

FLAVOR

& THE MENU

VOLUME 12 • ISSUE 3
Spring 2011

ABOUT THE BUSINESS OF FLAVOR

Condiments

Dessert toppings

Meatballs

Tequila



Texture

Flexitarian

Salads

Fried

FLAVOR TRENDS,
STRATEGIES & SOLUTIONS
for Menu Development

Trendspotting AT THE BAR

Chain drink menus showcase fresh and fruity cocktails, “skinny” sips, craft beers and South American wines

BY JACK ROBERTIELLO

While the trends at play in cutting-edge bars and restaurants often signal what’s next on the merus of multi-unit operations, change is slow. After all, what most restaurant-goers want is mainly something refreshing, recognizable and satisfying. But when a tipping point finally is reached and a hot, new fad becomes a trend, many operators make the shift.

With trends in cocktails, lately that means more fresh ingredients; with beers, more craft selections; and with wines, the emergence of South American varieties, especially Malbec.

Most contemporary bartenders insist on making drinks exclusively with fresh ingredients — squeezed, pureed or otherwise produced in-house. It’s taken awhile, but more programs with many units see the wisdom in going fresh.

“At Kimpton, we allow the restaurants to be very individualistic,” says the chain’s master mixologist, Jacques Bezuidenhout, “but we’re very much into fresh cocktails in our program, for instance, squeezing our own lemons and limes for fresh sour.”

FRESH CHALLENGE

With 50 restaurants operating in its hotels, Kimpton operations vary, but at bars like Sable Kitchen + Bar in cocktail-centric Chicago, a menu of dozens of cocktails created with house-made bitters and cordials requires that all the lime, lemon and orange juice be fresh. Bezuidenhout notes that fresh is so common in some operations that customers are pushing for more organic ingredients, but he says price and supply considerations are a major hurdle, at least today.

Operational efficiency is also an issue as the number of fresh ingredients grows at multi-unit operations, a problem that Ryan Valentine, director of beverage and operating partner of the 30-plus Cameron Mitchell Restaurants units, has tackled by making a partnership with the culinary side.

For other operations, the modern chain classics — margaritas, martinis and mojitos — are still big, but they need occasional tweaking, according to Black Angus Steakhouse President/CEO Merry Taylor. “Our guests really resonate with new twists on the classics, something that interjects some fun into the cocktail.” Which explains such innovations as the Purple Gold Three-peat-arita; the L.A. Lakers-themed drink, offered during the NBA playoffs in the Los Angeles area, is made with a float of raspberry Chambord for color and flavor.

To mark the conversion of its lounge areas into a sports bar format called the BullsEye, Black Angus introduced other new cocktails but adhered to the beer-heavy sports concept with Mexican-style beer cocktails, one made with pineapple, jalapeño slices and lime juice, another a zesty Bloody Mary-style beer drink with seasoned tomato juice.

“We’ve had to go through an educational process for the cheladas, to let customers know what they are, but so far they have been successful,” she says.

Sweet Blackberry Texas Tea (foreground), made with muddled blackberries, sweet tea vodka and raspberry liqueur, is Black Angus Steakhouse's signature take on the Long Island Iced Tea.



CRAFT-BREW Offshoots

You never know where the next trend will emerge. Take canned beer, a packaging form generally shunned by all but the largest brewers and holding little cachet among beer snobs. Until now. Lately, a mini-movement has started within the U.S. craft beer business to sell the best brews in cans.

Among the leaders is 21st Amendment Brewery restaurant in San Francisco, which sells all its brews in cans, claiming the airtight, opaque packaging keeps the beer fresher longer and is generally better for environmental reasons.

Some beer-focused restaurants are happy to add cans to the menu, since on-premises canned beer has been limited to Pabst Blue Ribbon, the hipster's favorite. At Lot No. 3 in Seattle, cans of 21st Amendment's India Pale Ale sell well, and as brewers like Oskar Blues in Colorado take the leap into cans, more will follow. There's already an American Canned Craft Beer Festival. (Follow the can news at www.craftcans.com.)

The craft beer surge has had another interesting side-effect: the return of real root beer, or at least root beer served in frosty mugs and used in non-alcoholic refreshers like root beer floats. Lot No. 3 serves a lot of root beer, says Christene Prentice, director of liquids for owner Heavy Restaurant Group, as do the Rusty Bucket units of Cameron Mitchell Restaurants, alone and in a float, and Director of Beverage Ryan Valentine suggests that a shot of Cognac in the old-fashioned American brew would be just fine.

Beer is showing up more often as a cocktail base, as in the jalapeño Chelada that Black Angus offers in its BullsEye sports-bar concept.



BLACK ANGUS

Take-Away TIPS

JOB SHARING: House-made purees, juices, syrups and infusions can slow things down in the bar. Get the kitchen's help with these "culinary" ingredients to ensure product consistency and quick service.

LIGHTEN UP: Target the ladies in the crowd by providing low-calorie mixes for sweet bar drinks and smaller-sized glasses for the beer-drinkers among them.

DON'T BE A SNOB: You might look down your nose at PBR in a can, but the latest development from U.S. craft brewers is canned, artisan beers. The airtight, opaque containers reportedly keep brews fresh longer.

MALBEC TOPS SALES

With wine, while trends are slow, Malbec has finally emerged as a customer favorite. In the Denver Ocean Prime, Malbec is the No. 1-selling pour. Other popular varietals there (two of the top five are Pinot Noirs and the only white is a New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc) establish that this unit is unusual, says Valentine, but others also report a growing interest in the varietal.

"It's been happening for awhile now, but Malbec is really strong for us. People will ask what we have in Malbec, and as a result I've put a Malbec flight on the menu, and it outsells Cabernet," says Prentice.

Even Chilean Carmenere, perhaps due to the lower price, has proven popular lately, she says.

And Sangria, the much-maligned wine punch, has made a comeback at Cameron Mitchell and Black Angus restaurants, where they are big sellers. Black Angus sells its red sangria — made with pomegranate juice, citrus merlot and Patrón Citronge orange liqueur — year-round and is planning to introduce a white variety.

Even the return of stirred cocktail classics has trickled down to the general customer, says Bezuidenhout, and the Kimpton units have had good luck with Manhattan variants on many menus. Most surprising is the resurgence of the Negroni: "In some major markets it's become big, something I never would have expected from consumers, but they are getting into it."

In the contemporary world of instant media attention, focus on the new, the hot, the obscure and the unique ultimately drives fads to become legitimate trends that make their way onto mass-market menus. A look at chain menus shows operators are keeping up with beverage trends by offering more fresh ingredients, artisan beers and good old-fashioned cocktail classics. ☞

JACK ROBERTIELLO writes about spirits, cocktails, wine, beer and food from Brooklyn, N.Y.; applejak@earthlink.net.