

ON THE LIST

THE RIGHT COCKTAIL MENU=PROFIT

BY ALIA AKKAM

Five years ago, if you walked into your neighborhood bar and asked to see a cocktail menu you'd be met with a raised eyebrow, and most likely end up downing a standard vodka and tonic. Whether one orders a "Red Apple 'Rita'" at one of the country's plethora of Applebee's, or a "Guyanese Old-Fashioned" at tiny Brooklyn, NY, hangout The Jakewalk, a dedicated cocktail list is an integral part of any bar. Instead of just conforming to the masses and offering customers a piece of paper scribbled with fancy cocktails, there's actually a science to building this list. Master it, and it can translate to curious, loyal customers—and profit.

REQUIRED READING

"The objective is not unique, but the scenario is," says Allen Katz, director of mixology and spirits education at Southern Wine & Spirits of New York. Katz' job revolves around visiting accounts and educating them so they are more trend-conscious. He likes to develop distinct cocktail programs that fit the venue, "providing not only ideas, but access to ingredients." After he puts it in place with training, he returns in eight weeks to assess from a usage and sales perspective. "It's about creating a program you trust, giving it time to evolve, and maintaining and fine-tuning it. Even cocktails people love in the test phase may not sell, and you can't let them sit there."

Sometimes, Katz maintains, the old adage, "if it's not broke, don't fix it," applies to cocktail menus; other times, bartenders find themselves asking how to maintain a fresh outlook. Ultimately, though, it boils down to "breaking down the cost and profitability of cocktails." For example, Katz says "how you use things like fresh ingredients is important." If a list offers 10 cocktails, just three may use fresh lemon or lime.

Lists peppered with brand names can also be an efficient marketing tool according to Katz: "The staff has to be prepared to tell a story. If I'm not familiar with a product, I'm

going to ask the bartender, so you want to use that as a sales opportunity. Name brand awareness offers a comfort level to be taken advantage of."

Jim Ryan, Hendrick's brand ambassador, agrees storytelling is a vital component to a successful cocktail menu. "From a staff point of view, training everyone who takes an order to know the cocktails inside out is crucial; from your GM on down to your servers. If you have a drink on your menu with Hendrick's Gin as opposed to any other, be prepared to explain that you chose it because it is a Scottish family-produced small batch gin with essence of cucumber and rose added to it, and this is why it works in this drink," he says.

Just be careful about overkill. Philip Raimondo, master mixologist at Beam Global Spirits & Wine says brands should be a part of the conversation between bartender and customer. However, sometimes the appearance of that name is because of a sales person out for a quick buck; not because the bartender truly believes in it. "Brands should be chosen based on the recipe and how well it works in the drink," he asserts. "It should also be a brand that might have some guest perceived value, but this is not always the case since many guests do not know of all the great brands out there."

A GOOD EXAMPLE

When creating a menu, Ryan points out a few don'ts, including the addition of '-tini' to the end of every cocktail ("It's a dead giveaway for something reflective of a darker age in cocktails

PROFIT COMES FIRST

"If I can't sell you two of my cocktails, I'm not doing as much as I can to help the bottom line of profitability. Restaurants that care enough to put together a concerted cocktail program need to focus on the profit margin of a cocktail and be able

to talk it up."

— Allen Katz,
Southern Wine & Spirits of NY



LEFT: The cocktail selection at Commander's Palace in New Orleans ABOVE
CENTER: Interior of bar at McCradys in Charleston RIGHT: The menu and cocktail
at Café Adelaide in New Orleans

SERVERS NEED TO BE ON THEIR GAME

"The staff has to be ready to offer the menu to every guest who steps inside. For the servers, getting straight to their pocketbook works best. Ensure them that they will spend less time asking how many olives the guest would like in a dirty martini, and more efficient time taking the order off the menu. This will help them flip the table sooner and raise the check average and gratuity."

— Jim Ryan, Hendrick's Gin

rather than a brighter 2010") as well as terribly sweet libations like Apple Martinis and Amaretto Sours. He does approve of listing about 8 to 10 different classic and original cocktails, moving from lighter to darker.

The largest contribution to the construction of a cocktail menu is the undeniable resurgence of the classic cocktail. "Looking back on the past five years, they've grown significantly from the three drinks shuffled to the very last page. Currently, cocktail menus are taking some very interesting formats," Ryan notes. He points to a few in New York: the vertical approach (sparkling, lighter, darker, sweeter) embraced by his former employer, Dressler in Brooklyn, NY, Death & Co.'s multiple choice format and Allen and Delancey, which instead of naming individual cocktails, provides a theme with lighter and stronger options fitting within.

Ti Martin runs the ship at both New Orleans' legendary Commander's Palace and Café Adelaide, where the Swizzle Stick bar draws its own elite contingent of drink-

ers. "Some things are just too casual," she says. "It's nice if you have a cocktail menu." At her restaurants, the cocktail menu is featured prominently on the table; when a guest arrives, it's there. "There's always a lull between the time you're seated and when a server approaches. Guests see the list and will grab it. That's where it starts and begins the conversation." Martin says that about half of the menu at Commander's Palace constantly changes, like the "Drunk-en Pumpkin" that was a hit during the fall, while the other half remains the same. "A real drink is one you would want more of, like Dale DeGross's "Whisky Smash." It's an improvement on the Mint Julep, and it's a drink men feel confident ordering."

