

WINTER'S CHILL, STRAIGHT UP

DRINK | Seasonal cocktails feel great going down

BY SEANAN FORBES

Cocktails are more than a passing craze, and seasonality is still a sublime obsession. If you think winter's chill means you can't have current flavors in cocktails, you're in for a delectable surprise.

According to nationally renowned bartender Jim Meehan of New York's PDT, winter's cocktails are ripe for contemplation.

"At the end of the calendar year," Meehan says, "people are reflecting, getting together with people they haven't seen in a long time." They want drinks they can sit with, sharing time with friends, lingering.

How do drinks serve that? Bruce Sherman of North Pond, 2610 N. Cannon, makes cocktails that engage the senses. The seasonal restaurant's brandy apple cocktail features cider, cider reduction and Pommeau de Normandie.

Another drink has pears, star anise and crumbled gingerbread. With Sherman, you can watch seasons slowly turning in your glass.

Award-winning New York pastry chef Johnny Iuzzini, who's learning his way around professional bartending at PDT, aims to make flavors pop. His game plan includes using "any and all of the techniques and equipment used in the kitchen when creating cocktails."

In fact, cooking is integral to the mixologist's art. Michelle Peake of Otom, 951 W. Fulton, cooks pears sous-vide with rosemary and purees the result with simple syrup for a creamy, soft mouth-feel.

House-made jams have migrated into cocktail shakers. Peake's 10 Cane Mutiny blends rum with house-made orange marmalade and ginger bitters.

Peter Vestinos, head bartender at Sepia, 123 N. Jefferson, is another fan of jam. Like Peake, he plays it off something bitter. That way, Vestinos says, "You get a fun mouth-feel and that sweet preserved-fruit taste, but it finishes really clean and dry."

It's all about balance. Iuzzini's approach is to "think of the flavor profile of a cocktail much the same way as a dessert." In the kitchen, that means using complementary tastes, textures and temperatures.

For his Heirloom cocktail, Iuzzini plays anise hyssop off of muddled Concord grapes, working the counterpoint between sweet and sharp. The approach is plain in his book, *Dessert FourPlay*, out this week, but Iuzzini isn't a chef making liquid desserts in a glass; he's a chef taking decades of knowledge behind the bar.

Contrast might be the bartender's best tool. Kansas City's Ryan Maybee, one of the Midwest's hottest mixologists, uses a mist of absinthe to spark the senses.



Winter inspires mixologists to make cocktails that blend seasonal ingredients in unexpected ways. Here, vodka, pear-rosemary puree and housemade bitters combine in a drink served at Otom, 951 W. Fulton. | RICH HEIN/SUN-TIMES

Michelle Peake sprays house-made applewood-smoked bitters over a cocktail. "It's the first thing you smell," she says, and it introduces you to what you're about to drink.

Vestinos likes blood oranges and kumquats. He muddles the kumquats, breaking up the rind. "It helps in the construction of the balance of the cocktail," he says. "I like items that give me more than one dimension, one flavor component."

One flavor can have more than one dimension. At L20, 2300 N. Lincoln Park West, the same seasonal ingredients appear in all parts of the house.

Chef Laurent Gras says that the preparation might be the same ... but might not. Fruit might appear as "a consomme for the kitchen and a cream for the bar," Gras says.

This also is the season for savories and darker spirits in cocktails: rum, bourbon, rye and whiskey. Vestinos uses herbs. Peake smokes bitters. Maybe smokes liquor; puts roasted butternut squash in drinks and makes a pumpkin infusion with mulling spices. Warmth comes with sweetness, too; Vestinos uses honey syrup or agave nectar, rather than sugars.

In the cold weather, a hot cocktail holds extra comfort. Vestinos likes hot buttered rum. Jim Meehan sees so much potential in heat that he's revamping the bar at PDT to include a hot cocktail menu.

Here, too, you can think seasonally: hot cider works with rum, mocha with Kahlua or cognac, mulled wine with pumpkin pie spices and hot chocolate with Grand Marnier or peppermint schnapps.

But what's really hot? What's honing the cutting edge around the world? Every day, the bartenders at Virgin Atlantic's Heathrow Clubhouse serve up to a thousand customers from around the world. Seasons, hemispheres and cultures vary from person to person. Is there a common thread?

"History," according to Clubhouse mixologist Matthew Morse. People want to know the stories behind the cocktails, he says. The rage for spices is international — as is the yen for the house-made.

Jay Beavers and Chris Canatser of Kansas City's Justus Drugstore take that to an extreme. Canatser's a trained botanist, and Beavers is keen on infusions. They flavor bourbon with dates and brandy with apples and apricots. They make crabapple infusion ("It's surprisingly good," Beavers says). They have even taken to making vermouth: dry, sweet and sipping.

