

7 - Beverages Go Bold

A thirst for adventure brings thrilling flavors and compelling narratives to the better beverage trend

By Katie Ayoub

The renaissance of craft cocktails set the scene for bold beverages. Just as diners seek artisanship on food menus, they cast their eyes to the bar, looking for those same premium qualities. That search for integrity informs the still-strong better beverage trend, and now that the scene is sketched out, bold flavors and wildly creative concoctions color it in: spicy, smoky, bitter, brazen. Indeed, the setting is perfect—sophistication of palate and sense of adventure offers a gorgeous backdrop for flavor exploration at the bar. As evidence, look to the bold and bitter Negroni. You don't have to search far anymore to find it. The Old Fashioned launched the new wave of civilized cocktail culture (thank you, "Mad Men"). The Negroni has taken the torch and turned up the flame. Considered a grown-up's cocktail, it's bracing, floral, rich, bitter. And it has thrown down the gauntlet for a new wave in bold, elegant cocktails.

"Cocktails are one of the most exciting areas of the menu," says Maeve Webster, senior director of Datassential. "They've undergone a nearly complete reinvention over the past few years, along with a reintroduction of the classic cocktails that were lost in a sea of Tequila Sunrises, Apple Sours and Cosmopolitans."

Datassential's research illustrates the trend: Some of the fastest growing flavors in cocktails include habanero, smoked, Serrano, chile, bitters, thyme and rosemary. What makes for a bold beverage? Assertive, complex and intriguing profiles.

One of the main drivers behind bold beverages—and with most of today's sustaining trends—is the demand for authenticity and seasonality. "The movement toward fresh and less processed is driving this trend," says Melissa Abbott, senior director of culinary insights at The Hartman Group. "That, along with an interest in folklore and farm-to-glass."

Authenticity at the bar is tied to product integrity. Housemade shrubs and sodas often feature seasonal produce and sparkle with craftsmanship. Single-village bottling of mezcal conveys artisanship and a sense of place. "Housemade products, like drinking vinegars, bitters and sodas, can really allow an operation to highlight their creativity and the skill of its staff, creating an experience that a patron simply can't get just anywhere," says Webster. The Culinary Edge's Eric Stangarone agrees. "Bold, unique beverage platforms create meaningful ways to address seasonality."



To accompany its impressive list of gins, Oceana offers four styles of housemade tonic waters, in bitter, sweet, spicy and citrus varieties.
PHOTO COURTESY OF PAUL JOHNSON.

Backstory plays its part, too—diners yearn for a good yarn. For example, shrubs, tinctures and bitters add menu interest and tart flavor, but they also tie the diner to the past, giving you credit for that added dimension. Classic cocktails, like the Manhattan, offer appealing narratives of time and place. Brash ingredients tell a great story, too—rebellion and the American spirit in a bottle. Absinthe. Moonshine. “Educated palates want and appreciate the ‘wow’ factor; drinks that are well balanced, verbally and visually appealing and have a story behind them,” notes

consultant Rob Corliss.

WHAT'S OUT THERE

Bold beverages are all around, but what flavoring agents will work for your operation? At Bergerac in San Francisco, Russell Davis, bar director, conjures up fantastical cocktails. As with all trends, there's a fringe element—one that inspires, but needs democratizing for both efficient high-volume bartending and mass appeal. Davis divides the cocktail menu at Bergerac into Approachable, Complex, High-Octane, Low-Octane and Social categories. “Organize your menu on how people choose a drink,” he suggests. Under Complex, customers can find Two Weeks Notice made with cachaça, Suze liqueur (delicately bitter), yuzu marmalade, lemon, salt and jalapeño tincture. Meanwhile, at the Portland Penny Diner in Portland, Ore., diners can order an Egg Cream Soda with Fernet-Branca, that bracingly bitter amaro with minty, piney overtones.

Indeed, bitter (and bitters) is well represented in this beverage trend, and consumers are embracing its mature, no-nonsense flavor. At the Bristol Lounge in the Four Seasons, Boston, the Bitter Bully is made with Bully Boy custom rum shrub (artisanal rum, botanicals), muddled orange, sugar, bitters and soda. At TBD in San Francisco, the Nogroni features Peychaud's Bitters, sweet vermouth, juniper and fino sherry. Go to The Root Restaurant & Bar in White Lake, Mich., for a Widow's Dream, a bold combination of Benedictine, Cardamaro (an amaro from Piedmont flavored with cardoon and blessed thistle), farm egg, Guernsey Farm's cream and fresh-grated nutmeg.