Even if your list is organized beautifully and readily accessible, the most important asset might be an educated staff. As Bryan Dayton, bar manager at Frasca Food and Wine in Boulder, CO, reveals: "The whole cocktail list thing is awesome, yet I have seen a couple of issues with some bars jumping on the classic movement with no real education on the classics. For instance, a friend was at a bar talking about the Hem-

HIT THE KITCHEN

"I think restaurants have an incredible advantage over bars without kitchens. It's how we came up with a hot brandy cocktail with satsumas. With savory cocktails becoming so interesting, it's a shame when restaurants don't take advantage of the experimentation going on in the kitchen."

— Ti Martin, Commander's Palace and Café Adelaide, New Orleans

FIND A BALANCE

"I want to have interesting drinks, some that may be unusual. But then the balance comes with the cocktails that appeal to the masses. Vodka-based cocktails are always the top sellers, but I prefer to give equal opportunity to all spirits, and allow our guests more options."

—Heidi Hinkle,
Aria Resort & Spa, Las Vegas, NV

ingway Daiquiri on their list and how it was closely related to the original daiquiri, and the bartender said that it was nothing like it. This was because the bartender didn't know what a real Daiquiri was. This makes me question everything about their cocktail list and if the bartenders can actually make a great cocktail."

In New York, wine is the star at A Voce restaurants. Wine director Olivier Flosse does not think this impedes guests from ordering cocktails, however. "It's a mix of offering interesting ingredients, consistent quality and giving the drinks intriguing names (such as the 'Ginger Apple')," he says. "We also have a very energetic bar scene and encourage guests to enjoy cocktails before being seated for dinner. Our bartenders are incredibly engaging with the guests."

SEASONS CHANGE

Now that today's diners are obsessed with eating locally, they expect the same from their drinks. But how often should you change up a cocktail list? And does it add



ABOVE LEFT: The bar at New York City's A Voce RIGHT: The "Tramonto di Cascade" cocktail at Frasca Food and Wine in Boulder, CO

more costs in the long run? Not according to Ryan: "If you're rotating your drinks seasonally, that would signify you're using produce when it's available and at its cheapest. The concept of seasonal flavors isn't just a passing fancy: restaurant goers are very savvy about what is presented on the menu. Would you like to have an heirloom tomato salad with watermelon, mint and fleur de sel in the dead of winter? Chances are you'd be a bit more inclined to choose the potato/leek soup with pancetta instead, not just because you know that tomatoes and melon haven't been in season for months, but because it's snowing outside. This approach translates to your drinks featured."

Raimondo agrees: "During the down economy, consumers are demanding a better cocktail for the money they are paying—they want value. In many cases it can be more cost effective to use the fresh ingredients instead of a packaged mix product. The other great thing about fresh is you have very limited waste since the juice is usually done to order. The perceived value to a guest is paramount and guests want a show. They will pay a little bit more for better quality, and fresh is the best."

Not every bar has the luxury of an on-site greenhouse like that of Summer Win-

USE YOUR INSTINCT

"You are constantly bombarded with product. You are friends with most of them so you want to help out yet you have to stick to your guns about why you like and dislike something. If it is a quality product and I think I can sell it, I will bring it on. It is all about what is in the bottle—no matter who is selling it to me."

—Bryan Dayton,
Frasca Food and Wine, Boulder, CO

ter, inside the Marriott Hotel in Burlington, MA. Bar supervisor Dave Greekwood says its cocktail menu is set apart by incorporating fresh herbs grown in the backyard into drinks; from varieties of mint and basil, to pineapple, sage, shiso and rosemary. "We try to represent what I call the 'big four': vodka, rum, gin and whiskey. For the most part we have at least one cocktail from each category; however, the vodka-based cocktails, like our "Greenhouse Caipiroska" and "Cranberry Basil Flower," are continuous best-sellers at the bar and in the dining room," he reveals.

Heidi Hinkle, director of beverage at Aria Resort & Casino in Las Vegas finds it a challenge to apply round-the-clock seasonality to cocktails, but says it is worth the effort. "It's important to keep things fresh in all bars, including the high-volume casino lounges. We squeeze fresh lime into every margarita. Although it is more expensive, it is a reflection of our program. Fresh ingredients are absolutely essential in executing a top-rated beverage program." To make fresh ingredients economically feasible, Hinkle

suggests offering "fresh fruit mojitos and caipirinhas" for instance, changing fruit seasonally and not having to worry about reprinting menus. "This offers the servers and bartenders the opportunity to talk about the offerings rather than leaving it to the guest to read through the menus; suggestive selling is always more effective."

The only way to tell if a cocktail works, whether customers are really paying attention to seasonally crafted drinks or not, is through thorough sales analysis. Clint Sloan, sommelier and beverage director at McCrady's in Charleston, SC, does this on a quarterly basis. If a drink is not selling, it is taken off the menu and replaced. "We try to stay away from the seasonal thing because it can hinder your sales," he says. "For example, we have a Sangria on our cocktail list and it sells like crazy no matter what the weather. It's amazing to me that it could be 40 degrees outside and people still order Sangria. At the end of the day if your guests are happy with a cocktail, why would you take it off and deprive them of what they want?" ■

TESTING IS KEY

"We have a team of four to five people at the restaurant who develop and test the cocktails, and refine them before placing them on the menu. A lot of research and development goes into these recipes."

—Olivier Flosse, A Voce, NY

THE RIGHT LOOK

"Five years ago it was all about how many drinks you could feature on one menu since you only printed it once every 12 to 18 months. Now your drink menu needs to be undated and printed at least twice a year. Five years ago it was all about "specialty" drinks and now it is all about originality. You must offer a signature drink."

—Philip Raimondo,
Beam Global Spirits & Wine