

# Cheers<sup>®</sup>

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## VODKA Variables

Navigating the numerous options in  
America's most popular spirit category

The Franklin's Ghost cocktail at Boston's Island Creek Oyster Bar uses a regional white whiskey as well as local strawberry rhubarb jam.



# Indigenous Imbibing

The locavore trend spreads from the kitchen to the bar

By Kelly A. Magyarics

As restaurants increase their focus on locavore cuisine, guests at the bar are also more aware of what's in their glass—and where it's from. Operators recognize that patrons not only like to eat local, they drink that way too. So bars are reaching for local and regionally distilled spirits, as well as farm-fresh herbs, fruits and vegetables for infusions, shrubs, bitters and garnishes.

The increased availability of locally distilled spirits has been a boon for bars, says Vikram Hegde, head bartender at the 175-seat Island Creek Oyster Bar in Boston. "With local distillers all making better and better products every year, it's becoming a lot easier for cocktails programs to really get behind the local guys," he says.

Island Creek's Franklin's Ghost cocktail (\$10) mixes Bully Boy white whiskey from Boston with locally made Bonnie's Strawberry Rhubarb Jam. The 1822 drink (\$10) features house-made, rhubarb-infused vermouth and Knockabout gin from Gloucester, MA.

The Farm/Farmers Restaurant Group in Kensington, MD, also uses spirits distilled nearby in locavore libations in its two Founding Farmers farm-to-table restaurants. "People are getting more involved in the craft of distilling, and are starting to prefer small-batch spirit production that's done close to home," says chief mixologist/beverage director Jon Arroyo.

The company's proprietary Founding Farmers rye, produced at the Copper Fox Distillery in Sperryville, VA, is added to drinks like the Farmers' Smash (\$12) with muddled lemon, orange ginger syrup and bitters, and the Ward 8 (\$12), with house-made grenadine and lemon and orange juices. Bartenders also drop a shot of the rye into Raging Bitch Imperial IPA from Flying Dog Brewery in Frederick, MD, for the FF Boiler Maker (\$10). And the operator's Farmers Fishers Bakers concept on the Georgetown waterfront serves hard apple cider made in-house from apples sourced from regional orchards.

## LOCAL COLOR

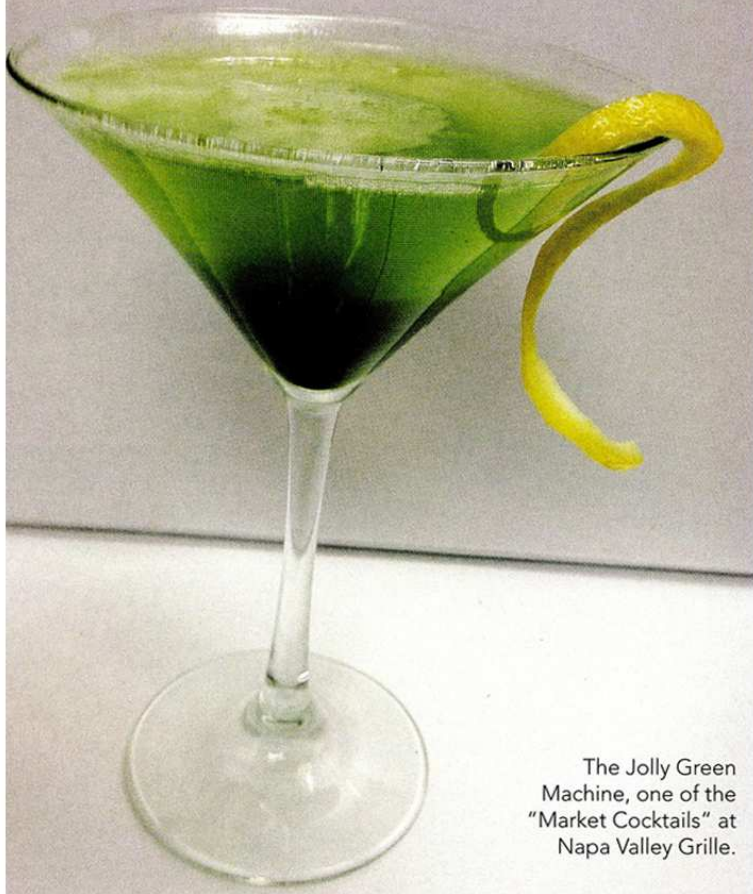
Proximity to farm-fresh ingredients drives guest expectations for local goods and ensures the quality of the final product. Amelia Sauter, co-owner of Felicia's Atomic Lounge, a 65-seat locavore-focused venue in Ithaca, NY, strives to use cocktail ingredients sourced from within 20 miles. But most of the time, she can find fresh items within a 10-mile radius.

