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Beverages: Spice Up Drink Menus with Latin Libations

Latin exports from batidas to micheladas offer easy routes to pour more-exotic flavors.

Allison Perlik, Senior Editor -- Restaurants and Institutions, 2/20/2009 12:18:00 PM

Now that Americans are accustomed to sipping mojitos and caipirinhas, the next wave of Latin drink exports is ready to wash up on mainstream beverage menus. Cool, fruity recipes such as batidas, horchatas and aguas frescas offer distinctive options either in non-alcoholic forms or in fun variations spiked with spirits. Meanwhile, micheladas open the door for all kinds of zesty, beer-based refreshments.

"The Latin flavor profile in the cocktail segment is huge right now," says Tad Carducci, principal at New York City-based beverage consultancy **The Tippling Bros.**, which has worked with restaurant clients including **Asia de Cuba** in New York City and Huntington Beach, Calif.-based **BJ's Restaurants**.

For a recent client, New York City's **Mercadito** restaurants, Carducci and partner Paul Tanguay created a beverage lineup that includes an horchata-based cocktail and a whole selection of creative spins on micheladas. Mercadito's micheladas

"The michelada and all its different variations is a really, great refreshing drink. There are very few people I've come across who aren't a fan of a cold beer, and the combination of spicy and salty and citrusy really helps make it that much more refreshing," Carducci says.

While these drinks have yet to crack many restaurant and bar menus beyond Latin-themed concepts, Carducci sees plenty of potential. "They kind of represent this island-lifestyle ideal that I think lots of us appreciate, especially this time of year and especially in this kind of economic climate we're in," he says. "Everybody need a little bit of an escape."

Start with the following primer to get down the basics, then check out the **restaurant-ready recipes** below.

- Batida**: Like the better-known caipirinha, these fruity, milkshake-like drinks also star cachaça (the Brazilian spirit distilled from sugar cane), blended with fresh fruit juice (or fruit purée) and ice. Common additions include sugar, sweetened condensed milk and/or coconut milk.

- Horchata**: These creamy, milky-looking drinks, which originally hail from Spain but is popular throughout Latin American, actually don't traditionally contain milk at all. Instead, they're made by steeping nuts, grains (such as rice) and chufa ("nuts" that are actually the tiny roots of an African plant) in water. Typically served cold or at room temperature, they are sweetened with sugar and often spiced with cinnamon.

- Michelada**: These Mexican beer "cocktails" often pack a little heat. They feature a changing lineup of ingredients but always begin with beer, lime and salt and often are spiked with hot sauce, Worcestershire, Maggi seasoning and/or soy sauce. In some variations, tomato juice and clam juice are mixed in as well.

- Agua Fresca**: The lightest and perhaps most-refreshing of these Latin imports, agua frescas typically contain just water mixed with puréed (or simply mashed) fresh fruit and a little sugar. Herbs or flowers sometimes are stirred in as well. Unlike smoothies, ice is not a standard component, nor are the water and fruit typically blended all together.

Recipes:

Watermelon-Basil Agua Fresca

Brazilian Batida

Horchatini

Banana Batida

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