

Thinking Outside the Bar:

Why a good cocktail menu

is worth more than the paper it's printed on

By Elyse Glickman

With cocktail culture front and center, the nation's best mixologists show how to make cocktails and cocktail menus greater than the sum of their parts.

Cocktails have their place in global pop culture. Sex and the City made Cosmopolitans the drink of choice for stylish women in the '90s. A generation ago, James Bond and the Rat Pack made Martinis status symbols for men about town. More recently, Hennessy, Courvoisier and Cointreau spent fortunes bringing new cocktails to the forefront while transporting decades-old cocktails into the present, thanks in part to mixologists specially hired to put a modern spin not only on the spirits, but also the recipes and the way they're presented on the event's menu. The menu itself proves that a cocktail, then as in now, is not just a thirst quencher, it's a lifestyle choice.

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COCKTAIL

These days, there are as many cocktail recipes as there are people to enjoy them. With so much information out there, a list of options has become necessary, even for customers who think they know what they'll order ahead of time. However, as some of the industry's top mixologists, including Tony Abou-Ganim, Eben Klemm, Bridget Albert, Patricia Richards, Julie Reiner and Aisha Sharpe (all of whom will be presenting at Tales of the Cocktail in New Orleans this month) reveal, cocktail menus shouldn't just outline the choices. They should define the establishments and personnel serving them.

While Carrie Bradshaw and James Bond will remain icons in the cocktail universe, a well-executed menu needs to be the real star of the show.

THE NUMBERS GAME

Though the "less is more" metaphor may be a bit overused, it rings true even among mixologists, who agree that a few well-chosen specialties make a bigger statement than an overwhelming volume that states the obvious or, worse, the uninteresting. Additionally, a smaller number of cocktails guarantees that everybody on staff will be able to readily put out a consistent product.

"Pay close attention to the concept of your space," stresses Patricia Richards, who develops cocktails for Wynn Las Vegas. "Is it a night club? A full restaurant? A local pub? A cocktail bar in a casino with no offerings except for chips and salty things? Is it casual or fine dining? What's the price point? If you're working with a higher overall price point, can you use more expensive ingredients and charge more? There are lots of things to consider."

Tony Abou-Ganim, meanwhile, says the secret to cocktail success is featuring only your most distinctive signature cocktails on what gets printed. "The reason behind this logic is to be able to execute cocktails in a timely fashion and with consistent quality," he says. "I also find that a basic Margarita or Cosmo does not necessarily need to be added to a menu, even if customers know you use fresh ingredients and hand-squeeze your juices. Don't confuse your guests with 40 drinks and make them half-assed.

Do six drinks and do every single one spot on every time ... this is what generates a buzz and gets people talking." "Except for restaurants focused on Latin and Pan Asian cuisine, where you can do a little bit more because their beverage program is more cocktail driven, eight to 10 drinks on the menu is plenty," points out Eben Klemm, director of cocktail development for B.R. Guest Restaurants, a New York City-based collection of concept restaurants. When designing a menu, he takes a holistic approach to its conceptualization, dividing it up by actual tastes – sweet, savory, citrus or fruity – instead of types of liquors. This makes it easier for servers and bartenders to target the right cocktails to the right customers every time. "I have three restaurants in different parts of Manhattan, and what people drink at one location is completely different than what people drink at another," he adds. "Even smaller geographic breakdowns like neighborhoods need to be considered as well."



Photo courtesy of Wynn Las Vegas

New York-based Aisha Sharpe, known for putting together focused menus for Manhattan's Bed, the high-profile opening menu for the Soho House and Tao's Beach Club out at The Venetian Las Vegas, advises that one should approach doing a drink menu in the same way one would approach a food menu. "Respect the theme of your restaurant," she says. "If you likened your spirits to proteins, you want a balance. Just as you would not have an all-chicken-based menu, you would not have only gin-based drinks. You could think of your home-made mixers as your side dishes or sauces."

Of course, to every rule, there are always valid exceptions, especially with venues primarily focused on cocktails. However, even when more is more, menus should be written to inspire, not overwhelm, the customer. "My places are cocktail bars, so people expect many great cocktails," says Julie Reiner, who developed a list of 20 cocktails for Flatiron Lounge and 30 for the newly opened Clover Club, both in New York. "The best way to present them is in an organized fashion, breaking them down by house signatures or types of spirits (rum, vodka, shochu, tequila, etc.)," she continues. "Menus need to be altered over time to adapt to increased volume, change of season and evolving trends, no matter what size of a venue."



Photo courtesy of Wynn Las Vegas

Keeping it Real

Even with a carefully thought-out menu, Sharpe is particularly passionate about not skimping on ingredients.

"Name one bar that doesn't get fresh lemons and limes," Sharpe challenges. "If you are already getting limes and lemons, buy a juicer and make these basic ingredients yourself. While some people have gotten used to synthetic mixers, I personally cannot drink them. When you use fresh ingredients, you'll find that the drinks will go over far better with a wider group of people. Hangovers and headaches come from the excessive sugar and chemicals." Sharpe notes it is also often cheaper to use fresh ingredients.

For example, it costs seven cents to make a cocktail with fresh lemon or citrus juice with a little simple syrup, while sour mix cocktails cost 11 cents. Although using all fresh ingredients may seem less convenient than mixes, she insists the secret to an effective menu is the prep, making sure everything you need is accessible and fresh for the bartenders, just as a chef would have it in his kitchen. "A chef can put out 500 dishes perfectly every night, so why shouldn't a mixologist be able to do the same thing?" she asks.

