

COCKTAIL CHIC

'Bar chefs' revitalize cocktails with fresh, seasonal ingredients

[Laura Compton, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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Walk into almost any hip San Francisco restaurant and the menu you're handed will likely describe mouthwatering concoctions that use fresh herbs, organic fruit and other top-notch ingredients.

But it's not the regular menu -- it's the specialty cocktail menu.

Although signature cocktails are being whipped up in other big cities like New York and Los Angeles, the Bay Area's gastronomic culture has inspired bartenders to raise the bar and take their cues from the kitchen.

Bartenders are becoming known as "bar chefs" as they search out organic ingredients, visit farmers' markets, source artisanal spirits, and size up the competition in other cities.

"I'm willing to go out on a limb and say San Francisco is the best cocktail city in the nation," says Duggan McDonnell, self-described "spirits savant" at Frisson, a stylish Financial District lounge-restaurant.

We're talking serious cocktails, not mixed drinks meant to be pounded down during happy hour. For \$8 to \$10, you get a hand-shaken concoction of top-shelf liquor, fresh juices, housemade syrups and unusual ingredients that might include lychee, saffron, Sriracha hot sauce, huckleberries, rhubarb, cucumber, prickly pear, lemongrass and obscure oils like litsea cubeba.

McDonnell believes the Bay Area's proximity to Wine Country, its availability of fresh ingredients, and its emphases on tourism, hospitality and international cuisine have fostered a population that cares deeply about food and wine -- whether they're consumers, producers or servers.

Presentation, quality and creativity are just as important to bartenders as chefs, he says.

"They treat their cocktails like dishes -- they have to be both beautiful and balanced," says McDonnell, who was recently named San Francisco's Rising Star Bar Chef by StarChefs.com, a restaurant industry Web site.

On a Friday night at the Last Supper Club, a casual Italian restaurant in San Francisco's Mission District, Jennifer Lilla, 30, and Bryony Wiseman, 33, enjoyed a few cocktails as they waited for their dinners to arrive.

"I'm all about specialty cocktails," Lilla proclaimed, laughing, as she sipped a "really nice" Stella Bianco, a modified Cosmopolitan using white cranberry juice, Skyy vodka, the Italian sparkling wine Prosecco and fresh raspberries.

"With wine, you want it to pair. That's the nice thing about specialty cocktails -- you don't have to match it with the food," Lilla said. "It makes a lot of sense to enjoy (cocktails) out."

Signature cocktails have made a believer of Camper English, who has covered San Francisco's nightlife for a variety of publications. English is a fan of cheap drinks, as covered in his book, "Party Like a Rock Star: Even When You're Poor as Dirt" (Alyson Publications, 2005). Lately, he has been hooked on the "fantastic specialty gin cocktails" at Range, a new Mission District restaurant.

"I think most everybody is tempted by a cocktails menu when they see combinations they haven't tried before or ingredients that are brand-new to them," he says. "You're paying for the originality of the drink. If you're out at a restaurant and presented with something fancier, you're going to order that."



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The bars at restaurants like Town Hall and Slanted Door are knee-deep in buzzing crowds, while the dining areas are more sedate. But people aren't necessarily ordering less wine -- glasses and bottles of it still crowd most tables.

"I find that more and more, people will have a cocktail before dinner," says Thad Vogler, the bar manager at the Slanted Door, who also created the cocktail list for Coco500. "When it's a good cocktail, they'll have another."

The under-40 set is more likely to order specialty cocktails, says Range co-owner Cameron West, with the older generation going for Scotch or Martinis.

At the Slow Club, a hipster restaurant on Potrero Hill where the bar is a focal point, diners order plenty of Blood Orange Cosmopolitans and other drinks based on seasonal ingredients with their meals. A bartender says the scent of muddled mint usually prompts a run on Mojitos.

The cocktail trend has been fueled by the flow of flavored vodka into the marketplace since the 1990s, which led to drinks like the Green Apple Martini.

"The proliferation of the cocktail menu, along with so many of life's problems, can be placed on the Appletini," quips English, the nightlife chronicler. "People heard about the Appletini, and suddenly every bar wanted their own custom Martini."

Vodka, much of it flavored, accounts for 27 percent of spirits sales, followed by rum at 12 percent, according to Shawn Kelley, spokeswoman for the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States.

