



*The*  
Light  
Bright  
*Tastes of*  
SUMMER

*Seasonal fruits, herbal infusions,  
back-of-house inspiration and  
lighter spirits invigorate warm-  
weather beverage menus*

A flavorful cocktail revolution is spreading through the American restaurant scene, gathering force and altering the ways restaurant operators and customers view beverages, with and without alcohol.

In ingredients, presentation and freshness, today's beverage menus must adapt to changes of season and drinking habits. Seasonality is not just a fad, say most beverage professionals; customers expect drinks to reflect the care previously given only to marquee main courses.

In this demanding new beverage world, the key word this spring and summer is flavor.

## SOAKED IN FLAVOR

"Flavor, flavor, favor: it's the hottest thing right now. Everybody wants their drink to have great flavor," says Philip Raimondo, director of drink development and training for restaurant consultants Patrick Henry Creative Promotions in Houston.

"Flavor is all I hear," confirms Robert Plotkin, author and founder of BarMedia, a Tucson, Ariz., consulting firm specializing in beverage operations. "If a drink doesn't have loads of flavor, it just won't fly today."

But where the flavor comes from is also important.

"I'm a firm believer in the importance of fresh juices and fresh sour mix behind the bar," says Dale DeGroff, who has earned the title "America's best-known bartender" and recently founded the Museum of the American Cocktail in New Orleans.

"You can't really call your cocktail program up to par without fresh [ingredients] today."

And when it comes to warm weather, operators have found they can no longer succeed simply by stocking up on gin and tonic. Just as chefs look to the weather for cues on customer preferences, fresh produce and lighter fare, drink creators are paying more attention to how drinking habits change as the weather warms.

In general, this means fewer high-potency martinis and rich, wintry-flavored drinks like

- ▶... Why fresh herbs, fruits and vegetables have become as important to beverages as they have to food
- ▶... How syrups, purees and frozen fruits can aid Mother Nature in the quest for fresh beverage flavors
- ▶... Mojitos, coolers and limoncellos — some of today's hottest hot-weather drinks

chocolate and brandy and more thirst-quenching, refreshing beverages that can be quaffed as well as sipped. Flavor-packed drinks with a balance of sweet and sour and lots of ice come back into vogue.

This year, consumers are likely to find more beverages made with fresh seasonal fruit and fruit juices, as well as spirits lower in alcohol and lighter in taste. Gin, rum and tequila become more popular, while the so-called brown spirits of bourbon, Scotch, brandy and others take a back burner, unless they're needed for classic American drinks like the mint julep.

## QUALITY INGREDIENTS, SEASONAL SHIFTS

Also important as the weather warms are drinks made with more sophisticated mixers, like fresh lemonades, herbal infusions, high-end sparkling water, pricey sodas, iced teas and a new trend: unripe jelly juice.

"Only great products make great drinks," says Raimondo, echoing what any good chef will tell you about great food. "You can't use a substandard product, and when recipes are adjusted based on lower cost and higher revenue, that inevitably works against a drink."

The more creative the operation, the more exotic and esoteric the fruits and spirits will be, and the more likely it is the beverages will contain fresh herbs, spices and purees.

At New York City's Dylan Prime, for example, a restaurant whose beverage concept is known for its dessert cocktails called Pie-tinis, co-owner and beverage guru Michael Waterhouse keeps things fresh by featuring special seasonal cocktails he changes weekly all year long. His constantly evolving menu represents one method



## FLAVOR FORECASTS

As for what's still ahead for this year's refreshing flavors, peach, pomegranate and other flavorful fruits are on the minds of many creative drink-makers. Dylan Prime's Michael Waterhouse makes his own fresh fruit syrups in house and says he expects more restaurants to do the same with tender seasonal fruit like raspberries.

Patrick Henry Creative Promotions' Philip Raimondo thinks mangoes and passion fruit will continue to be popular ingredients, both fresh and in syrups. He also says grapefruit, especially ruby-red varieties, will make a return. Like food and beverage consultant Kathy Casey, he thinks herbs like lemon grass, or at least their flavors, will find their way into more summer drinks. Casey encourages common sense when pairing food and beverage menus; for instance, using cilantro in a cocktail for an Italian restaurant may not make as much sense as basil.

