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Cocktails on tap

Spirits dispensed like beer let bartenders pull a fast one

By CARLA SPARTOS
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When Naren Young pulls the tap at the popular bar at new Bowery steakhouse Saxon & Parole, it's known to stop conversations.

Instead of a pint glass, Young pours an amber elixir over rocks into a hand-cut crystal decanter.

"I'll see this puzzled look on people's faces, like 'What is that coming out of the tap?'"

He proceeds to add a few dashes of leather-infused bitters, gives the whole thing a quick stir, then strains the resulting drink into a dainty martini glass. The remainder is poured into a small flask set over a bed of crushed ice that's been stabbed with a pair of skewered garnishes — an orange twist and branded cherries. And voilà! The \$15 Manhattan on draught is ready to serve.



"On a busy night, we'll go through an entire gallon keg — an obscene amount," says Young, a bar manager at Saxon & Parole who introduced the mix of Evan Walker single-barrel bourbon and Cocchi Vermouth di Torino to his taps in November.

"We measure everything perfectly, so it comes out consistently, it comes out cold — you don't have to stir it for very long. It's really easy to do."

The Manhattan isn't the only tippie on tap at NYC bars. At brand-new watering hole the Wayland and year-old Amor y Amargo, both in the East Village, you'll find the \$7 San Fran Spout (Fernet Branca and cola) and the \$12 Americano (sweet vermouth, Campari, soda), respectively. Others will soon be flowing: When Gin Palace opens in early April, it plans to serve both a Negroni and a gin-and-tonic on tap.

"It's pretty cool. I'm not going to pretend that wasn't a factor," says Young. "We've been seeing wine on tap and, I thought, there's no reason we can't do that with a cocktail."

But the innovation goes beyond mere effect: Amor y Amargo beverage director Mayur Subbarao wanted to improve upon the classic highball drink — basically any mix of spirit and soda — when he introduced NYC to the cocktail-on-tap concept last year at the now-shuttered El Cobre restaurant.

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concentrated at the bottom and light at the top," explains Subbarao, noting one of the inherent problems with soda-topped drinks.

And since bartenders just have to pull a tap, prices can be cheaper — and pours larger.

"[At El Cobre] we were able to offer [the Dark & Stormy and Cuba Libre] at a lower price than the rest of our cocktails," he says. "In the case of the Americano here, it's the same price as the rest of our cocktails, but it's a bigger pour."

For Subbarao, there was also a surprise bonus: "Much like a beer or a wine, you can actually give people tastes of the cocktail."

Instead of pouring the San Fran Spout from a keg, Wayland co-owner Jason Mendenhall uses a soda gun to serve Fernet Branca — the bitter Italian digestif that's a bartender cult favorite — and cola he makes himself.

"I wanted to showcase these great sodas we're making, and I thought this was an interesting way to do it," says Mendenhall, who is toying with the idea of introducing a fountain Paloma (mescal and grapefruit soda) in the spring.

Besides, says Mendenhall, there's a mystique that goes along with tending bar the old-fashioned way.

"You won't see me doing a Sazerac on tap," he explains.

But in an era when bartenders can easily get overwhelmed chipping ice and muddling fruit, some don't see the time-saving technique as a romantic buzz kill.

As Young puts it: "If they had to choose, I think most people would rather get their drink more quickly."

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