

# FLAVOR & THE MENU

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# Autumnal ACCENTS

Gear the drink menu to cool-weather flavors with essences of apple, pear, pumpkin and cranberry



Fall tree fruits fit many cocktail profiles, from spritzers to martinis and dark-spirited mixed drinks.

CALIFORNIA PEAR ADVISORY BOARD



BY JACK ROBERTIELLO

The farm-to-table movement and accompanying demand for fresh, seasonal ingredients on restaurant menus has moved past the kitchen and into the bar. Seasonal menus are de rigeur for any operation aspiring to capture consumers' attention, and fall in the bar means mainly apples.

"Apple as a flavor is so successful because it ties in well with so many spirits: spiced rums, cognacs, bourbons and really any other kind of brown spirit," says Charlotte Voisey, portfolio ambassador for London-based spirit supplier William Grant and Sons. Voisey has developed cocktail menus for cutting-edge bars in New York City, including the recently opened lounge at the W New York Downtown Hotel and Kenmare.

"The flavors of apples and pears blend very well with dark spirits overall, and that crisp snap they provide is terrific in drinks," notes Voisey.

#### A TOUGH MUDDLE

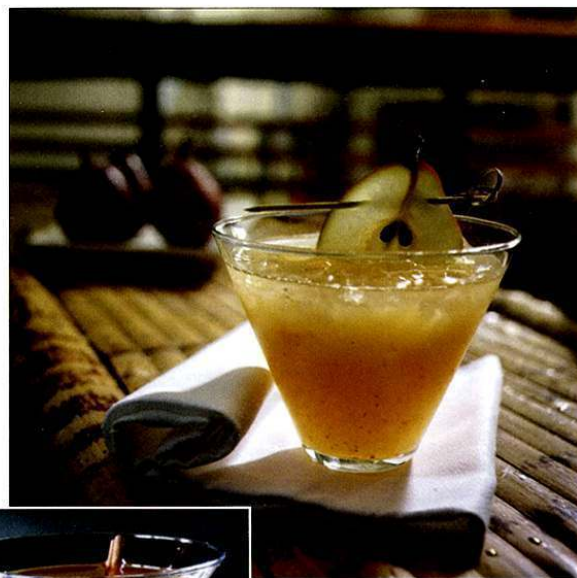
But fall's bounty presents a conundrum for fresh-obsessed bartenders, as apples, pears, cranberries and other autumnal fare are not easy to juice, muddle or otherwise manipulate to flavor drinks.

With apples and pears, juiciness, flavor intensity and even the varietal mix can vary from day to day. Juicing à la minute, either through fresh pressing or muddling (both messy, time-consuming and likely to provide inconsistent results) can be an operational nightmare. Happily, there are myriad ways around the problem.

A range of high-quality, fresh-pressed juices, both commercially and farm produced, is now available. Purees also can provide an autumnal tang without an excess of fuss; a cooperative chef can even custom make them in house.

Hard ciders, while popular primarily in brewpubs, offer varying flavors and styles, plus the snap of carbonation to elevate a drink's presence. Higher-end, farmhouse-made cider varieties (both international and domestic) come in styles and flavors that are outside the American palate experience (see sidebar).

Of course, that old favorite, the house-made infusion, still works wonders. At American Seasons in Nantucket, Mass., co-owner and General Manager Orla Murphy-LaScola designed a fall crabapple infusion in which she heats local crab varieties, with their skins pierced, and



PEAR BUREAU NORTHWEST



JACQUES-ALAIN NARON

Bartenders are including all of autumn's bounty — not just apples — when crafting the season's beverage programs.

then soaks them in vodka for two weeks to extract flavor. She mixes the results with a brown-sugar simple syrup and finishes with sparkling cider for a drink that brings rich autumn touches to the table.

#### DARKER DAYS

Derek Brown, co-owner of The Passenger and the Columbia Room in Washington, D.C., changes his menu frequently and offers a weekly cocktail special designed to match food items. In the summer, that means lighter spirits and fruit-driven cocktails, such as a Bellini, made with fresh white peaches; lightened Bloody Marys, made with heirloom-tomato water; and Gin Rickeys. But in the fall, he turns more to dark rums and whiskeys as a base; this is where spiced apples, cranberries and other fall flavors meet their match in terms of flavor intensity.