While there's skill in mixing drinks, the best bartenders aren't about flash and show. They do what they do with simple elegance.

You don't have to be able to juggle flaming tumblers to be a brilliant bartender. Just celebrate the season.

Seanan Forbes is a free-lance writer based in New York and London.

FOR STARTERS

These syrups can serve as the basis for many cocktails.

SIMPLE SYRUP

Bring 1 cup of water to a boil. Stir in 1 cup of granulated sugar. Turn the heat to low. Stir constantly until the sugar completely dissolves (about 3 minutes). Remove from heat. Allow to cool, pour into a jar and store in the refrigerator. Keeps for 1 month.

PETER VESTINOS' HONEY SIMPLE SYRUP

Mix 1 cup of honey with 1 cup of warm water. Blend thoroughly. Cool. Store in the refrigerator.

INFUSED SYRUP

Start with a bunch of fresh herbs or a handful of fruit (cranberries bring the season home) in addition to the sugar or honey and water. Bring the mixture to a simmer, stirring constantly. Reduce heat, cover and simmer for five minutes. Remove from heat, cool, strain into a jar and store in the refrigerator.

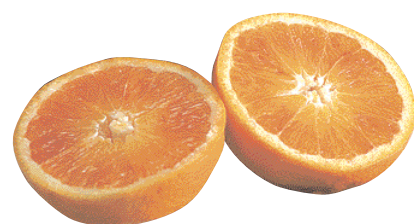
COOL INGREDIENTS

All around the world, the best bartenders are playing with the same key ingredients. What's hot behind the coolest bars? A few items are probably in your cupboard — or your refrigerator. Others might surprise you:

Bitters (hand-crafted, made to suit the drink)
Citrus (blood orange juice)
Concord grapes
Ginger (yes, it's a spice, but it's popular enough to merit its own space)
Herbs (basil, thyme, cilantro, rosemary, sage, lavender)

Jams and marmalades
Meats (foie gras infusions, bacon)
Natural sweeteners (maple syrup, honey, agave nectar)
Smoke (in liquors, bitters and garnishes)
Spices (star anise, chipotle pepper)

Seanan Forbes



HOT BUTTERED RUM

Courtesy of Sepia bartender Peter Vestinos, who says, "If you can make cookies, then you can make buttered rum." Make this in a large batch; it will last you the winter.

½ pound butter, softened
1 pound light brown sugar
1 tablespoon ground cinnamon
1 tablespoon ground nutmeg
1 teaspoon ground cloves
1 tablespoon vanilla
Dark rum
Hot water

Make a dough of the butter, sugar, spices and vanilla by creaming them together in a blender. Put in a container and let set overnight in the refrigerator. Dough is enough for about 30 drinks. (If you're having a big party, spread the dough on a baking sheet and chill in the fridge. Then, cut it into single-portion cubes before storing.)

Let the dough come to room temperature. Put 1 tablespoon of the dough in an Irish Coffee mug with 1½ ounces of dark rum and top with hot water.

Peter Vestinos, Sepia



STOIC VIRGIN

MAKES 1 DRINK

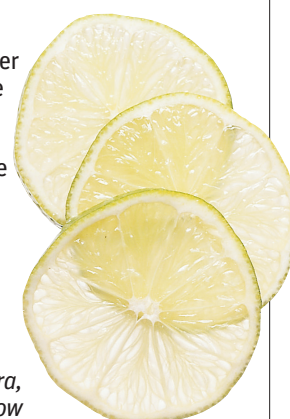
2 sticks or 1 knob of fresh ginger
Dash of fresh lime juice
¼ ounce mango puree
1½ ounces apple juice
½ ounce Cointreau
1½ ounces vodka (Phagura likes Akvinta vodka, which is quintuple-filtered)

Muddle (crush) the ginger with the lime juice in a shaker. Add the rest of the ingredi-

ents, shake and strain contents into a highball glass over ice. Garnish with a fresh lime wedge, mango cube or apple slice.

For a fizzy version: Muddle a ½-inch cube of ginger and ½ ounce of fresh lime juice. Add ½ ounce each of mango puree, apple juice and Cointreau, and 1½ ounces vodka. Shake, strain and top with champagne.

Swaran Phagura, Virgin Atlantic's Heathrow Clubhouse Lounge



JUSTUS HARVEST STORM

MAKES 1 DRINK

1½ ounces pear vodka (see Note)
Ginger beer
Myers' dark rum

Pour the vodka into a tall glass over ice, top it off with ginger beer and float ¼ inch of Myers' dark rum on top.

Note: To infuse your own vodka, put sliced pears in a container, pour vodka over the pears and cover. Keep at room temperature, out of direct sunlight. Wait four to six weeks and then strain, bottle and store it.

Jay Beavers and Chris Canatser, Justus Drugstore