The bar's motto is "small town; big cocktails," Sauter says, "so once people know our commitment to making locavore cocktails, the drinks sell themselves." Felicia's Sage-Riesling cocktail (\$7) muddles lemon and sage with Finger Lakes



Above, the Whiskey Smash from Baltimore, MA-based Woodberry Kitchen is made with regional ingredients. Right, Founding Farmers' Ward 8 cocktail uses the operator's proprietary rye.





The Jolly Green Machine, one of the "Market Cocktails" at Napa Valley Grille.

## The Buzz on the Rooftop

Replacing simple syrup and other sugar-based sweeteners with honey procured from local farms can be a great way for a bar to start to incorporate the locavore trend into their drinks program. Honey can be stored indefinitely; it lends a rich, earthy sweetness to drinks, and can be combined with warm water in a variety of ratios so it's easy to add to cocktails.

Founding Farmers, a Washington, D.C. farm-to-table restaurant operator, even has its own hive. "Whenever possible, we use honey from the Founding Farmers apiary, which is located on the rooftop of George Washington University's Lisner Hall," says chief mixologist/beverage director Jon Arroyo. The restaurant partners with the university, which maintains 13 hives—making it the largest restaurant-owned urban apiary in the country. Bees leave the hive and pollinate a variety of plants in a four-mile radius around the city.

Founding Farmers harvests in late August or early September—this past year the hive yielded 130 lbs. of honey. The staff uses it in cocktails like the Brown Derby (\$8), with Jim Beam Black 8-Year Bourbon and grapefruit juice, and the Yellow Jacket (\$8), with Beekeeper gin, lemon juice and Luxardo Maraschino liqueur. How sweet!

—KAM

Riesling; the Beet Down (\$6.50) mixes tequila, lime and brown sugar with a spicy syrup crafted from local beets; and the Concordian (\$7) infuses gin with local Concord grapes, topped with tonic. "People expect to see locavore cocktails on Felicia's menu, yes, because we've fed that expectation with our creativity and experimentation," Sauter says.

As with locavore cuisine, the time of year tends to drive what's available on back-bar shelves. "Seasonality dictates much of our cocktail program," says Corey Polyoka, bar director for the 152-seat Woodberry Kitchen in Baltimore, MD, a restaurant focused on the cuisine and growers of the Chesapeake. "We know what's coming in from our growers in every season, and we think about ways we can use it at the moment, and how we can use it when preserved."

Woodberry Kitchen's Ruby Sour (\$12) mixes West Virginia barrel-aged gin with organic rhubarb, apple-cider molasses, grapefruit bitters and house-made sour—all made with locally grown products. The staff cans tomatoes to use all year in the restaurant's Bloody Mary (\$10); when the tomato supply is depleted, the drink is pulled from the menu.

### FARM-FRESH FINDS

Anyone who has ever strolled the stalls of a farmers' market recognizes that much of the enjoyment lies in seeking out what looks and smells the freshest, and then taking it back to the kitchen—or bar—to experiment.

Napa Valley Grille in Westwood, CA, has a "Market Cocktails" section of its drink menu. One libation is the Jolly Green Machine (\$12), which mixes Farmer's Organic gin, St. Germain elderflower liqueur, lemonade and kale juice, topped with club soda and garnished with cucumber and lemon.

Napa Valley Grille's Emeryville, CA-based parent company Tavistock Restaurants, which runs 33 upscale concepts and 90 locations of Freebird World Burritos, doesn't have a set locavore cocktail program, says beverage director Mike Hanley. But the bar staff often uses ingredients found at farmers' markets.

"People come to our restaurants for our chefs' use of fresh, seasonal, local ingredients, and they appreciate that in a cocktail as well," Hanley says. "Any time we use local ingredients in a cocktail, it automatically makes it more popular."

The two locations of the company's California Café (in Palo Alto and Los Gatos) offer a Spiced Strawberry Margarita (\$11.25) with El Jimador tequila, Triple Sec, house-made sour, habanero simple syrup and local strawberries; the Market Vegetable Bloody Mary (\$11.25) blends roasted local vegetables.

