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Growth Brands



Sophisticated Virgins


Non-alcoholic drinks are so good, some guests like them just as well sans spirits.

By Monica Kass Rogers

In the middle of Lark Creek Restaurant Group's recent bar program overhaul, John Hulihan had a moment of clarity. "There we were, embracing a seasonal, hand-crafted-from-fresh-local-ingredients approach for our spirit-based cocktails when the thought occurred, 'We should be doing the same with our non-alcoholic offerings,'" says Hulihan, vice president of beverage and service for the 12-unit San Francisco-based restaurant company. "It just made sense. Most of the non-alcoholic beverage options out there are so pedestrian; they leave a large group of people underserved. We thought, 'Why not apply the same creativity and utilization of fresh, creative ingredients we now use with our spirited cocktails, to our non-alcoholic drinks?'"

A little more than a year later, the house-made "Zero Proof" offerings on Lark Creek's collective restaurant menus have been selling so well that the group is ramping up to offer at least three or four at every location. Hulihan points to \$3.75 to \$4.50 drinks like the Mango Nectar Spritzer, made from African Nectar Tea, mango puree from The Perfect Puree of Napa Valley and a splash of soda water; and Ginger's Island, a mix of pineapple juice, fresh lemon juice, simple syrup and Bundaberg Ginger Beer, served at MoretonFig, a Lark Creek partnership with the University of Southern California. Looking at 2010 numbers, Hulihan estimates an increase of five percent in non-alcoholic beverage sales "directly as a result of our emphasis on better non-alcoholic options like these."

And Lark Creek is not alone. Around the country, a growing number of forward-thinking restaurant and bar report that



At Boston's Island Creek drinks made without alcohol, like the Lizzie Swizzle, are named after the staff's friends.

MICHAEL PIAZZA

more sophisticated non-alcoholic drink options are worth the trouble. “Who says drinking pleasure should be limited only to those who drink alcohol?” asks Raimondo Boggia, president of BVentures USA, operator of Obika Mozzarella Bar, a Rome-based concept that now has three U.S. locations (two in Los Angeles, one NY and more on the way). “People who don’t want to drink spirits should not be limited to just tap water or a bottled soda,” says Boggia. Building its non-alcoholic drink program on the same fresh, locally sourced, seasonal platform it uses for its food, Obika offers three, \$6, spirit-free options at the top of its cocktail list: The Gingerella, a mix of lemon, pineapple, orange, grenadine and ginger ale; and the California Crisp made with lemon, lime and pomegranate juice, are favorites.

“It’s definitely a growing category,” says Tom Schlesinger-Guidelli, general manager and wine director of Boston-based Island Creek Oyster Bar, where 10 percent of guests order from the concept’s “Abstain” section of specialty non-alcoholic cocktails, which are updated every two weeks. Steve Johansson, food and beverage manager of the Mayflower Park Hotel in Seattle says he’s seen sales of non-alcoholic options increase about 10 percent in the last two years, at the 161-room property’s restaurant and bars, which include Oliver’s, Andalusia and Suite 410. “There is a shift in awareness of eating and drinking more healthfully, whether it is fresh ingredient’s in cocktails or ‘grown locally’ for menu items in restaurants,” says Johansson. “With our average consumer being more educated and conscious about health and nutrition these days, we are seeing the market move away from syrup-drenched drinks, and a small—but noticeable—increase in drinks without the alcohol,” says Mac Lynch, an executive chef and partner at 31-unit Roy’s Hawaiian Fusion Cuisine, which is based in Newport Beach, Calif. And Ryan Goodspeed, head bartender for Miami-based contemporary-American concept Michael’s Genuine Food and Drink adds he has, “watched this category grow about 24 percent over the last two years. The more great, high quality options you can give your guests, the better.”

DON’T HIDE, HIGHLIGHT

“Put the non-alcoholic cocktail options on the menu and don’t be ashamed of them just because they cost less,” says Schlesinger-Guidelli, noting one of the keys to a successful non-alcoholic drink program. “If you don’t highlight them, people won’t know to buy them. But if you do, they will.” Adds Goodspeed: “We pre-shift these—you have to talk about them, let people know what you are doing.” Lark Creek’s Hulihan



At Starbelly, in San Francisco, the Darjeeling Tea is a successful non-alcoholic drink.

also advises to “hand-craft your non-alcoholic cocktails with the same vibrant, flavorful, but not-to-sweet balance you offer with your best spirited cocktails and change them seasonally.”