But introducing fall fruits doesn't mean that Brown has to develop entirely new drinks. His ingredient-driven cocktail menu allows him to tinker with classic recipes and come up with something new.

"When berries start coming in, I make a whiskey sour with them; it sounds simple but that small change really



# CIDER RULES

One of America's original drinks is staging a contemporary comeback

It's odd that a beverage produced in America since colonial days gets so little respect in bars and restaurants. In fact, except for in brewpubs, it's difficult to find hard cider in U.S. restaurants at all.

That has been changing some, as more producers try to develop a presence, but for most of us, cider still means a non-alcoholic, pressed-apple, fall beverage, presented cold or perhaps heated, spiced and served with apple brandy or liqueur. For some, though, hard cider offers a way to broaden flavors in sparkling beverages.

"There's such a range of flavors in ciders, but when people think cider, they think of the one they've had and think that's representative of all ciders. It's not," says Ellen Kelly, owner with her husband, Rick, of The Noble Fir in Seattle, which stocks three tap ciders (from England, Ireland and Washington state) and nine bottles (three English, two French, two from Washington and two other U.S.-produced brands).

Hard-cider consumption has been growing consistently, albeit slowly, in the U.S. market, though there are few fine-dining advocates outside the brewpub world, where five or more imported bottles are routinely found.

"Restaurants are becoming more and more receptive to carrying cider, and lots of places are receptive to bringing in at least one," says Bret Williams, CEO of Woodchuck Cider, the best-selling American-made brand.

Suppliers like Woodchuck have been trying to expand the market by producing seasonal specialties, limited releases and even spiced versions. Williams says one of his company's most-popular versions is a pear cider. At The Noble Fir, which opened in 2010,

the overall-most-popular tap variety is a black-currant cider made in California.

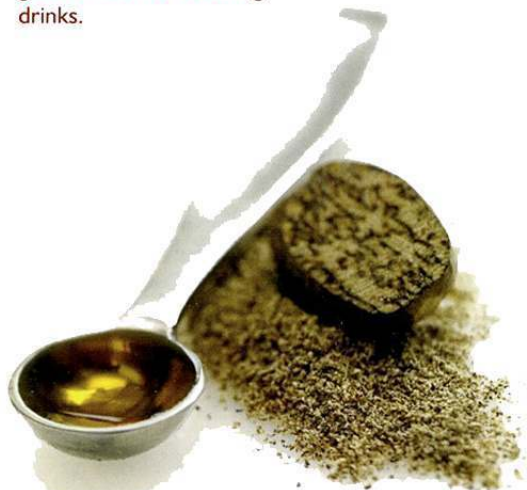
Hard-cider production is fairly basic: Pressed apples are allowed to ferment, something commonly experienced at home when that plastic jug starts inflating and a little fizz develops. Traditionally, in Normandy and England, the two places where high-quality cider and food are often matched, cider-makers blend many apple and pear varieties for a range of styles, and several hundred varieties of apple are available. Norman cider is primarily a small-production, farmhouse product, though major suppliers produce there as well.

Ciders range from the classic, dry, Norman brut style — spicy, tart and complex — to semi-dry, with a similar spiciness but more full-bodied and robust, and finally sweet cider, usually with a lower alcohol content. Ciders can be clear or cloudy, depending on fermentation, filtration and pasteurization methods.

The main difference between French and English styles is sweetness; Normans make cider from small, exceedingly tart fruit, while, as in America, Brits tend to favor a sweeter brew. But that doesn't mean that Americans wouldn't like the hard stuff if given the chance to try it. Kelly offers samples of her tap ciders to capture the interest of neophytes.

"Overall, there's such a range in sweetness and [degree of robustness in] the apple flavor in different ciders," says Kelly. Imported ciders, often packaged in large bottles and sealed with a cork and wire like Champagne, can be relatively expensive compared to other brews. Operators need to be prepared to hand-sell those styles or serve them as special-occasion beverages.

