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SHAKEN AND STIRRED

A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing

By JONATHAN MILES

JAPAN'S sake industry may want to give a big fat thank you to the New York State Liquor Authority and the city's community boards. Because of the hurdles involved in obtaining a full liquor license in Manhattan, some restaurateurs — at least, those convinced that opening without a specialty cocktail list is the equivalent of leaving one's apartment half-dressed — have turned to sake-based cocktails to fill in their menu gaps. (As a beverage brewed from rice, sake falls under the beer-and-wine license category.) While saketails — or saketinis, take your pick — have been a sushi-bar staple for years, they're now showing up in more unlikely places.

Take Mercadito Cantina, for instance, the first stop on a saketail crawl of recently opened restaurants that I took last week. The owners of this svelte taqueria on Avenue B in the East Village, where new liquor licenses are notoriously hard to come by, turned to Paul Tanguay and Tad Carducci, cocktail consultants who call themselves the Tippling Brothers. The two, Mr. Tanguay said, spent three months devising a tequila imitation by infusing a 24 percent-alcohol-content sake “with herbs, spices, peppers, vegetables, everything but the kitchen sink” designed “to trick the palate into thinking it's tequila.” They call it “tric-quila,” and, mixed with lime juice, agave nectar and orange-flower essence, it does yield a fair, if dainty, approximation of a margarita — a karaoke version of the drink.

Another improbable sake destination on my tour: Vai, an Upper West Side Italian-Mediterranean restaurant that opened, sans liquor license, in June. On the night I visited, it was packed with a well-heeled throng that looked, to my eye, like a vodka crowd: a vodka “martini” for the gentleman, a Cosmo for the lady. But sake — mixed with a Japanese fruit wine called ume blanc and lime juice, and served up — is as close as they can get. “Sake seems like vodka,” said Vincent Chirico, the chef and owner. “Flat, not much flavor.” Mr. Chirico said that while sake “doesn't have much to do with the Mediterranean concept,” he still “wanted to be able to offer the martini-style drinks.”

Sake hews closer to the concept at Boka, a Korean spot that opened last month on St. Mark's Place in the East Village. But the song remains the same: no liquor license equals saketails galore. The Spear Plum — a simple, good-natured mixture of sake, plum wine, lime juice, sugar and fresh mint — goes down as easily as one of those infused, high-end iced-teas solid in boutique delis. This

is a cocktail you could glug after a five-kilometer footrace. Moving down the list, I asked the bartender for the Ninja, a fearsome-sounding combination of sake, powdered wasabi, olives and ginger. Adamantly, she steered me away from it.

“I want you to enjoy yourself,” she said. “I’ve tried all kinds of ways of making it, but there’s just no way to make wasabi and sake taste good together.” After tacos and sake, and pizzetta and sake, it seemed I had found the outer limits.

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