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TASTE

Cocktails: Fresh approach puts new spin on some classic drinks

Continued from E-1

chefs are not just bartenders, they are chefs. They are looking at the drink as a food product and taking a chef's approach.

"A bar chef understands the principles of classic cocktails, but also knows how to use fresh ingredients to give a drink a new twist," Schmitt said. "Some of the most interesting things I've seen happen with cocktails in the '90s and '00s happened in the '80s and '90s. That's going on with beverages, as well."

The whole idea of bar chefs is to give bartenders more creative freedom. In the past, bartenders were limited to a few classic cocktails. Now, they can use fresh ingredients to create new drinks.

"When the chef was first hired, I was really into fresh ingredients and using them to give a drink a new twist," Schmitt said. "At first, it was just about using fresh ingredients to give a drink a new twist. Now, it's about using fresh ingredients to create new drinks."

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Photos by JOHN PEMBERTON

The fresh offerings at Bistro Aix include a Raspberry Long Island (from left), Chef Tom's Ginger Breeze and a Berry Gin Fizz.

Can I freshen your drink?

Forget the powdered mixes and syrups. 'Bar chefs' are creating cocktails with fruits, spices and herbs

By DAN MACDONALD
Times-Union food editor

Fresh, seasonal ingredients drive the kitchens in the best restaurants. That philosophy is making its way to the bar.

Bartenders in New York and San Francisco are replacing powdered mixes and syrupy sweet sodas with real fruit juices, squeezed fresh when the cocktail is ordered. They're infusing their own liquors with fruits, spices and herbs.

The change in drink presentation is so marked that some have coined the term "bar chef." The surly bartender's call of "Whatcha havin'?" is being replaced by the bar chef's request of "What can I prepare for you?"

Locally the trend has been building during the past 10 months at Bistro Aix in San Marco. Chef and co-owner Tom Gray became fascinated with the bar programs in upscale San Francisco restaurants and wanted to do the same in the new bar, The Onyx Room, when he expanded Bistro Aix late last year.

"I was watching the bartenders make fresh squeezed drinks. I tasted them and realized a significant difference there," Gray said. "The philosophy at Aix is that we are always trying to refresh and keep it exciting."

Aix is starting slowly. Jacksonville's nightlife scene is still in its infancy, and these upscale drinks are pricey. The Onyx Room's cocktails feature fresh squeezed juices and a variety of fruit for flavor. In destination cities, bar chefs go further by making their own ginger ale and tonic water. Aix compromises by using bottled club soda and tonic water.

Still, Gray said there is a noticeable taste difference when compared to the carbonated



Bistro Aix bartender Parker McKeller makes a fruit-influenced Long Island.

Taste the difference

Bistro Aix has a menu of mixed drinks featuring freshly squeezed ingredients. Here's what we tried.

- Berry Gin Fizz:** Very berry flavor. A bit tart. Could use a little sugar to sooth the pucker factor. The raspberry seeds accent the drink's freshness. Only a hint of gin flavor. \$8.
- Ginger Breeze:** The first taste is ginger. It really pops. Then the mint comes in to sooth any heat from the ginger. Very effervescent. Has a ginger ale taste. \$9.
- Chocolate Covered Banana Daiquiri:** The combination of two rums and the fresh banana make this a fruity and potent cocktail. The banana is the dominant flavor as the chocolate shavings serve mostly as a garnish. \$10.
- Mango Mint Long Island:** It comes in a tall glass to hold all the liquor but you won't taste

- a drop. It has a refreshing citrus flavor from the mango. The mint is rather subtle. Definitely a drink for the person lucky enough to be in the passenger seat. \$12.
- Salty Dog:** A simple variation on the vodka-grapefruit classic. Fresh juice makes this version better than most you'll have. The salty rim lends flavor to the name but isn't really necessary. \$9.
- Raspberry Long Island:** As potent as the first Long Island, but the berry gives this one a red hue and a sweet raspberry flavor. Freshly made sweet and sour makes this drink stand out from the cloying Long Island Iced Tea found at ordinary bars. \$12.

BERRY GIN FIZZ

- 2 blackberries
- 2 raspberries
- ¼ ounce lemon juice
- 1 ounce simple syrup
- 1 shot gin
- Club soda

Muddle fruit, lemon juice and simple syrup. Add wine and gin. Top with club soda. Shake and strain over ice in a glass. Add splash of club soda.
Note: Simple syrup is 1 part water to 1 part sugar. Boil until sugar has dissolved. Let cool.
Source: The Onyx Room at Bistro Aix

BANANA RUM FRAPPE

- 2 cups dried banana chips
- 4 ounces boiling water
- 2 ounces unsulfured molasses
- ¼ cup packed brown sugar
- 1 liter dark rum
- 1 large vanilla bean
- 4 tablespoons granulated sugar for rimming glass
- 4 tablespoons shredded coconut, toasted, for rimming the glass, plus more for garnish
- 1 lemon or lime wedge for rimming glass
- 16 ounces pineapple juice
- Crushed ice for serving
- Dried pineapple slices or banana chips for garnish

Prepare rum: Cut banana chips in half, place in the bottom of a large pitcher or catering jar with an air-tight lid. Add water, molasses and brown sugar. Stir well, let sit 2 minutes.
Ste in rum: Split the vanilla bean lengthwise and scrape out the seeds. Add the seeds and bean to the rum. Shake or stir vigorously to mix ingredients. Refrigerate for at least 4 hours, up to 48 hours. Strain the rum, discard the vanilla bean and banana chips.
Make cocktail: Pour sugar and coconut into a small bowl and mix thoroughly. Transfer the coconut sugar to a small glass. Run the juicy side of the lemon or lime along the outside edge of a Margarita glass — not along the inside of the rim. Holding each glass at an angle roll the outer edge of the rim in the sugar until fully coated.
Fill a pitcher with ice, add banana rum and pineapple juice, and stir briskly until pitcher is beaded with sweat and frosty. Put crushed ice in the prepared glasses. Pour the frappe over the ice, garnish with dried pineapple slices or banana chips, sprinkle with coconut and serve.
Yield: 15 5½-ounce drinks.
Note: The strained banana chips can be saved and used as a dessert topping over ice cream or cake. The banana rum can be made 4 hours ahead of time, but 48 hours is ideal.
Source: Raising the Bar by Nick Mautone (Artisan, \$27.50)

GREEN MARKET GIBSON

- 1 dozen basil leaves, rinsed
- 1 large branch rosemary
- 3 bay leaves
- 5 sprigs cilantro
- 5 sprigs parsley
- 2 ounces boiling water
- 2 ounces ice water
- 1 liter vodka
- 5½ ounces dry vermouth
- 1 cocktail onion for each cocktail

Prepare herb-infused vodka: Place the herbs in a 2-quart jar that has a tight-fitting lid. Add the boiling water, close the jar tightly and shake vigorously. Allow it to steep until herbs are bright green, about 30 minutes. Add the ice water, vodka and dry vermouth. Close the jar and shake vigorously. Allow to steep in a cool spot or in the refrigerator for three days, until the liquid turns bright green. Remove and discard the herbs.
When ready to serve, fill a cocktail shaker with ice. Pour in 3 ounces of the herb-infused vodka per drink and shake vigorously until the outside of the shaker is thoroughly beaded with sweat and extremely cold to the touch.
Strain the vodka into the cocktail glasses. Add an onion to each and serve.
Yield: 14 3-ounce drinks.
Source: Raising the Bar by Nick Mautone (Artisan, \$27.50)