WHAT IS A SIGNATURE COCKTAIL?

What do you think of when you hear the term “Signature Cocktail”...a local favorite, a weird concoction, an old man’s stuffy drink, some over-the-top libation with 87 esoteric ingredients which require a month long treasure hunt to collect? I say think again! Signature Cocktails are created for many different types of venues, occasions and budgets. Here are a few ideas and examples of how you can participate in this trend. So get ready to “sign on the dotted line.”

A Signature Cocktail (or SC) is quite simply a mixed drink that has been created with a recognizable purpose in mind. The “Signature” refers to one or several elements of the libation: its name, association to a person, place or thing, ingredients or an event. It always attempts, though not always succeeds, to be original.

There are several questions you should ask yourself when stepping up to the creative end of the bar:

Why introduce a signature cocktail? Will the name help or hurt it? What is the practical application for your venue? How can you promote and sell it?

WHAT GIVES IT ITS SIGNATURE?

Ethan Kelly, Spirits Sommelier at Brandy Library in New York, believes “it represents who you are as an establishment.” It shouldn’t be a projection of the person creating it but a reflection of the clientele. His Jarnac Ginger focuses on premium ingredients, the soul of the Brandy Library; fine Cognac and Ginger Beer (which is made on location) mixed with lime juice and cane syrup. It is one of many SC’s featured. He states that the creative process often starts out as “an ambitious idea by one staff member” but ends up as a team effort, incorporating many tastes and making the drink “more approachable.”

I have found the reasons for crafting such a cocktail vary. Often, for a restaurant, it reflects the type of cuisine served and balances its flavors to compliment the menu. It allows the customers the opportunity to enjoy something unique at their favorite dining spot. One example is the Manhattan Italian eatery Bistango and it’s Capri Martini. I was asked to create a SC that fit the theme of the establishment. Like Capri, Bistango is a comfortable and exciting escape whose fare is fresh and based in tradition. The martini is vodka based (to appeal to a broader range of clients) and the vermouth is infused with fresh torn basil leaves, offering a hint of the native herbs. The inner slope of the glass is decorated with dots of sun dried tomato paste. They slowly integrate into the beverage, adding dimensions of flavor. The garnish reflects the traditional island ingredients; a colossal black olive stuffed with peppered mozzarella and a basil leaf. All these elements are standard for the restaurant. It is a perfect fit with venue and the cuisine.

Industry leader Brian Van Flandern, the head mixologist at Per Se in Manhattan, applies the philosophy of flavor profiling (creating cocktails that balance with food) much the same as pairing fine wine. Pay attention to those flavors: sweet, savory, spicy, earthy, etc.

The presentation can be a key element as well. That includes the glass it’s served in, the garnish or the color. I recommend you try to keep the look of the cocktail appropriate to the event or venue. Mix it up. Use an unexpected glass (whisky in a flute) to

continued on page 24
feature your invention. A boxing glove shaped vessel might work for a sports bar, but not for a “punch” style beverage at a fine dining location, unless of course a gourmand like Mike Tyson owns the place. Craft your garnish carefully. Exotic fruits and vegetables, fresh herbs or interesting decoration (like flakes of gold leaf or edible flowers) make a prominent statement and will stay in tune with your establishment. Overly bright, colorful cocktails (electric blue or florescent orange) tend to put people off, though maybe not NY Mets fans. They appear too festive or tropical for venues not located directly on the beach or poolside.

**WHAT DO I NAME IT?**

What you call your Signature Cocktail can be as important as what is in it. Stick to names that are clever, descriptive and relative. The “kitsch”, “gross” or “sex” factors may work for Spring Break, but will rarely impress a more sophisticated clientele. Start simple. The Algonquin cocktail, featured at it’s namesake New York City hotel, keeps the branding as simple as it gets.

James Endicott, Beverage Director at the hip, new Allen & Delancey on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, is following the same philosophy with his current works in progress. His Allen will have more masculine characteristics, smoky and earthy, while the Delancey includes lighter, delicate qualities of fruit, a more feminine profile. Deciding to assemble these “was an organic process” says Endicott. “You want to create something that’s not found anywhere else.” Thus, the names will be as original as the libations.

The name can also reflect other aspects of the venue. I created a pair of seasonal SC’s for a West Village American Bistro based on the two “ghosts” in residence. They became very popular promotional elements and added to the history and mystique of the place. The Grey Lady, a hot apple pie martini, and the Grey Ghost, a refreshing citrus concoction using a touch of sorbet, also indicated the main spirit used; Grey Goose Vodka.

