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Bartenders hone techniques for infusing spirits

Camper English, Special to The Chronicle Sunday, November 20, 2011

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Lance Iversen / The Chronicle Joel Teitelbaum pours jalapeno-infused Chartreuse at Harry Denton's Starlight Room for his Humos Locos cocktail, below.

Around the turn of the millennium, bartenders proudly displayed large glass jars of their experiments behind the bar. These infusions generally weren't terribly complex; often they would be fruit floating in vodka or light rum, destined for a flavored lemon drop or mojito.

A decade later, bartenders have refined those techniques, infusing spirits in different ways to put all sorts of vegetable (and sometimes animal) matter into syrups, tinctures, bitters and liquors.

For most of the past two years, infusions were in limbo here after California bartenders learned that homemade "rectification" of spirits was illegal in California. A new law passed a few months ago to allow the practice, and bartenders

are back at it with a vengeance - not only for starring spirits like vodka but for the supporting cast of ingredients as well.

Menus in San Francisco and around the country now list caraway-infused Campari, black-cardamom-infused Sherry, black-pepper-infused Chartreuse, clove-infused Cognac, and chai-tea-infused sweet vermouth. Despite some of these spirits purportedly containing 130 ingredients, bartenders feel compelled to add just one more.

Their reasons for these infusions vary. But everyone seems to want to fine-tune flavors for a specific

cocktail.

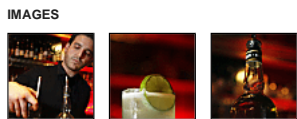
Methods vary, too. Though an infusion need not be alcoholic - water and sugar syrups can be infused, too - the higher the alcoholic proof, the faster and more pronounced the extraction of flavors. When very high-proof alcohol is used, bartenders refer to the infusion as a tincture, which typically highlights a single flavor.

At the Wilson & Wilson Detective Agency, part of the bar Bourbon & Branch, bartenders Jayson Wilde and Ian Scalzo seem to want to infuse nearly everything. But their method changes depending on the needs of each cocktail.

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"I think it comes down more to extraction," Scalzo says. "When I make a tincture, I'm using something really high proof like Everclear and I let it sit for two days. It really pulls that flavor out intensely. And that's why you use only a drop or dash in a drink."

But less potent infusions also serve a purpose. To a Tequila-based drink called the Crimson Chord, he adds strawberry-infused Cocchi Aperitivo Americano (a bitter aperitif wine), lemon juice, chocolate stout syrup and a sea-salt-and-pepper tincture. That's three flavoring techniques for one cocktail.

Scalzo said in developing the drink, he sought to find the best combination of methods to achieve a specific mix of flavors he thought up. Putting fruit straight into Tequila, for instance, wouldn't work: "When I infused the spirit with strawberries, it was just too intense."

Control is a big justification for these techniques. While San Francisco bars are often known for the "salad in a glass" format of muddling many ingredients in a drink, Scalzo finds infusions and tinctures to be a more accurate means of adding flavor.

"If you do a multiple-bottle infusion, you're using a whole flat of strawberries," he says. "If you're muddling, the flat of strawberries might not be ripe the next week."

Yael Amyra, formerly a bartender at Circolo, had a drink on that menu with vanilla-infused vermouth. She, too, wanted to avoid overwhelming the base liquor - in her case, a gin that sponsored a cocktail contest she had entered.

"I didn't want to completely mask a base spirit; I wanted to make it taste better. And I needed to find some kind of velvety texture and taste," she says. "So that's why I went to vermouth."

She placed vanilla seeds in Dolin Blanc vermouth to create a more delicate flavor.

Vermouth is a frequent recipient of an infused tweak. At Employees Only in New York, bartenders have been infusing it for nearly a decade. It began, says co-owner Dushan Zaric, with the search for a specific flavor - a chai tea accent to bridge Cognac and pomegranate juice. He put the blend in a tea bag and dropped it into sweet vermouth.

Now the bar serves a drink with herbs de Provence-infused dry vermouth and another with red-bush-tea-infused blanc vermouth.

And for a cocktail called the Lazy Lover, they mix jalapeno-infused Green Chartreuse with cachaca, Benedictine, lime juice and agave nectar.

"We muddled jalapeno into the drink, but it didn't really work well," Zaric says. "We tried infusing cachaca with jalapeno. That didn't work. It was overpowering. Then I thought to infuse Chartreuse with jalapeno."

Joel Teitelbaum of Harry Denton's Starlight Room takes the same approach with Chartreuse, then mixes it with mezcal, lime and agave syrup. He came to his own revelation by trying to combine two separate drinks he had created at a previous job: one with jalapeno-nectarine marmalade, and another with mezcal and green Chartreuse. The infusion of Chartreuse seemed to provide more flavor than simply making a jalapeno tincture.

"The tincture is such a concentration of flavor that you don't get the full effect from the herbs, the spiciness and the bell pepper flavor," Teitelbaum says. "It was short on the palate. I wanted to move that cocktail along ... and make sure it gave a full range of flavor."

Humos Locos

Makes 1 drink

Adapted from a recipe by Joel Teitelbaum.

- 1 1/2 ounces Del Maguey Vida or other high-quality mezcal
- 3/4 ounce jalapeno-infused green Chartreuse (see Notes)
- 3/4 ounce fresh lime juice
- 1/2 ounce agave syrup (see Notes)
- 1 lime wheel, for garnish

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Instructions: Pour all ingredients, except the garnish, into a cocktail shaker. Add ice; shake for 15-20 seconds. Strain into an ice-filled rocks glass. Garnish with the lime wheel.

Notes: To make jalapeno-infused green Chartreuse, quarter one large jalapeno pepper and add all the pieces to a 750-ml bottle of green Chartreuse; let steep for 72 hours. (For a 375-ml bottle, use half a pepper.)

To make the agave syrup, combine 1 part water and 2 parts light agave nectar.

Camper English is a cocktail and spirits writer and the publisher of Alcademics. Send e-mail to wine@sfgchronicle.com.

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