

Cooking Corner: Cocktails, too, pair well with foods

by Maria C. Hunt

The 5 o'clock martini - the social drug of the 1950s - was meant to do more than smooth the rough edges of a stressful day or enliven a dull evening at home. Comprised of gin, dry vermouth and an olive, that cocktail was designed to help work up an appetite for a dinner of beef Stroganoff or Mrs. Paul's fish sticks.

COOL COCKTAILS - James Moreland of Bombay Sapphire Gin created the Ginger Grape, a delicate cocktail that pairs well with seafood. At The Ivy Hotel in San Diego, it is served with sea bass. CNS Photo by Nelvin C. Cepeda. **BOURBON AND BEEF** - At Arterra in the San Diego Marriott Del Mar, a glass of 20-year-old bourbon is served as an accompaniment to a dry-aged New York strip steak. CNS Photo by Scott Linnett. **POUR IT ON** - Tom Masticola mixes a cocktail at Arterra in the San Diego Marriott Del Mar. CNS Photo by Scott Linnett. With the resurgence of classic cocktails made with natural ingredients and infused spirits comes the elevation of the cocktail to a thing of purpose - other than getting buzzed. At trend-setting bars and restaurants around the country, chefs and bartenders are using fine spirits and natural ingredients to create subtly flavored drinks designed to enhance dinner.

"A good cocktail can bring out the flavors of food just like wine," said Tom Masticola, general manager of Arterra in the San Diego Marriott Del Mar. "It's almost like a condiment or a garnish."

Moving into a role once dominated by wine, cocktails are being counted on to stimulate the appetite, complement cuisine or make a big meal go down easy.

In a challenge on the most recent season of Bravo's "Top Chef," competitors were tasked with creating an appetizer to pair with a variety of Bombay Sapphire Gin cocktails. The winning combo was Foie Gras French Toast with a Balsamic Strawberry Rickey.

At his new restaurant, Grayz, in New York City, chef Gray Kunz serves cocktails designed to pair with his eclectic cuisine.

And the venerable James Beard Foundation in New York City recently hosted a dinner in which each course by chef Larry Nicola of Nic's in Los Angeles was paired with a Modern Spirits vodka.

"I see a huge interest in restaurant lounge culture, where someone has cocktails with dinner rather than wine or beer," said Izabela Wojcik, programming director for The Beard House.

At the Napa Valley Grille in San Diego, a Bloody Caesar, a hearty combination of tomatoes, clam juice and Modern Spirits' celery peppercorn vodka, is served with steaks. At Arterra, Mastricola suggests his refreshing Limeade cocktail with a spicy tuna roll topped with lemon zest.

At Nine-Ten in the tony San Diego community of La Jolla, chef Jason Knibb and the restaurant's bartenders pair a cocktail with a happy-hour appetizer.

"Wine is kind of overdone," Knibb said. "This is something new and different, and it makes sense."

Although the cocktail is an American invention, Europeans have a long history of giving distilled spirits a role in meals. Italy is famous for its aperitivos like Campari, Aperol and Cynar, bitter spirits meant to stimulate the appetite.

Gin, which is flavored with botanicals including grains of paradise, lemon peel, juniper berry and orris root, also helps work up an appetite.

"There's a purpose and a place for cocktails," said James Moreland, a brand ambassador for Bombay

Sapphire Gin who is based in New York City. "The botanicals in gin are what get your appetite and gastric juices going. Wine's not going to open up your appetite."

Even before he went to work for Bombay Sapphire, Moreland relied on gin as he created cocktails to complement Geoffrey Zakarian's cuisine at New York City hot spots Town and Country. He said the palate is dulled by sweet drinks or cocktails featuring fruit, which has a lot of fiber.

It's best to begin with a dry cocktail made from a gin that has been naturally infused with botanicals and then combine it with other spirits and natural flavors, Moreland said. A Negroni - with gin and Campari - or a simple combination of lemon juice, champagne and gin are ideal starters.

While touring the country on a recent search for the best bartenders, Moreland stopped at The Ivy Hotel in San Diego to mix up a few drinks. He crafted his Ginger Grape, a delicate cocktail that could pair with seafood or pork, and Royal Scarlett, a blend of ruby port, sweet vermouth and gin that works well with steak or cheese and chocolate after dinner. The Calyx, with muddled honeydew melon, tangerine and gin, has a fresh, lightly sweet flavor that marries well with a plate of prosciutto.

