

Latest cocktail trend is to low-alcohol drinks

Camper English, Special to The Chronicle
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Like a food menu, a proper cocktail list reflects a chosen theme while catering to a variety of diners. The low-alcohol drinks now showing up around San Francisco are designed to satisfy cocktail flexitarians who aren't avoiding alcohol but who don't want the calories, the rapid buzz or that full feeling.

For some drinkers, it's like small-plates dining.

"I like cocktails so much that sometimes I wish all booze was lower in proof because I want to drink more and not feel (the) effects as intensely," says Brooke Arthur, who placed two low-alcohol cocktails on the bar menu she developed for Prospect restaurant.



Michael Maor / The Chronicle
Kevin Diedrich, Burritt Room bar manager, creates a low-alcohol cocktail.

Getting creative

It is not uncommon for restaurants without full liquor licenses to get creative with legal lower-alcohol ingredients like sake and soju, but now more venues like Prospect - which have the option to use gin, bourbon and other full-proof liquor - are following suit.

Bartenders have found a variety of substitutions for base spirits. Some use fortified wines like sherry and vermouth, as in the Fino Noir cocktail at Nopa and the Bamboo cocktail at Comstock Saloon.

Other bartenders work with unfortified beverages like the Chardonnay in a drink at the Burritt Room, Riesling ice wine in a version of the Pimm's Cup at Gitane, sparkling wine in the Pleasant Evening at Rickhouse, and beer in the michelada at Maya.

"Probably the biggest reason was I don't believe you should have a flavor bomb or a really intense high-proof cocktail that will completely ruin your palate before you start eating," Arthur says of her work at Prospect. She included one aperitif-style cocktail and one digestif-style for just that reason.

Taking food into account is a common theme. At Comstock Saloon, co-owner Jonny Raglin offers a version of the classic aperitif Bamboo cocktail with sherry, dry vermouth and bitters.

"I don't think it's necessarily about being an aperitif, though it is (one). All cocktails are aperitifs to a certain extent," says Raglin.

"We weren't gauging the cocktail list to pair with meals, even though people do it all the time. It really is more about being low in alcohol, something for the daytime drinker."

Aperitif cocktails

While Comstock Saloon offers food - even if Raglin prefers not to pair it with cocktails - the Burritt Room doesn't serve food. As a Union Square hotel bar with live entertainment, the clientele ranges from hotel guests to pre- and post-dinner drinkers to barhoppers en route to a nightclub.

"Our menu hits on a lot of spirits," says bar manager Kevin Diedrich. Plus, he says, the bar offers Champagne cocktails or aperitif cocktails for "people who don't want to get full or don't want to get bombed before dinner or after dinner."

The Burritt Room's menu at one time listed a version of a mint julep made with Champagne and a small amount of cognac, but Diedrich has replaced that drink with the Flying Horseman made with a buttery, oaky Chardonnay as its base (see recipe).

These low-alcohol drinks fulfill another of Diedrich's directives: To offer drinks made with beer, wine and Champagne at all times, whether they're in a low-alcohol cocktail or not. These are meant to entice drinkers of those beverages to try cocktails, a trick Diedrich says he learned from Jim Meehan at PDT in New York.

Not all about sweet

Comstock's Raglin says such drinks don't require as many sweet elements to soften the sting of liquor, which allows for additional creativity.

"Using the low-alcohol ingredients vermouth and sherry, you can put together a cocktail that's increasing your ability to use dry ingredients," he says. Otherwise, he says, the usual formulas for standard cocktails can be "kind of redundant."

Comstock's Bamboo cocktail is due to be replaced by another classic spin-off, the Improved Philomel, made with manzanilla sherry, the bitter aperitif Bonal, a touch of funky Smith & Cross rum, bitters and pepper vinegar.

Arthur notes that the shift toward low-alcohol has been helped by the proliferation of new products - fortified quinine wines like Bonal and Cocchi Americano, aperitif bitters like Gran Classico, new vermouths and sherries.

"I think we're moving on from the St. Germain and the Cantons and all the sweet, one-flavor liqueurs," she says. "Now we're seeing all these things coming out that are really bitter and interesting. Those things are like toys in our hands."

Flying Horseman

Makes 1 drink

Adapted from a recipe by Kevin Diedrich and Andrew Mitchell of Burritt Room.

- 2 ounces Chardonnay, preferably in a richer style
- 1 ounce Dolin Bianco vermouth
- 1/2 ounce Benedictine
- 1/4 ounce lemon juice
- 1 dash grapefruit bitters
- 1 dash Peychaud's bitters
- -- Soda water
- -- Grapefruit peel, for garnish

Instructions: Combine the Chardonnay, vermouth, Benedictine, lemon juice and both bitters in a mixing glass. Add ice; stir for at least 15 to 20 seconds, then strain into an ice-filled highball glass. Top with soda water and garnish with the grapefruit peel.

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