

Food & Beverage

ON BEVERAGE

Cocktail 'omakase' movement rising

One of my favorite things to do when dining in a restaurant headed by a chef I know is to put my immediate culinary future in his or her hands. Give me what you will and no holds barred.

The Japanese have a word for my habit: *omakase*. Very seldom has my trust not gone richly rewarded.

None of which was on my mind as I sat a few months ago in the Toronto cocktail oasis Barchef, discussing a newly arrived brand of gin with co-owner and head mixologist Frankie Solarik. And yet, within minutes, I found my dining habits migrating to the bar as I asked Solarik to develop a cocktail, there and then, that would best express the qualities of the gin.

Which is precisely what he did, with great success. I soon found out that I was hardly unique in my demand of Solarik. By his own estimation, the tall, lean bartender figures that about 75 percent to



Stephen Beaumont

80 percent of what he does is "freestyle," riffing off whatever guideline his customer provides — sweeter or more sour, or highlighting a certain spirit or flavor — to devise a new way of providing what he describes as "an experience of flavor, complexity and texture."

"It's all Frankie does," added co-mixologist Aaron Gaulke with a laugh.

Not only does this practice help Solarik keep his creative side fresh — "It's what I love to do and where I learn the most," he said — it also provides tremendous added value for the customer. Just as an open kitchen can bring an element of theater to the dining experience, so does watching a top talent develop a cocktail out of his imagination add a bit of spectacle.

It seems that "cocktail omakase" is, if not quite a burgeoning trend across the land, then at least a nascent movement.

"When people didn't really know me or

Elixir, it didn't happen," said H. Joseph Ehrmann, proprietor of Elixir in San Francisco. "But now that we're known for our cocktails, it happens increasingly. Each bartender has a following as well, so their own regulars look to them for their individual styles."

Jackson Cannon, bar manager at Boston's Eastern Standard, echoes Ehrmann's comments: "Although the expression 'omakase' is a rarity, the practice is a daily occurrence, and it is one that my staff and I welcome."

Noting that the creation of an original recipe "results in some great dialog between staff and guests," Cannon is emphatic about how custom cocktail-ing adds to the perception of value and promotes repeat business.

"As guests return to the restaurant having had a good experience with this practice, they often just say, 'You know what I like, surprise me!'" he said. "Oth-



Frankie Solarik's "Freestyle" Tequila Cocktail

- 1 ounce blanco tequila (100 proof)**
- One-half ounce cherry-infused Madeira**
- One-half ounce artichoke-flavored aperitif**
- One-half ounce lime juice**

Shake all the ingredients together with ice. Strain into a cocktail glass and grate nutmeg over the top.

Frankie Solarik of Barchef in Toronto freestyles behind the bar with mixed drinks.

ers do kind of refuse to drink 'on menu' and insist on off-the-cuff creations. This can be a lot of fun."

As for the mechanics of the practice, Jeffrey Morgenthaler, cocktail blogger and bar manager at Bel Ami in Portland, Ore., admits that timing can play a role.

"If we've got a lot on our plate at the time of the request, we tend to pull from the tops of our heads, which is usually a classic," he said. "But on those slower nights, we might reach for a new cocktail we've been working on, or something a little more obscure."