

WINTER'S CHILL, STRAIGHT UP

DRINK | Seasonal cocktails feel great going down

BY SEANAN FORBES

Cocktails are more than a passing craze, and seasonality is still a sublime obsession. If you think winter's chill means you can't have current flavors in cocktails, you're in for a delectable surprise.

According to nationally renowned bartender Jim Meehan of New York's PDT, winter's cocktails are ripe for contemplation.

"At the end of the calendar year," Meehan says, "people are reflecting, getting together with people they haven't seen in a long time." They want drinks they can sit with, sharing time with friends, lingering.

How do drinks serve that? Bruce Sherman of North Pond, 2610 N. Cannon, makes cocktails that engage the senses. The seasonal restaurant's brandy apple cocktail features cider, cider reduction and Pommeau de Normandie.

Another drink has pears, star anise and crumbled gingerbread. With Sherman, you can watch seasons slowly turning in your glass.

Award-winning New York pastry chef Johnny Iuzzini, who's learning his way around professional bartending at PDT, aims to make flavors pop. His game plan includes using "any and all of the techniques and equipment used in the kitchen when creating cocktails."

In fact, cooking is integral to the mixologist's art. Michelle Peake of Otom, 951 W. Fulton, cooks pears sous-vide with rosemary and purees the result with simple syrup for a creamy, soft mouth-feel.

House-made jams have migrated into cocktail shakers. Peake's 10 Cane Mutiny blends rum with house-made orange marmalade and ginger bitters.

Peter Vestinos, head bartender at Sepia, 123 N. Jefferson, is another fan of jam. Like Peake, he plays it off something bitter. That way, Vestinos says, "You get a fun mouth-feel and that sweet preserved-fruit taste, but it finishes really clean and dry."

It's all about balance. Iuzzini's approach is to "think of the flavor profile of a cocktail much the same way as a dessert." In the kitchen, that means using complementary tastes, textures and temperatures.

For his Heirloom cocktail, Iuzzini plays anise hyssop off of muddled Concord grapes, working the counterpoint between sweet and sharp. The approach is plain in his book, *Dessert FourPlay*, out this week, but Iuzzini isn't a chef making liquid desserts in a glass; he's a chef taking decades of knowledge behind the bar.

Contrast might be the bartender's best tool. Kansas City's Ryan Maybee, one of the Midwest's hottest mixologists, uses a mist of absinthe to spark the senses.



Winter inspires mixologists to make cocktails that blend seasonal ingredients in unexpected ways. Here, vodka, pear-rosemary puree and housemade bitters combine in a drink served at Otom, 951 W. Fulton. | RICH HEIN-SUN-TIMES

Michelle Peake sprays house-made applewood-smoked bitters over a cocktail. "It's the first thing you smell," she says, and it introduces you to what you're about to drink.

Vestinos likes blood oranges and kumquats. He muddles the kumquats, breaking up the rind. "It helps in the construction of the balance of the cocktail," he says. "I like items that give me more than one dimension, one flavor component."

One flavor can have more than one dimension. At L20, 2300 N. Lincoln Park West, the same seasonal ingredients appear in all parts of the house.

Chef Laurent Gras says that the preparation might be the same ... but might not. Fruit might appear as "a consomme for the kitchen and a cream for the bar," Gras says.

This also is the season for savories and darker spirits in cocktails: rum, bourbon, rye and whiskey. Vestinos uses herbs. Peake smokes bitters. Maybee smokes liquor, puts roasted butternut squash in drinks and makes a pumpkin infusion with mulling spices. Warmth comes with sweetness, too; Vestinos uses honey syrup or agave nectar, rather than sugars.

In the cold weather, a hot cocktail holds extra comfort. Vestinos likes hot buttered rum. Jim Meehan sees so much potential in heat that he's re-vamping the bar at PDT to include a hot cocktail menu.

Here, too, you can think seasonally: hot cider works with rum, mocha with Kahlua or cognac, mulled wine with pumpkin pie spices and hot chocolate with Grand Marnier or peppermint schnapps.

But what's really hot? What's honing the cutting edge around the world? Every day, the bartenders at Virgin Atlantic's Heathrow Clubhouse serve up to a thousand customers from around the world. Seasons, hemispheres and cultures vary from person to person. Is there a common thread?

"History," according to Clubhouse mixologist Matthew Morse. People want to know the stories behind the cocktails, he says. The rage for spices is international — as is the yen for the house-made.

Jay Beavers and Chris Canatser of Kansas City's Justus Drugstore take that to an extreme. Canatser's a trained botanist, and Beavers is keen on infusions. They flavor bourbon with dates and brandy with apples and apricots. They make crabapple infusion ("It's surprisingly good," Beavers says). They have even taken to making vermouth: dry, sweet and sipping.

While there's skill in mixing drinks, the best bartenders aren't about flash and show. They do what they do with simple elegance.

You don't have to be able to juggle flaming tumblers to be a brilliant bartender. Just celebrate the season.

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