"I've had sommeliers tell me it's so much easier to pair cocktails," Moreland said. "When you have a table of four ordering appetizers that are completely different, you're not going to get a wine to go with all of those."

He said that the aromatic qualities that make gin so conducive to the appetite may have helped make vodka martinis popular. When it became non-P.C. to return to work smelling of spirits after those three-martini lunches of the 1970s, many people switched over to the odorless spirit.

ACQUIRED TASTE

In Eastern Europe, aquavit and schnapps, both clear liquors lightly flavored with caraway or fruit, are sipped along with meals.

When Litty Matthew started dating her future husband, Melkon Khosrovian, she didn't think she could adopt his Armenian family's custom of downing vodka along with their meals. Khosrovian started making vodkas infused with fresh fruits and herbs to tempt her.

Their Modern Spirits line of hand-made spirits has grown to include seven classic recipes, including a pear lavender vodka, chocolate orange vodka and a grapefruit honey vodka made with fruit.

This season, they're introducing a vodka infused with pumpkin and warm spices that they are suggesting as a complement for wintry dishes such as braised short ribs.

At the Beard House dinner, lamb au poivre was paired with Modern Spirits' black truffle vodka; tuna belly with guajillo pepper was served with its ginger-infused vodka.

Matthew said using natural infusions of herbs or fruits yields a softer flavor profile than something made with artificial flavor. "When we're drinking, we like to eat also, so to us it's a natural - you should do both together," she said.

Arterra's Mastricola is fond of using smooth Rain vodka, made from organic white corn, or a vodka from Charbay, a naturally infused line of spirits made by the Karakasevic family in the Napa Valley. Charbay's ruby red vodka stars in a cocktail called the Grapefruit Nehi, which Mastricola likes to serve with chef Brian Pekarcik's caramelized pork belly.

Or keeping it simple, Mastricola said a fine aged bourbon with rich caramelized flavors, such as the Pappy Van Winkle 20-year aged bourbon, is delicious with a New York strip steak with bearnaise sauce.

"There are flavors that identify with each other with the vanilla, and it cuts through the butteriness of the bearnaise sauce," he said.

Once the meal is over, it's time for sweet liqueurs like Sambuca, Limoncello, Pernod and the restaurant worker's favorite cure, Fernet Branca. Known as digestifs or digestivos, these are intended to help settle the stomach after a meal or pair with a dessert.

While wine will always be a part of fine dining, Mastricola said it's fun to help diners discover new food and drink combinations.

"Part of my mantra is educating not just the staff but the diner," he said. "I'm big on letting people try something, and then if they don't like it, they can try something else. We have to get people out of the mind-set it's only wine with dinner."

ROYAL SCARLETT MARTINI

3/4 ounce gin

1 ounce ruby port

3/4 ounce sweet vermouth

Yields 1 cocktail.

Shake gin, port and vermouth in cocktail shaker filled with ice until well-chilled. Pour into a martini glass.

Note: The Royal Scarlett Martini pairs well with steak or fruit and cheese.

THE CALYX

4 cubes honeydew melon

Juice of 1/2 tangerine

1 leaf fresh mint, plus mint sprig for garnish

1 1/2 ounces gin

Splash ginger beer

Yields 1 cocktail.

In cocktail shaker, muddle melon, tangerine juice and mint leaf. Add gin and fill shaker with ice. Shake until well-chilled. Pour through a fine-mesh strainer into rocks glass filled with ice. Top with splash of ginger beer and garnish with mint sprig.

Note: The Calyx pairs well with prosciutto and cheese after dinner.

THE GINGER GRAPE

12 green grapes, plus 1 for garnish

2 small slices ginger root

1 1/2 ounces gin

Yields 1 cocktail.

Add grapes and ginger root to cocktail shaker and muddle to release juices. Add gin and fill with ice. Put top on shaker and shake until well chilled. Pour cocktail through fine-mesh tea strainer into martini glass. Garnish with the whole grape on a cocktail skewer.

Note: The Ginger Grape pairs well with pork and seafood, especially scallops.

- James Moreland, Bombay Sapphire.

ST. GERMAIN COCKTAIL

2 ounces champagne or sancerre

2 ounces St. Germain elderflower liqueur

2 1/2 ounces soda

1 lemon twist

Yields 1 cocktail.

In tall Collins glass filled three-quarters full with ice, place champagne or sancerre, St. Germain and soda. Garnish with lemon twist.

- St. Germain.

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