Classic cocktails such as Manhattans, Martinis and Sidecars are on the rise at white-tablecloth restaurants in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago and New York, she says, adding, "People are taking the classics and being more creative with them with their own twist -- maybe fresh fruit or seasonal herbs."

New York's "King of Cocktails," Dale DeGroff, is frequently credited with reviving upscale specialty cocktails when he reopened New York's Rainbow Room in 2003. He credits his "boss, friend and mentor" Joe Baum with giving him "the laboratory to work out the techniques and recipes that I would use later in the Rainbow Room" -- namely, no mixes and only fresh juices.

Before that, as head bartender from 1987-'99, he remembers "the cocktail was at a low ebb in popularity. Cocktail menus in those years were almost impossible to find."

DeGroff, who has invented some 400 cocktails, is now a columnist, teacher and cocktail consultant.

"I have taught a generation of young bartenders, and with each group, I emphasize the importance of approaching a bar the way a chef approaches his kitchen," he said via e-mail.

The Slanted Door's Vogler says, "Cocktails, like food, are about ingredients."

The list he developed for the Slanted Door took its cues from chef Charles Phan's philosophy of cooking traditional recipes with fresh ingredients.

Freshly squeezed lime, a staple of Vietnamese cooking, inspired Vogler to create the Ginger Kaffir Limeade, using Hangar One Kaffir Lime Vodka -- made in Alameda -- ginger and lime juice. The drink is the restaurant's best seller, particularly in summer.

Yet Vogler is not convinced that innovation is the key to success. The best bartenders, he says, are "the people who honor the tradition of what's been done before, or at least try to."

He acknowledges that froufrou drinks like the Cosmopolitan and Lemon Drop (invented here at Henry Africa's in the 1970s) seem to be here to stay. The challenge, he says, is making better, more palatable versions that don't mask the true flavors.

The Slanted Door's version of the Lemon Drop, Buddhadrop, uses Hangar One Buddha's Hand Citron Vodka, which takes its name and flavor from the long, finger-like citrus, Buddha's hand; limoncello; fresh-squeezed lemon juice; and organic raw sugar.

Absinthe, a Hayes Valley brasserie known for its extensive bar, makes its own syrups to go into drinks. For the Sangre de Fresa, a tall drink of cachaca, muddled strawberries and basil, the bar staff whips up balsamic syrup in the kitchen, cooking it in big batches and reducing it until it forms a sweet, acidic base.

"It has a beautiful reddish blood hue to it," says assistant manager Jeff Hollinger, the former bar manager who still "jumps back behind the bar" now and then. "It came out just gorgeous looking."

Range bartender Venegas visits the farmers' market every morning looking for inspiration for the daily cocktails Range offers in addition to its set list. For most of August, it was Range Cider -- fresh-pressed apple juice with silver tequila.

"You've got to think outside the box, but use the flavors you know," he says. Range's Fickle Fox uses No. 209 gin and huckleberries, but once huckleberries are gone, he'll find another seasonal fruit to take its place.

Frisson, which opened in 2004, has worked to create memorable cocktails. Return diners ask for "that cucumber drink" (the Fountain of Youth). Hand-shaken speciality cocktails account for about three-fourths of all bar sales, bar manager McDonnell says.

"We sell a lot more spirits than wine," he says.

Case in point: the Pomegranate Manhattan, which uses Maker's Mark bourbon. "We go through almost a case a week of Maker's Mark, which for a restaurant that is not a steakhouse, is a lot," McDonnell says.

The increasing importance of cocktails to the dining experience also informs Coco500, veteran restaurateur Loretta Keller's new, upscale small-plates restaurant that replaced Bizou on the corner of Fourth and Brannan this summer.

"Bizou was a place where people had wine," Vogler says. But the younger loft-dwelling crowd moving into the burgeoning neighborhood didn't eat there or think of it as a place to hang out. That has changed with the revamped space, with a prominent bar integrated into the cozy restaurant.

"It's an urban experience to dine at the bar as well as drink, as the bar becomes more part of the restaurant," he says.

The list Vogler developed for Coco500, like the Slanted Door's, focuses on classic cocktails with slight twists and organic ingredients. The house cocktail, the Coco500, features Hangar One Kaffir Lime vodka, fresh lime juice and Thai basil.

