaurant Mint, called 820 North, a cocktail lounge with a "more rambunctious and playful" atmosphere than neighboring Mint. Her cocktails reflect her innovative use of purees, herbs, vegetables and fruits, brightly colored and intensely flavored cocktails.*



### **820 NORTH COCKTAIL MENU**

All drinks \$4.00

*Rhubarb Cooler (cooler made with rhubarb syrup)  
Violet (one-of-a-kind boutique Martini)  
Mr. "820" (house gin Martini)  
Avocado Daiquiri  
Spanish Armada (coffee Martini)  
IVO (vanilla rum Lemon Drop)  
Vermont (Grey Goose Martini with a rinse of maple syrup)  
OHouse mojito  
Absolut Mission  
House Pisco Sour  
Tribeca (house Manhattan)  
Hot & Sour (house Whiskey Sour)  
Love on the Rocks (house Seabreeze)  
Blue Margarita (Margarita with parfait amour)  
Sweet Love (banana split coffee drink)  
Hazel (coffee rum Martini)  
Ruby (beet Martini)  
Mission (fig puree Martini)*

San Francisco's Sno-Drift was designed to appeal to the twenty-something and early thirty-something crowd. Built like a ski lodge circa 1960s, complete with wrap-around fireplace and fake snow and LED lighting, it's a complete retro look that "the guys don't usually get, but the women do right away," says owner John Russell. To drink, Sno-Cones made with flaked ice, spiked with flavored vodka and Torani syrup, in

addition to a number of other theme-appropriate cocktails.

**SNO-CONE** Flavored Stoli and Torani syrups in orange, lemon lime, raspberry or vanilla

**ESKIMO KISS** Creme de menthe, creme de cacao, Kahlua and cream

**SNO-BUNNY** Stoli Raspberry, cranberry juice and fresh lime shaken, served up

**DEER DROPS** Bambi's special recipe Godiva and cream with three coffee beans resting in a field of snow

**ANTIFREEZE** Vodka, Midori, triple sec, sweet and sour, pineapple juice

**CREAMSICLE** Stoli Vanil, Malibu, orange juice and cream

**CHILLY WILLY** Maker's Mark, sweet vermouth and bitters served with a cherry and a kiss of citrus

**THE KLONDIKE** A vanilla-choco Martini made with Stoli Vanil, white creme de cacao, shaken and served in a sugar-rimmed glass

**CHAIRLIFT** Hennessy, Cointreau, fresh lemon in a sugar rimmed glass

## COCKTAIL STRATEGIES FOR RESTAURANT SEGMENTS

### WHITE TABLECLOTH

- Change cocktail menus monthly or seasonally
- Work with the kitchen to come up with new flavors
- Develop cocktail menus that reflect the cuisine of the restaurant
- Develop pre-dinner cocktail menus that are drier, more savory and based on aperitifs
- Use fresh juices, premium fruit purées
- Involve staff in tastings

### CASUAL DINING

- Develop drink menus which can be served both with and without alcohol
- Use premium ingredients including freshly squeezed citrus juices
- Offer a drink of the month at a special price
- Use table tents and menu tip-ins to advertise cocktail specials
- Let patrons pick and choose their flavors by listing an array of juices and flavored syrups from which to choose

### CLUBS & BARS

- Go wild with color, flavor and garnish
- Offer a bartender's choice each night
- Hold internal contests where bartenders come up with new cocktails
- Use interesting glassware
- Make sure cocktails and decor match the livelier the decor, the wilder the cocktail

## HOTTEST COCKTAIL TRENDS

- not-so-sweet cocktails, but still using fresh fruit juices and fruit purées
- vibrant color resulting from natural products
- garnish that is lively and creative but matches the cocktail
- menus that constantly change, either monthly or seasonally or both
- listing of all ingredients to satisfy patrons' "thirst" for knowledge
- cocktails that reflect ethnic melting pots; Latin and Asian cocktails hottest
- revival of the classic cocktail, but it's cleaner, fresher, and less sweet than in recent years
- everything served in a Martini glass
- the more creative, the better, both in flavor combination and name
- the cocktail as the appetizer
- bar design that matches the cocktails and visa versa

## HOTTEST FLAVORS

*Pomegranate (both puree and juice, and juice combinations)*

*Cranberry (both red and white cranberry, in juice and puree form)*

*Prickly pear*

*All things citrus, especially lemon, lime and grapefruit (fresh squeezed is best)*

*Herbal infusions, muddles and crushes (rosemary, cilantro, thyme, basil, lemongrass, hibiscus, sage, kaffir lime leaves, mint)*

*Muddled fruits*

*Herbal and regular tea infusions mixed with vodka or rum*

*Toasted nuts (almond, pecan, hazelnut)*

*Vanilla*

*Ginger*

*Nutmeg*

*Clove*

*Star anise*

## **POPULAR LIQUORS**

*Flavored vodkas (especially vanilla and lemon, but also mandarin and raspberry)*

*Flavored rums, gin, tequila, cachaça, pisco shochu (soju), saké, Hpnotiq*

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