According to McCormick & Co., nutmeg and rum are a natural flavor pairing and a good choice for warming drinks.



MCCORMICK & CO.

carries the drink. In the fall, you can do the same thing, switching in fresh apples, but the result, if made well, yields two completely different drinks off the same basic idea."

That makes sense in an operation like the Columbia Room, which is open only three nights and runs like a chef's table, with Brown's menu offerings based on what he finds on his weekly run to the local farmer's market.

## LOCAL COLOR

Higher-volume operations are also open to fine-tuning the menu for the fall harvest. Damian Torguson, who oversees the cocktail program for Robert Wiedmaier's Washington, D.C., area restaurants Brasserie Beck, Brabo, Marcel's and the recently opened Mussel Bar, features a different seasonal cocktail from local sources monthly, so he needs a reliable source for the entire period.

As accompaniments to last fall's bar dishes, for example, Torguson offered a Spiced Apple Martini made with house-infused apple-and-cinnamon vodka, simple syrup, fresh sour and cranberry; and a Morello



# The FLAVOR PAYOFF

## Don't Let Fall Flavor Opportunities Pass the Bar

David Commer, a Lewisville, Texas-based chain-account beverage specialist with more than 30 years experience in the hospitality industry, has this advice for spicing up beverage sales with autumnal touches:

**Follow The Chefs:** Chefs do a great job recognizing seasonal shifts, and the fall harvest is one of the more striking. Think pumpkin-pie flavors and candied yams in liquid form. Cinnamon, nutmeg, chai and pumpkin pie are Commer's top flavor picks.

**Think Sweets:** Fall and winter are the best times to pull out chocolatey, minty, decadent, dessert-like drinks, because people are open to festive treats with a warm touch.

**Avoid Gimmicks:** Tossing some candy corn in a cocktail doesn't make it a seasonal treat, notes Commer. Tie authentic garnishes, like a rosemary sprig or a cinnamon stick, to actual drink flavors.

**Do Something!:** The biggest mistake is to keep serving the same drinks without ever breaking routine. Even risk-averse regulars note a shift in season and might appreciate more warming spirits and spices in the beverage mix.

— Kathy Hayden

Manhattan, made with bourbon, brandied Morello cherries, bitters, cloves and anise simple syrup, along with a dash of cherry-infused brandy.

"It sounds unusual, but it tasted just like fall," he says.

When using apples and pears (he's used both in juleps), Torguson notes that it's often necessary to heat and reduce them with sugar to extract more flavor. He's also been known to turn to his chef for a house-made puree. Torguson develops a cider every year at Brasserie Beck; last fall's version was flavored with mulling spices, mixed with butter and rum and topped with vanilla foam from the kitchen.

For many operations, though, the hassle of working with pumpkins, cranberries and apples causes bartenders to turn to the

distilled versions, which were originated as methods to preserve the fruits.

"I don't tend to do a lot of culinary cocktails, or a lot of fresh, seasonal fruit," says Jeffrey Morgenthaler, bar manager at Clyde Common in Portland, Ore. "But what I do like to do is have the flavors of the season in the drinks; apples taste like fall, so I'll use more of the local apple brandies made in the Pacific Northwest."

Morgenthaler and other bartenders overseeing busy locations cite several reasons for steering away from house-made juice from fall fruits: the inconsistent quality and relative fragility of the juice, the stress on juicers and the fact that fresh juice separates quickly and must be agitated frequently. He says there are fine local apple juices, but they can be expensive and fragile.

So he goes to the bar shelf for fall flavors; his seasonal menu always includes a drink called Autumn Leaves: apple eau de vie, rye, vermouth and Strega with a house-made cinnamon tincture and an orange twist. It's a big hit and shows that sometimes the art of the fall drink is in the taste and not the source.

Cider is fairly under-appreciated as a cocktail ingredient, but it's possible the sudden popularity of punches and emerging small-scale hard-cider providers will spur a comeback. Voisey created punches for the newly opened Cuban-inspired Cocteleria At Cienfuegos in Manhattan, one using hard cider rather than Champagne or sparkling water, two more common punch finishers. In her Moveable Feast, she mixes white rum, dry vermouth, lime juice and orange bitters with a splash of dry French cider and a dash of nutmeg. The nutmeg enhances the connection with spiced apples, a classic autumnal pastry pairing, and the cider enhances the herbal dryness of the vermouth, she says.