Casey also expects to see the use of prickly pear fruit to expand and agrees that there's great interest in both house-made and bottled pomegranate juices as a flavor base in all sorts of drinks. She also predicts a boom in more herb-flavored beverages, a trend she aggressively employs.

BarMedia's Robert Plotkin says operators are finding that nearly every ingredient traditionally kept in the back of the house has the potential for being showcased by creative bartenders. He thinks tall drinks made with fresh fruits and juices, as well as sangrias and mojitos in a variety of flavor incarnations, will continue to grow in customer popularity.

Lucy Brennan of Mint and 820 North Lounge thinks the popularity of the mojito has opened operators' and customers' eyes to the refreshing qualities of mint and expects to see it used more widely. She also predicts the explosion of flavored rums — with higher sugar content and great tropical associations — will infuse more warm-weather drink menus.



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guaranteed to keep things on-season and on-trend. By fine-tuning a menu so often, he can leave room for a balmy winter week or a chilly May.

"We're definitely geared to seasonal changes as the weather warms, so we might be featuring more collins-like cocktails, using lighter spirits, including things like limoncello and orangeccello," Waterhouse explains.

Summer also prompts him to reach for the gin, a great warm-weather liquor that holds its own flavor even up against pronounced tastes like citrus and tropical fruits. Waterhouse prefers gin to vodka, which he calls "the tofu of spirits" for its tendency to soak up other flavors, often losing its own. Gin's botanical notes meld better with summer fruits, especially berries, he says. Dylan Prime customers can expect drinks made with gin-fruit pairings this year, as well as various fruit sangrias that have proved popular in recent years.

By introducing new cocktails all the time, Dylan Prime encourages its bartenders to experiment with different ingredients. Waterhouse says this year the restaurant is focusing more on fresh herbs and spices and seasonal fruits.

"When blood oranges or pomegranates are in season, we go for it," he adds.

He also endorses the practice of reenergizing old-fashioned drinks — like, well, the old-fashioned. By smashing seasonal fruits instead of the traditional orange slice in the mixing glass, he creates an updated and upscale classic. The "muddling" process is a smashing method as old as the drink itself but has made a major comeback among bar culinarians who, in some cases, bring an array of custom-made muddlers with them to work, much the way chefs carry their own Sabatiers.



KIWIFRUIT DAIQUIRIS (ABOVE) AND GREY GOOSE VODKA INFUSED WITH CHIPOTLE, RED AND YELLOW PEPPER (BELOW) ARE TWO ON-TREND SUMMER DRINKS INSPIRED BY KITCHEN CROSSOVERS.



## SPIKING WITH HERBS AND SPICES

Dylan Prime is just one of many restaurants where the appearance of fresh, even local products stirs beverage creativity.

“Fresh herbs and spices, fresh fruits and juices are all playing a big part in the drinks we’re creating for our clients” says Kathy Casey, principal of the Seattle food and beverage consultancy Kathy Casey Food Studios, which provides cocktail, beverage, food, concept and menu development for such clients as Marriott hotels, Holland America cruise line and Seattle-based Restaurants Unlimited.

When it comes to spring and summer beverage inspiration, Casey, a former chef known for bringing lots of ingredients out of the kitchen and into the bar, doesn’t draw the line at fruits. She recently created a cocktail made with vanilla vodka, fresh sour mix, club soda and red pepper for a client. And she’s looking forward to the cantaloupe season so she can try her coconut rum, cantaloupe and Thai red curry syrup concoction again.

Incorporating the seasonal component in non-alcoholic beverage offerings is just as important to restaurants these days, Casey says, especially as daytime alcohol consumption and driving after drinking any alcohol at all have become hot-button issues in many communities. She recommends that operators take inspiration from the lighter cocktails of summer and substitute club soda for spirits, creating non-alcoholic adult beverages that are less sweet and have sophisticated flavor profiles.

At Sambar, also in Seattle, non-alcoholic beverages are obviously made with an adult palate in mind. Drinks include fresh rosemary lemonade; a Pear Cooler made with pears, simple syrup, cranberry juice and sparkling water; the Pomegranate Fizz, made with pomegranate juice, orange juice and sparkling water; and the Citroen, made with verjus, an unfermented, under-ripe grape juice with high acidity and tartness, plus ginger ale, cinnamon, nutmeg and a lime twist.