"Both restaurants' chefs are interested in having the bar be an extension of the restaurant," Vogler says.

The relationship is even closer at Aziza, a Moroccan restaurant in the Richmond District.

"All the flavors, all the vegetables, all the spices -- everything on this list is compatible with everything that's on the menu," says manager Farnoush Deylamian, who created the list after working closely with chef Mourad Lahlou, taking mixology classes and "reading a lot of books."

"They sound all exotic and everything, but when you drink them, they're really good. They sound great on paper, and they taste really incredible," Deylamian says.

As the sound of bartenders muddling emanated from the intimate restaurant's bar last week, patrons raved about the Balsamic Morocco Mary -- harissa, spicy organic tomato juice, lime juice, Hangar One Straight Vodka and aged balsamic vinegar -- and the stiff but fragrant Tarragon-Cardamom Caipirinha.

"I try to create drinks that are perfectly balanced -- not overly sweet, overly bitter or overly sour -- but still try to use savory ingredients," Deylamian says.

Deylamian estimates that 90 percent of the restaurant's patrons have at least one cocktail. The bar's revenue has nearly tripled in the last year, and the staff at the seven-seat bar has increased from one to three.

San Francisco restaurants aren't the only ones to see the potential in signature cocktails. El Dorado Kitchen, which opened in June in Sonoma, is trying to stand out in the valley of wine-centric dining.

"For this particular location, people come here and it's really about wine," manager David Gray says. "Conceptually, the restaurant would like to become more branded for these really interesting cocktails.

"We're focusing more on the botanicals as opposed to more the fruit-driven infusions."

The Cucumber and Thyme, with Magellan gin and fresh lime juice, "embodies that kind of spa/resort feeling" and fits the restaurant's patio dining, he says.

The most popular drink, however, is the Peach Jalapeno, a takeoff on the Cosmopolitan featuring Absolut peach vodka, white cranberry juice, lime juice and sliced jalapeno peppers.

Signature cocktails require skilled bartenders. Staffs range from a few bartenders to as many as 25 at the Slanted Door. Aziza's Deylamian estimates that "90 percent of what's done at the bar is muddling."

"When you have a commitment to all these drinks, it definitely has an impact on your bar staff," Gray says. "It takes a long time to hand-shake these drinks. Each container has to be rinsed out; fruit and herb garnishes need to be kept fresh and cool."

Given the labor involved, they're a bargain for \$8, he says. Most San Francisco restaurants charge between \$9 and \$10.

Vogler believes higher-quality ingredients are essential even if they cost the bar more. "If you make a really great cocktail -- Mojito, Sidecar -- a drink you have all around town," and do it better than anywhere else, "more often than not, because it's a great drink, you'll sell a second."

Pairing cocktails with food

Some cuisines are tailor-made for cocktails: Latin American, for instance. Tequila's flavors, particularly when not drowned in sugary fruit mixes, are food-friendly. Margaritas are the nation's No. 1 cocktail, according to the National Spirits Council. That's why every bar has a version: Seasonal variations include pomegranate, watermelon, mango and strawberry. They pair with Mexican and Spanish food and other boldly flavored dishes.

Dominic Venegas serves Herradura Silver Tequila with orange bitters, which "looks intimidating, but is very drinkable," he says, and can lead into dinner.

"People are drinking more cocktails, and yes, they do go with food," says Frisson bartender Duggan McDonnell. "We try to get people to appreciate the strong or sharp or sweet nose of a cocktail. Aroma is just as important as taste."

He suggests pairing the Fountain of Youth, a kaffir-lime vodka and Cointreau drink, with the restaurant's yellowtail tuna tartare because both come with cucumber-honeydew puree. McDonnell says the Pomegranate Manhattan pairs well with red meat.

To match with Vietnamese or Asian food, look for acidic cocktails not too high in alcohol, says Slanted Door bar manager Thad Vogler.

-- Laura Compton

Where to sip specialty cocktails

Absinthe Brasserie & Bar: 398 Hayes St. (at Gough), S.F.; (415) 551-1590.

-- Drink to try: Ginger Rogers.

Aziza: 5800 Geary Blvd. (at 22nd Ave.), S.F.; (415) 752-2222.

-- Drink to try: Meyer Lemon Basil Drop.

Coco500: 500 Brannan St. (at Fourth), S.F.; (415) 543-2222.

