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Cool cocktails shake up long, hot summer: operators spike drink lists with fresh ideas, innovative presentations

Brooke Barrier

A muse can strike at the oddest of times or most unexpected of places--especially, it seems, in the case of cocktails. This year's summer drinks take their inspiration from a wide range of sources, including Catherine Deneuve's unfaltering grace in "Belle du Jour," the low-carb craze that's taken hold of the country and even the fluorescent-colored drinks located in the fridge at your neighborhood C-store.

But whether they're shaken, stirred, muddled or mixed, this season's specialty cocktails are putting a twist on old favorites to bring new flavors and fun presentations to the table.

"All cocktails are based on about 10 classic recipes," says Eben Klemm, director of cocktail development for New York-based B.R. Guest Restaurants, which operates 13 restaurants. "Margaritas and Cosmopolitans are basically Sidecars." A Sidecar usually features brandy; orange-flavored liqueur, such as Cointreau or Triple Sec; and lemon juice.

The majority of summer cocktails, contemporary or traditional, mix a variety of fresh fruit juices or fruit purees with various types of liquor. Sushi Samba, a Japanese-Latin fusion concept with four locations in New York, Miami and Chicago, recently started offering guests cocktails called Chutinis. These drinks contain a Japanese liquor called shochu, a distilled spirit made from barley, sweet potato, rice or sugar, says Paul Tanguay, corporate beverage director for Sushi Samba. Shochu has about twice the alcohol content of sake.

"In Japan it's called a Chuhi when you mix shochu with juice, so we played with the name," Tanguay says.

The Chutinis, which are available for \$9, come in a variety of flavors, including honey; orange; and spicy ginger, which also incorporates fresh lime and currant vodka. The biggest hit with guests is the Chu-cumber, which combines muddled cucumbers with shochu and vanilla liqueur into a "very refreshing drink," Tanguay says.

Across the board, operators are finding that their best-selling summer drinks are those that have a light, refreshing quality. For example, at Excelsior restaurant in Boston, bar manager Jason Cooper recently debuted the Strawberry Caipirofka, \$10, which is a spin-off of the Brazilian Caipirinha. A traditional Caipirinha is composed of lime, sugar and cachaca, which is a white, Brazilian rumlike alcohol made from sugar cane. According to Cooper, the Caipirofka features a whole fresh strawberry, lime wedges, fine sugar and vodka. "We muddle together the strawberry, lime and sugar and then add the vodka, shake the drink and pour it into a glass," says Cooper. "It's delicious because of its fresh fruit flavor."

Another drink that takes an old-school Latin favorite and infuses it with contemporary flavor is Excelsior's Bajito, \$12. Based on the Mojito, which contains rum, crushed ice, lime juice and fresh mint, the bajito adds fresh basil to the mix. "The basil adds an herbal quality to it," Cooper says.

"Sales of the Bajito have picked up in the summer months," he continues. "Rum is a basis for so many summery drinks, and people really respond to it. And with the Mojito being a Cuban creation, it's really a warm-weather drink."

"Cocktails are fun and festive, and people feel that way in the summertime," says Mary Mraz, manager at Gramercy Tavern, an upscale American restaurant in New York, owned by Union Square Hospitality Group.

The restaurant recently debuted a new cocktail called the Belle du Jour for \$10. Created by Barry Johnson, a bartender there, the

drink takes its name from the movie "Belle du Jour," in which Catherine Deneuve played the title role. "It's light and elegant, and Barry felt that the lavender in the drink gives it a feminine touch, which is why he named it after Deneuve," Mraz explains.

To make the drink, Johnson mixes lavender-infused simple syrup with gin and lemon juice and garnishes it with a sprig of lavender. "It tastes like fancy lemonade," Mraz says. "We started selling it in the spring, and the response has been good." Other operators have plugged into the latest diet fads--Atkins and South Beach--to find cocktail inspiration. In 2000, Loews Hotels debuted a low-carb food menu, called PC--high in protein, low in carbs--according to Beth Grant, corporate director of food and beverage.

"When the South Beach craze hit, people started coming into our restaurants and requesting alternative meals," Grant says. "But when it came to booze, people weren't as concerned and still were ordering high-carb drinks" containing sugary fruit juices and other mixers.