That’s crucial, says Deborah Blum, co-owner of Starbelly, a California comfort food cafe in San Francisco. She says that drinks like Jasmine Green Tea with Lemon and Sage, \$5, Lavender Honey Lemonade, \$4 and Darjeeling Tea with Lime, Basil and Egg White, \$5 “really meet a need. “You can walk into a convenience store and find a plethora of really interesting non-alcoholic options, but you can’t do that most restaurant bars.” So, says Blum, “if you’re doing them, emphasize them and be proud of them!”

At Starbelly, non-alcoholic drinks are listed under the “All Ages” drink section on the back of the restaurant’s food menu, right above the “21-Plus” section of wines by the glass and draft beer options. The non-alcoholic options have been hugely successful: 50 percent of Starbelly’s guests order an “All Ages”

drink with lunch; 20 percent with dinner. "We get a lot of great feedback about them," says Blum. "They showcase the creativity of our kitchen and fill a guest need."

It's also interesting to note that as Blum's numbers suggest: Lighter non-alcoholic drink options also work well with light and healthy and vegetarian food menus—not just before or after the meal. Says Jill Barron, chef and owner at Mana Food Bar, a vegetarian restaurant in Chicago. "People come here because they want to eat cleaner food, so it makes sense that they want to drink lighter and cleaner, too," says Barron. Her menu includes a variety of fresh vegetable juices (apple, carrot, celery, collard greens, cucumber, ginger, orange and pineapple (up to three combined for \$5; \$3 extra to add sake or vodka).

Adding interest to its non-alcoholic specialties at Island Creek, the concept's bar program gurus Jackson Cannon, Bobby McCoy and Schlesinger-Guidelli created "storied" cocktails in honor of people each of them know who prefer non-alcoholic drinks. "You have to have a story behind them," says Schlesinger-Guidelli. "It just makes it that much more fun and intriguing." Island's Creek's current spate of non-alcoholic drinks includes the Lizzie Swizzle, a blend of citrus and mint layered between crushed ice and topped with a dash of Peychaud's bitters—which is for Tom's sister Liz, who likes drinks with just that flavor profile. Meanwhile Abigail's Delight, made with fresh-pressed apple juice, Westport lavender syrup and a soda topper, was inspired by—and dictated by the tastes of—Jackson's two-and-a-half-year-old daughter.

BALANCING ACT

Figuring out how to balance drinks without alcohol is perhaps the biggest challenge. Giovanni Martinez, head bartender at Le Deux, a neighborhood gastropub in Hollywood, Calif., takes a custom approach, asking each guest what flavor they prefer—spicy, fruity, sour, herbal or mint—and then shaping the cocktail putting that flavor forward. At Starbelly, Blum says her team mixes the "All Ages" drinks with the same care and precision, fresh-squeezed juices and seasonally rotating fresh organic produce that she uses for spirit-based cocktails, and adding soda, bitters and even egg whites to balance flavors and mouth feel. Each cocktail recipe that ends up on the menu is built without spirits in mind, rather than taking an existing spirited cocktail recipe and just removing the spirit.

"That's an important distinction," says Myca Ferrer, marketing and sales manager for 15-unit, London-based Ping Pong Dim Sum. "Yes, you can make a Virgin Daiquiri or a Virgin Mary, but the original drinks were built around a certain base spirit. Why limit yourself like that?"

Ping Pong Dim Sum, which has a unit in Dubai that cannot have a liquor license, set out to see if it could create a successful non-alcoholic cocktail program using fresh, exotic produce with



At Ping Pong the Goji Berries, Mango and Mint Cooler is a top drink.

healthy components and no alcohol. As a result virgin cocktails such as the Raspberry, Guava and Shiso Cooler, or, the Goji Berries, Mango, Mint Cooler, (both \$4) now sell well in many Ping Pong units—even those with liquor licenses. Ping Pong's first U.S. unit, in Washington, D.C., for example, sells 50 percent of its guests non-alcoholic coolers. The other half order alcoholic beverages. Creating balance in the coolers, Ferrer says the Ping Pong team worked with bitter, sweet, sour, pungent, astringent and salty flavor components. "There should be at least three of these flavor components in each drink," says Ferrer.

Moving ahead, more bartenders, such as Mariena Mercer, say they plan to make time for mixology experiments, sans alcohol. Says Mercer, one of three mixologists overseeing nine bars, including the three-level Chandelier Bar at just-opened The Cosmopolitan—a 3,000 room hotel in Las Vegas, "This is absolutely an opportunity. Now that we are making all of our own fresh-squeezed juices, purees and syrups, I would like to do more fun-flirty feminine, non-alcoholic cocktails that have adult flair. If somebody's not drinking [spirits] they shouldn't have to sit there stuck with a Virgin Daiquiri. That day is past." ♦

Monica Kass Rogers writes about food, beverage and vintage recipes from Chicago at www.lostrecipesfound.com.

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