-- Drink to try: Tamarindo.

El Dorado Kitchen: 405 First St. W. (at West Spain), Sonoma; (707) 996-3030.

-- Drink to try: Peach Jalapeno.

Frisson: 244 Jackson St. (at Battery), S.F.; (415) 956-3004.

-- Drink to try: Le Long Frisson.

Jack Falstaff: 598 Second St. (at Brannan), S.F.; (415) 836-9239.

-- Drink to try: Lychee & Kombucha.

The Last Supper Club: 1199 Valencia St. (at 23rd St.), S.F.; (415) 695-1199.

-- Drink to try: Limoncello Cooler.

Range: 842 Valencia St. (at 19th Street), S.F.; (415) 282-8283.

-- Drink to try: Fickle Fox.

Slanted Door: 1 Ferry Building, No. 3, S.F.; (415) 861-8032.

-- Drink to try: French 75.

Slow Club: 2501 Mariposa St. (at Hampshire), S.F.; (415) 241-9390.

-- Drink to try: Blood Orange Cosmopolitan.

Town Hall: 342 Howard St. (at Fremont), S.F.; (415) 908-3900.

-- Drink to try: Town Hall Cooler or Sazerac.

-- L. C.

Temptation

Courtesy of Range restaurant.

INGREDIENTS:

1 1/2 ounces Hangar One Straight Vodka

1/2 ounce Trelleborgs Creme de Framboise de Bourgogne (raspberry liqueur)

Juice of 1 1/2 lemons

1/4 ounce brut sparkling wine

Sugar

INSTRUCTIONS:

Coat the rim of a cocktail glass with sugar. Shake the vodka, raspberry liqueur and lemon juice with ice in a mixing glass, then strain into the cocktail glass. Float the sparkling wine on top.

Pomegranate Manhattan

From head bartender Duggan McDonnell at Frisson in San Francisco.

INGREDIENTS:

2 ounces Maker's Mark bourbon

1 ounce Pomegranate Nectar (recipe below)

1/2 ounce Cynar (Italian liqueur distilled from artichokes)

3 drops Fee Brothers orange bitters

Ginger ale

Orange twist

INSTRUCTIONS:

Pour the bourbon, nectar, Cynar and bitters over ice in a mixing glass, then strain into a cocktail glass, adding a splash of ginger ale for effervescence as you pour. Garnish with an orange twist.

Pomegranate Nectar

From head bartender Duggan McDonnell at Frisson in San Francisco.

INGREDIENTS:

1 cup Carlo Pomegranate concentrate

1/2 quart Cortas Pomegranate molasses

1 quart simple syrup (equal parts sugar and water)

INSTRUCTIONS:

Pour pomegranate concentrate, pomegranate molasses and simple syrup into a container. Cap and shake to mix thoroughly. Refrigerate. Yields 1 1/2 quarts.

Note: All of the above ingredients can be found at liquor stores except the pomegranate concentrate and molasses, which can be purchased at Yum, 1750 Market St., San Francisco.

Ginger Kaffir Limeade

A cocktail from Thad Vogler at the Slanted Door restaurant.

INGREDIENTS:

Freshly squeezed juice of 1 1/2 limes + a wedge of lime for garnish

Organic sugar (see note)

3/4 ounce Ginger Syrup (recipe below)

Splash of Cointreau

2 ounce Hangar One Kaffir Lime Vodka

INSTRUCTIONS:

Run a piece of lime along the lip of a tumbler and then dip the rim into organic sugar spread on a plate.

Fill a glass with ice. Add the lime juice, ginger syrup, Cointreau and vodka. Shake well and pour the entire contents into the tumbler. Garnish with the lime wedge.

Note: Vogler prefers Wholesome Sweeteners Organic Evaporated Cane Juice, available at Whole Foods.

Ginger Syrup

From the Slanted Door restaurant. Use less ginger for a milder syrup.

INGREDIENTS:

1 1/2 cups of water

1 cup organic sugar

1 cup peeled, thinly-sliced ginger

1 tablespoon finely grated fresh ginger

INSTRUCTIONS:

Combine sugar, water and sliced ginger in a pan over medium heat. Reduce to 1 cup or until the mixture resembles a thick maple-syrup consistency. Add grated ginger to the syrup and store in an airtight container. Refrigerate.

Yields 1 cup

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