So Grant recently introduced the No Carbtails menu, which features low-carb cocktails, for \$7 to \$12, in a number of Loews Hotels' restaurants. The menu includes such drinks as the Green TeaNO, which contains lemon vodka, iced green tea and fresh lemon and lime juices. Another option is the Berry NOLada, a drink that blends rum, iced green tea, fresh raspberries and strawberries, lime juice, ice and a simple syrup made with artificial sweetener.

"You wouldn't think you would want green tea in your cocktail, but once you add citrus to it, it tastes really good," Grant says. "I never thought it would take off as much as it has, but the drinks are selling really well." Other operators are toning down the intensity of summer drinks with wine-based cocktails that go well beyond the standard Sangria offering. According to Klemm, B.R Guest recently debuted a series of these cocktails, for \$12, on its La Celia list at Fiamma Osteria in New York. The drinks have a base of red, white or sparkling wine and are mixed with vodka, calvados or tequila, in order to "make the contents lighter and brighter," Klemm explains.

"Drinking a cocktail can be too heavy," he adds. "This is something in which you get the alcohol, but you also get your palate ready for drinking wine with your meal."

La Celia cocktails include the Abruzzo, which contains limoncello, pomegranate and Prosecco, for \$12, and the Vitolo, which mixes calvados with an Italian red wine and seasonal fruit for \$12.

Gramercy Tavern recently introduced hibiscus Sangria, a blend of Beaujolais with hibiscus flowers, citrus fruit and a splash of soda for \$10. "It's refreshing," Mraz says. "The hibiscus adds a floral quality that tones down the wine."

Sushi Samba also has taken its Sangria offerings a step further with its newly debuted Red-Grape Sangria, \$9, which includes grapes muddled with sugar and lychee puree, lemon vodka, white wine and a splash of soda.

However, Sangria has not been a moneymaker for all operators this summer. "We've played around with Sangria," Cooper of Excelsior says, "but we couldn't get something that worked well."

Still, Excelsior does offer a spattering of sparkling-wine drinks made with Prosecco and a flavored liqueur for \$11.

"Prosecco isn't bitter like champagne can be," Cooper explains. "Its typical flavor profile includes peaches, and so it goes well with fruit flavors."

Although many operators are getting more and more creative with their seasonal drink menus, quite a few still are turning to the trusty summer fruit, the watermelon, for a crowd-pleasing cocktail.

For the summer Sushi Samba added to its menu the Melon Tequilana, \$10, in which watermelon and sugar are muddled together and then mixed with vanilla vodka, tequila, a splash of grenadine and fresh lime juice.

B.R. Guest also features watermelon drinks at many of its locations. "I try and track the seasons with drink ingredients," Klemm says. "So every one of our restaurants has a variation of a fresh watermelon cocktail."

According to Kevin Reynolds, an area director in the mid-Atlantic for Maggiano's Little Italy, a family-style concept owned by Dallas-based Brinker International, the restaurant just started offering specialty drinks this summer and is seeing great results with its Watermelon Martini, \$7.95 to \$8.95. The drink consists of watermelon liqueur, citrus vodka and triple sec and is garnished with a wedge of the fruit.

"The Watermelon Martini has been through the roof for the past month," he says Reynolds attributes the drink's success not only to its flavor but also to its appearance.

"Our glasses are bigger than the standard Martini glass," he says, "so the presentation sells it first and the value second. They are tall, powerful-looking glasses, which goes along with the grandiose style of Maggiano's."

Dwayne Chambers, vice president of marketing for Red Robin Gourmet Burgers, a 230-unit casual dinnerhouse chain based in Greenwood Village, Colo., agrees that glassware helps keep drink sales high. "We use unique glassware that reflects the fun of our brand," he said. "Our Margarita glasses are cone-shaped with confetti color around the glass, and our Daiquiris are served in tiki cups."

As to the cocktail recipes themselves, Red Robin derives inspiration from a variety of sources, including C-stores. "One of the best indicators of flavor trends is to look at what young people are drinking," Chambers says. "The most creative flavors can be found in convenience stores, where all sorts of companies mix flavors you would never think of combining."

Red Robin recently added to its menu a Prickly Pear Margarita, which mixes tequila with triple sec and prickly pear syrup. Margaritas range in price from \$3.99 to \$6.99.

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