**WILL IT WORK?**

No Signature Cocktail will succeed with-out practical application. High-end establishments may have the resources, staff and time to customize elaborate ingredients, but that isn’t always possible. Try to focus on elements that suit the business, seasonal in-house produce, regional spirits and associated flavors. Keep the time to build the drink to a minimum. Ethan Kelly likes to “focus on the concept of only four ingredients” and “the idea of how simple can you make it.”

Don’t be afraid to think outside the bar. When crafting a SC for Zen Green Tea Liqueur, The Ultimate Zen Martini, I zeroed in on the ethnic flavors, naturally pairing it with the Japanese style cuisine. A simple combination of Zen and Martin Miller’s Gin (floral and aromatic) balanced perfectly with the pickled ginger garnish set in the bottom of the martini glass. It visually evokes the soft movement in a Zen garden pool and adds just the right amount of spice and acidity. Best of all, the venues always have the specialty garnish.

When possible, experiment with flavored syrups, (make your own or purchase those available) try some of the fruit purees on the market and experience the myriad of tastes at your venue. You’ll be surprised what ideas you’ll come up with. Watch the trends and see what might work for you. James Endicott stated, “I like the lower alcohol beverages.” Adding “Teas have become a trend. I use syrups made from Jasmine tea reductions. It makes for a nice complexity.”

**HOW CAN YOU SELL OR PROMOTE YOUR LIBATION?**

Obviously, adding it to your cocktail list, featuring it on a table tent or posting signs around the space will get the word out. Run special promotions, discounts, etc. But the best way to inform (and educate) your customers is to speak with them. Help steer them towards a concoction they are more likely to enjoy, and order again. “I ignore the liquor aspect.” Kelly says. “I ask the customer what are your favorite flavors?” He tells them not to worry about what’s in it, but just to know that he has made it “based on flavors you like.” Know your audience. Make sure your Signature piece appeals to your customer base or it won’t

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THERE ARE OTHER APPLICATIONS FOR SIGNATURE COCKTAILS

Though I continue to craft cocktails for restaurants and bars, liquor companies, PR firms, special events and promotional use, my core business is high profile weddings. The creations tend to be more complex and the ingredients more diverse. Each drink must represent the couple and reflect elements they wish to share about themselves with their guests. They must taste sensational, look exquisite and impress the most critical attendee. Here is where research and creativity need to work with the ultimate practical application for large and small-scale celebrations.

ENJOY THE PROCESS!

Write a checklist, experiment with ingredients, do your research and get to know your customers. People will be asking for your autograph in no time at all.

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been essentially to address TCA, but what has essentially unfolded here is that screw caps have in fact revolutionized bottle maturation and freshness, and this is a fantastic development”. I can attest first hand on the issue of corks and TCA, when at a tasting event this year were Mr. Rowe was a guest speaker, where we sampled a pour from a bottle that was “corked” and another had to be opened. To taste two bottles from the same case side by side like that, would give most people ample proof of the problem that can sometimes occur with a cork closure.

Now back to the wines of that evening at Amalthea. Those who attended this event bore testimony to another wine tasting upset 31 years after the Judgment of Paris, an event that George personally chronicled and which heralded a new generation of winemakers and quality wines from the United States. That original tasting was called “the most talked about wine tasting of the [20th] century,” by food critic Anthony Dias Blue, as an upshot of nine French wine experts who all picked unknown California wines as better than the best French wines.

The current “rematch” of sorts was run by the Dionysian Club, International, under carefully controlled conditions by its Chancellor, John Mahoney, Ph.d., CWE. The person in charge of ensuring that the tasting at Amalthea was truly blind and independent was Anthony Fisher, Regional Vice President of the American Wine Society and Certified Judge. Amalthea Cellars firmly believes that “wines are grown in the fields, not made in the cellars,” and put that philosophy to the test. Hosting the 18 bottle double blind wine tasting these wines included some of the original Napa Valley and French wines that took the top honors that day, while also including some of their own wines in the mix.

And how would the participants of this recreated tasting judge these offerings on this night? Out of the nine whites that evening, the 2005 Joseph Drouhin Clos des Mouches took a mere sixth place, upended by a 2004 Freemark Abbey Chardonnay. But more importantly for Amalthea Cellars, from the nine reds that evening, The 2002 Amalthea Cellars Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon bested the Chateau Mouton-Rothschild which was eight times the price of the Amalthea. The Stags Leap SLV didn’t have a chance against the house that night either. My favorite? Of all the offerings that night, the Amalthea Limited Edition Cabernet Sauvignon, was something I regarded as special. Yet another testament to drink the wine and not the label.

David

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Check out page 27