## MORE KITCHEN CROSSOVER

The Pacific Northwest is especially sensitive to the drinks of summer, says *Seattle* magazine food editor Cynthia Nims.

“We’re already trained by the beer-brewing culture to be aware of seasonal changes in our beverages,” says Nims. “As blonde or wheat beers or seasonal ales come out, you can mark your dining calendar by the changing beer taps.”



OPERATORS SHOULD TAKE INSPIRATION FROM SUMMER COCKTAILS TO OFFER LESS-SWEET AND SOPHISTICATED NON-ALCOHOLIC ALTERNATIVES AS WELL.

So lightening beverages with fresh seasonal fruits has made a hit with locals, she says.

“We’re seeing a lot of kitchen crossover — both menus and cocktails reflecting seasonality. This time of year, we’re waiting for the peach mojitos to start appearing.”

Further south, in Portland, Ore., Lucy Brennan, owner of Mint and 820 North Lounge, made her name with an avocado daiquiri and beet-infused vodka. But as the weather heats up, she looks to taller, more refreshing cocktails. The arrival of one of spring’s earliest crops heralds her Rhubarb Cooler, made with house-made fresh rhubarb syrup and gin. Drinks like the Hibiscus Cooler also do well as the weather warms, as do other long drinks, like collinses and lemonade-based specialties. One of Brennan’s biggest summer sellers is her Passion-Fruit Lemon Drop.

“In Portland, people are turning more and more to local purveyors, and with places like Whole Foods Market, they have a higher expectation of fresher products,” Brennan notes. This seasonal savvy helps drive cocktail creators to experiment with local specialties like the marionberry in drinks.

## KEEPING FLAVOR CONSISTENT

Being attuned to the seasons also means the consistency issue is important for Brennan’s signature Avocado Daiquiri. She says her customers would riot if she tried to take it off the menu, so she has to keep on top of purveyors and the seasonal variations in the avocado supply.

Similarly, for some operations, like Bed, with headline-grabbing spots in New York and Miami, the

internationalization of fruit and vegetable supplies means a drink like the Red Head in Bed, made with muddled strawberries, citrus vodka, lemon juice, simple syrup and sparkling Moscato wine, are year-round items. Drink creators have to be as vigilant as chefs in making adjustments based on changes in the quality of the fruit and sweetness levels throughout the year.

## HELPING MOTHER NATURE

Consistency issues are especially important for large operations or chains looking to fresh fruits for added seasonal flavor. Mangoes, for instance, have become extremely popular, not only in margaritas and daiquiris but in mojitos and other trendy manifestations. But when sourcing becomes an issue, purées are a great help.

Raimondo and others say it’s important that seasonal drink recipes and promotions match seasonal and concept food preferences. A summer promotion his company is preparing for a major national seafood chain will include a line of flavored lemonades enlivened with melon, mango, raspberry and strawberry.

David Commer, whose company, Commer Beverage Consulting, creates beverage strategies for chain restaurants, says that, unlike independent restaurants, chains face challenges that keep them from quickly introducing trendy new programs that involve new products.

“With chains, making changes is like turning a battleship, as opposed to a speed boat. Just the concept of loading up the pipeline for these companies makes it difficult.”

Since standardization is also crucial for chains, supply, recipe execution and product-consistency demands can stop newly popular beverages in their tracks.

“Mojitos may be old news for most restaurants,” notes Commer, “but some chains are just starting to put them on the menu, so the more upscale ideas take a while to get down to the operational level for them.”

Similarly, while flavored margaritas may be passé in more upscale venues, for chain operations they’re still going strong and are enhanced and kept interesting by commercial syrups.

However much the drink menu borrows from the back of the house, and whatever flavors emerge as popular favorites this year, operators can be sure that something new and unexpected will be just around the corner, waiting to join the list of beverage essentials. ☺

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### take-away tips

- ▶ **MUDDLE IT UP:** Fresh fruit muddles infuse any drink with intense flavors
- ▶ **PANTRY RAID:** Herbs, spices, avocados and beets — some of the best flavors and colors in the pantry work just as well at the bar