And then there's the bold world of shrubs and drinking vinegars. Tart, acidic, refreshing and craveable, they can be added to sodas or mixed in with booze, presenting both seasonal and artisan cues. Shrubs, rich with a tradition of preserving, are usually made with fruit juice or fruit macerated with sugar and then cooked in vinegar. “Shrubs fell out of flavor with the advent of refrigeration, much like other preservatives,” says Robert Zydick, lead bartender for Cook Hall in Dallas. “You can build a great drink around those flavors because of their depth and variety.”



In San Francisco, bold and bitter defines TBD's mature cocktail offerings like the Nogroni, with Peychaud's, sweet vermouth and juniper fino sherry.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JULIA SPEISS.

He infuses fruit with vinegar for at least a week, then lets it steep in the cooler for a few days. He then strains the liquid, removing all sediment, adds sugar and heats it until the sugar dissolves. Recent shrubs at Cook Hall include cranberry and spiced apple.

“Shrubs are unique and authentic,” says Jared Johnson, bar manager at The Proprietors Bar & Table in Nantucket, Mass. There, a riff on a rum punch, simply called #10, stars rum agricole (distilled sugarcane juice), amaro and a housemade pineapple shrub (pineapple, champagne vinegar and sugar). “It’s a great palate cleanser with a really fruity, fresh background,” he says.

Smoke is well represented in the bold beverage trend, embracing diners with its subtle, lingering flavors of wood and fire. Smoked syrups are a relatively new and easy way to add flavor. Smoked ice is another creative flavor-builder. In booze, mezcal leads the pack of smoky spirits with its baked-underground agave. The Proprietors’ #2 cocktail plays off a margarita, combining mezcal, triple sec and strawberry shrub.

At Main Street Café in Louisville, the Smokin’ Mary is made with housemade Bloody Mary mix, Old Forester Kentucky bourbon, bourbon-smoked paprika and hickory smoke. Theatrics are provided by a smoking gun, infusing the glass with smoke before adding ice. When customers

open the Mason jar, a puff of smoke greets them. “It’s more about the aroma to get you ready for the smokiness,” says executive chef Laurence Agnew. In Chicago, Big Star’s Distant Star sports mezcal, chamomile-infused Broker’s Gin, honey and lemon. “We rinse the glass with the mezcal, giving it this beautiful smoky backdrop,” says Paul Fehribach, chef-owner of Big Jones.

Spicy brings the bravado to beverages. At Tupelo Honey Café in Asheville, N.C., the Moonshine Mary kicks things up with jalapeño moonshine and a spicy Bloody Mary mix. At New York’s Oceana, the Chipotle Margarita boasts a housemade chipotle syrup, while at Porcão Farm to Grill in Miami, the Margaret P.L. features cachaça, St. Germain, housemade sour mix, passionfruit purée and Thai chile syrup.

“We see Fireball Cinnamon Whisky renewing the shot occasion with Millennial males,” says Donna Hood Crecca, senior director of Technomic’s Adult Beverage Resource Group. “We also see margaritas and other cocktails with heat from chipotle, habanero and other fiery ingredients appealing to consumers.”



Atlanta’s Smoke Ring offers a bold sense of place in its Boiled Peanut Martini, with vodka, juice from housemade boiled peanuts and a spicy Cajun rim. PHOTO COURTESY OF NATIONAL PEANUT BOARD.

VENTURING INTO BOLD

Diners demand premium options, but they want value, too. That's obviously a tall order, and a conundrum that operators face every day. "Value-added drink platforms are an excellent way to drive check average and to portray expertise, without huge capital expenses and operational changes," says Stangarone. It's unrealistic to presume a brigade of bartenders can concoct tinctures, shrubs and bitters—so pick and choose what you can incorporate to leverage this trend, and seek out support from the many beverage and ingredient suppliers standing by to assist.

"Chain restaurants are notoriously cautious about adding new ingredients to the SKU list," says Jack Robertiello, beverage writer and consultant. "But contemporary customers have shown time and again that they want strong, assertive and interesting flavors in their drinks—mezcal laced into a margarita, amaro added to the Manhattan. Even chiles or intense spices like

ginger and star anise can easily take a simple drink into the realm of offering something old and new."

Of course, this trend applies strongly to alcohol-free menus as well, as proven by the many maturing profiles showing up in housemade soda and refresher offerings. With or without alcohol, it's wise to proceed with caution here, extending your brand without losing your base. "Focus on one avenue into bold. Have a rotating offering that inspires trial," says Abbott. "Housemade celery soda is not for everyone, but pineapple with cardamom bitters can have greater mass appeal." Carefully considered beverage programs can meet the demand for bold flavor adventures—one sip at a time.