"I totally love using cider in cocktails. It's got that dry acidity that we like from Champagne without that richness and heaviness, and the apple flavor works very well with lots of ingredients we're used to using in cocktails. It's genius."

Voisey may have started a trend in Manhattan with hard cider and punch; At



Terrence Brennan's Artisanal Bistro, the Summer of Punch menu includes the Cider Cup, made with Calvados, ginger liqueur, hard cider and fresh citrus. Meanwhile, in the middle of the country, Brad Smith, bar manager at Azia in Minneapolis, concocts hard-cider cocktails like his Original Sinners, with Ketel One Citroen, lemon juice, diced ginger and ginger simple syrup, topped with Crispin Brut cider, and the Intelligent Design, a mix of Plymouth Gin, honey water, Parfait Amour and lemon juice, topped with Crispin Honey Crisp cider.

#### THE PUMPKIN PATCH

Apples and pears are the most obvious source of fall cocktail inspiration, but surprisingly interesting concepts have emerged from the squash family. At American Seasons, with its regional-American menu changing roughly every two weeks, Murphy-LaScola last fall had a phenomenon on her hands: the Drunk Pumpkin, made with local sugar pumpkins.

To create the drink, she boiled pumpkins and soaked them in vodka, shook the resulting infusion with a brown-sugar reduction and finished with cinnamon sticks.

"It was an incredible hit," she reports. "I can't believe how many we sold. People were leery of it originally, but we could barely keep up."

Previous attempts at developing a pumpkin-based drink hadn't worked quite so well, perhaps because standard pumpkins can take on a canned flavor if steeped in vodka too long, Murphy-LaScola says. But the sugar

variety provided a less-cloying, softer flavor when infused.

Torguson, too, found a use for pumpkins recently; last year he offered the Harvest Cocktail, mixing squash and pumpkin purees with dark rum, floating pumpkin beer on top and garnishing the drink with spiced pumpkin seeds. These sorts of drinks may not be big sellers, but they help bars meet the requirement to deliver buzz as well as profits.

"People who are foodies, who go out a lot, expect more out of a place now, and this is one way to provide it," says Torguson.

"We like to change things up and keep them as interesting for us and our staff as possible," agrees Murphy-LaScola. "If you just keep doing the same thing, it gets old, and customers pick up on that."

#### BOGGING DOWN

The intense acidity of cranberries, another fall favorite, can make them a hassle to work with at the bar, and there's no comparison really between fresh and bottled juice drink.

"Cranberries are almost unpalatably tart, yet cranberry cocktail is very popular; how to manage cranberries properly is a problem, but you could maybe sweeten them with spiced honey or otherwise balance them better for a cocktail," suggests Voisey.

Murphy-LaScola uses local, organic cranberries when they come into season, turning them into a cranberry syrup for a Cranberry Old-Fashioned with muddled cranberries.

"Cooking definitely changes the flavor and makes them softer in the drink, especially with whiskey," she says.

To make your mark as an operation that takes drinks seriously, using updated flavors and techniques to add seasonality to the drink menu is a good place to start, whether it means cooking down your own spiced-apple syrup or seeking out suppliers with ready-made flavor solutions.

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#### TAKE-AWAY TIPS

**OUTSOURCING:** Fall fruits aren't easy to juice or muddle, and the job is tough on kitchen equipment; that's where ready-made fresh-pressed juices come in, available commercially or from local farms

**INSOURCING:** Purees are another easy way to deliver an autumnal tang; talk to kitchen staff about making them in house

**POWER PAIRINGS:** Spiced apples and other seasonal flavors make a good match with flavor-intense dark spirits like rums and whiskeys

**TWEAK THE STANDARDS:** Put seasonal ingredients to use in classic recipes rather than devising new drinks; how about using cranberry juice in a Whiskey Sour or substituting hard cider in a Champagne Cocktail?