Tavistock concepts partner with CSAs (community supported agriculture) groups, as well as with local farms, for fresh ingredients.

Carlo Splendorini, Mina Group bar director and Michael Mina San Francisco lead bartender, has witnessed the farm-to-table cocktail trend growing in the Bay Area during the past five years. At Michael Mina San Francisco, guests can recreate the experience of farmers' market shopping with the On a Whim cocktail (\$14). "The guest joins us at the bar, tells us what he or she likes, and we create a custom cocktail based exclusively on

that guest's palate—using only fresh ingredients available that day from the farms,” Splendorini says.

Michael Mina San Francisco customers can also select from a variety of on-the-menu libations with local or in-house crafted ingredients. The Siegel (\$11) includes Hakushu Japanese whiskey, yuzu juice, Angostura bitters and a house-made liqueur with Rangpur lime skins, Kaffir lime leaves, shiso and Ras el Hanout (a Moroccan spice blend). The Bushukan Folly (\$11) is all local—it mixes Hangar One Buddha's Hand vodka from California, quince purée, lemon and a habanero tincture.

The chock-full-of-vegetables brunch staple is at great way for bars to showcase local produce and spirits. At Cibolo Moon restaurant at the 1,002-room JW Marriott San Antonio Hill Country, a Bloody Mary bar stocks a plethora of local ingredients on Sundays. For \$10 per drink, guests check off their preferred mixers and add-ins from a printed menu, including Texas spirits Tito's Handmade vodka, Rebecca Creek Bourbon and Republic of Texas pico de gallo-infused tequila, as well as locally sourced vegetables and garnishes.

While the local food movement has become so pervasive that it's expected by many restaurant guests, for the most part locavore cocktails are still a nice-to-have, rather than a need-to-have offering. Instead of an overt demand from customers that bars stock specific local items, “it's more of a talking point for guests, whereas with food it can be a make-or-break requirement,” says Island Creek Oyster Bar's Hegde.

“Guests are not demanding local ingredients in their cocktails,” says Dan Hoffman, director of equipment and beverage specifications for the Bethesda, MD-based Marriott International hotel chain.

But he notes that Marriott guests “do like the element of discovery and opportunities for learning when locally produced ingredients are featured in cocktail menu descriptions and sales dialog.” And the popularity of local drinks is expanding, Hoffman says.

## LEARNING TO LOCAVORE

There are a few things you can do to make a locavore cocktail program a success. For one thing, though it may appear that only small bars have the time to craft locally focused drinks, Hoffman points out that batching these cocktails can also make them feasible at high-volume bars.

Splendorini believes that locavore punches, infusions and house-carbonated cocktails easily lend themselves to busy bars. They are simple to prepare “and can include locavore in every expression, from the base spirit, the cordial and fresh juices and products,” he says.

Having a personal connection with local purveyors is a bonus to any locavore cocktail program, operators say. Island Creek Oyster Bar often gives regional suppliers a direct mention on the drinks menu, and may even name a libation for a person with a direct association to the drink.

“The best advice I can give is to form relationships and cultivate friendships with your local purveyors, producers and farmers,” notes Founding Farmers' Arroyo. “Better relationships



The Rhubarb Martini, above, and the Sage Riesling cocktail, right, are locavore libations from Ithaca, NY-based Felicia's Atomic Lounge.



will give you more consistent access to products, and introduce you to other purveyors in the area.”

Felicia's Atomic Lounge's Sauter and co-owner Leah Houghtaling often meet with the owners of a local farm during the growing season and also when they are gathering ideas for their winter seed orders. The farm lets the bar staff know what's being harvested that week, and what's upcoming.

To keep costs down, Sauter uses seconds (bruised or “ugly”) fruits and vegetables for cocktails; when they are chopped, muddled or used in infusions, appearance doesn't matter.

Woodberry Kitchen's Polyoka advises operators to start small. “You can't wake up one day and decide ‘let's do a locavore cocktail program.’ We have learned over the last five years that it's a constant evolution.”

He suggests selecting one ingredient that can be replaced by a locally sourced item. For instance, Woodberry Kitchen began by replacing sugar with local honey, and then moved onto citrus.

Going locavore is a process, Polyoka says, “one that needs to happen in increments.”

*Kelly Magyarics is a wine and spirits writer and wine educator in the Washington, D.C. area. She can be reached through her website, [www.kellymagyarics.com](http://www.kellymagyarics.com), and on Twitter @kmagyarics.*