"When I go to Tommy's in San Francisco, it's not because they have great enchiladas, it's because they make the best Margaritas on the planet,"

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affirms Abou-Ganim. "If you cheat with shortcuts, the signature cocktail will be mediocre at best. For a few cents more or even the same price, you can go first class. It's not much harder to do it right, it's just a matter of making a commitment to take the time to do it."

To keep the bar fresh, figuratively and literally, it's ideal to offer a rotating series of seasonal cocktails with market-fresh ingredients onto drink menus, as chefs do for their food menus. Chicago-area mixologist Bridget Albert points out that a bartender or manager should spend as much time at a farmers' market as he or she does behind the bar.

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“Summer blueberries and tomatoes are wonderful and juicy,” Albert says. “Autumn apples and persimmons are great in hot ciders. Winter blood oranges and passion fruit can chase the winter blues away. The great thing about spices is that they’re available all year ‘round. Make friends with the folks at your local farmers’ market to keep posted on what’s fresh for your area and be sure to incorporate local produce on your cocktail menu. Also, take your lead from your chef,” she adds. “If the chef is using local ingredients, fruit purées or interesting garnishes, bring these items to your bar menu. Also, be aware of your demographics

and climate. If you’re from a tropical climate, frozen cocktails are very appropriate for your menu. Maybe your restaurant is in a metropolitan area, in this case, you may want to incorporate a few forgotten classic cocktails on your menu.”

DO CLASSICS ROCK, OR IS NEW “NEW” AGAIN?

Like music, different mixologists have divergent preferences, as do their customers. Still, the question of including or reintroducing old school cocktails to a trendy new mix makes for a provocative conversation. “Classics are classics

for a reason,” declares Reiner. “If they have lasted this long, then they are great recipes. My biggest thing with training bartenders is to learn the classics first and then start creating new things, and not go from zero to 60, even though it’s tempting to do so. Once a bartender has done his or her homework and learned how to make a proper Sidecar, Manhattan, Negroni and others, they’re getting the basics first. Once they master these, they then can move on to create original things.”

As Reiner sees it, it’s best to build a menu of crowd-pleasing cocktails, especially when newcomers to cocktail

it will become something that will keep customers coming back,” Sharpe says. “The goal is to become the bar customers need to go to again and again to get that cocktail.”

Abou-Ganim goes back to his theory that you should not have to state the obvious – including classics – on a menu unless there’s something about an adaptation that sets it apart. “If you must put a classic on a menu, do a lesser-known one like a Sazerac or a Harvey Wallbanger that has an interesting history, or something from the past where you can bring a modern touch into the original recipe. If you do it right, then it will become a conversation piece, where customers will ask to hear the story behind it.”

However, if a bar or restaurant’s focus is entirely on innovation and new approaches to cooking, the cocktail menu needs to follow suit, according to Klemm. “I don’t put ‘classics’ on my menu because, frankly, I do not do ‘classic restaurants,’” he says. “There’s no point in selling a cocktail with an older flavor profile, especially as the food menus are all about introducing new flavor profiles in food, and our customers are actively seeking what’s new and different. There are other restaurants focused on classics such as Manhattans and Sidecars, and those are appropriate places to make and serve them. Most old time-y drinks do not pair well with modern cooking, but newer cocktails do, as they, like the food, are about new approaches.” Richards offers other suggestions on teaching classic cocktails new tricks. “At the Wynn, we’re now recommending cocktail/appetizer pairings and cocktail/dessert pairings, as the main meal demands wine. At Parasol Up, we’ve introduced a cucumber and lavender Mojito, a classic with a fresh, seasonal twist.”

SPREADING THE WORDS

It’s easy enough to put words on a page. However, the true test of a menu’s effectiveness is how well the bar staff can bring a collection of delicious ideas to life. “The quality of your bar menu is only as good as the quality of your bartenders,” points out Klemm. “If you do not have a well-trained staff, the menu won’t live up to its promise.

As your company or venue grows bigger, it’s important that servers become as involved in selling drinks as the bartenders are in making them. We train and retrain over and over again just to keep that quality standard as high as it can be.”

Klemm believes that the most effective beverage programs hinge on how well bartenders and servers can sell the drinks. Based on his experience, he says it’s less important for servers to memorize actual recipes. It’s more important for them to have a grasp of a cocktail’s flavor profile and be able to intuit what cocktail customers would prefer based on the kinds of food they order and what drinks they normally gravitate toward. In other words, never try to serve a fruity Margarita to someone who prefers dirty Martinis.

“Always train your staff! Education is the key,” Albert stresses. “Make the training process ongoing, not just a onetime session. Include recipes with ounces, and be sure your bartenders are equipped with the proper tools to make all of your cocktails.”

Abou-Ganim and Sharpe think outside the bar when it comes to educating staff. It’s not enough for a bartender to make the drinks right. He or she should know about each cocktail’s “story” from the inside out. “I don’t just sell a customized cocktail menu to a venue,” says Sharpe. “I come in and I train the staff and provide follow up. It’s important to educate the people who will be carrying out the vision on a day-to-day basis, especially as they educate customers on what drinks are offered and what makes them special. I think of it as educating the educator.”

“Set your servers up to succeed,” asserts Abou-Ganim. “Get them involved to where they want to serve the menu, otherwise, what’s the point of having a menu? A menu is a great tool, but you also need to deliver it. The pitfall can be like a fast food menu: You see a gorgeous burger on the board, but when you order it and undo the wrapping, it in no way resembles the photo. What customers see should be exactly what they get.”

Now that you’ve read this menu of suggestions, choose wisely. Your customers will toast you for it!