

Wine producers are beginning to realize possibilities on the cocktail menu. Here, Spanish Rioja lends a unique flavor and tames the alcohol content in a New York Sour.



BEER & WINE

Join the Cocktail Crowd

Progressive mixologists are finding mixed-drink potential in these typically go-it-alone quaffs

BY JACK ROBERTIELLO

It's taken awhile, but creative bartenders finally recognize that beer and wine are ready to take their turn in the cocktail renaissance.

These beverages' appearance in the cocktail mix hasn't been a balanced or universal trend, however; beer just recently established a growing presence on many drink menus, a move heartily welcomed by customers, while wine's contribution is still made primarily by sparkling and fortified products.

BEER GAINS GROUND

Beer is taken seriously as a mixed-drink ingredient in venues like gastropubs, ethnic restaurants and other beer-focused operations. The Northern European-themed Vandaag in New York City is a fine example of an evolution, mixing bits of all three concepts and featuring seasonally changing beers on a Genever- and aquavit-based beverage menu.

Earlier this year, the beer drink list included the Bitter Linzer (Calvados, Batavia arrack, sweet vermouth, lemon, egg white, spiced syrup and Timmermans Framboise) and the Radler (pineapple-infused aquavit, ginger syrup, lime and Blanche de Bruxelles witbier).

Vandaag's Radler is a sophisticated version of a traditional Bavarian recipe of roughly half lager and half soda or lemonade.

"I draw from the classics or a classic formula and build off that," says Vandaag's drink creator, Katie Stipe. "With beer cocktails, there's a lot of exploration to be had, and that's why people are excited about them."

She notes an operational advantage beer cocktails offer: Beverages lower in alcohol allow guests to quaff safely and order more frequently throughout the meal.

Mixing it up WITH BEER

SUDS CAN BRING A PLAYFUL TOUCH TO COCKTAILS

Jane's Candy: McCoy's Ginger Shandy and raspberry wheat beer — The Foundry, Kansas City, Mo.

The Belga: St. Louis Peche Beer, Hangar One Lime Vodka, Crème De Peche and a dash of Rose's Lime Juice — Belga Café, Washington, D.C.

Beggar's Banquet: Bourbon with maple syrup, fresh lemon juice, aromatic bitters, topped with ale — The Breslin, New York City

Margaveza: Mexican cerveza served on top of a margarita (served in a mason jar) — Barrio Mexican Kitchen & Bar, Seattle

Drunken Monk: Chimay Triple, St. Germain elderflower liquor and fresh mint, served over ice — 8 oz. Burger Bar, Miami Beach, Fla.

Hi-beer-nator: Gin, hibiscus beer, citrus, orange slice, sage leaves, thyme, agave nectar — Steingarten, Los Angeles

Beer-mosa: Allagash White and orange juice — Bad Apple, Chicago



YARD HOUSE

Yard House has a changing list of 10 beer blends on its menu. On offer here are Black Velvet (foreground), layering Wyder's Pear Cider and Guinness Stout, and Belgian Shandy, made with the pear cider and Leffe Blond.

WINE PLAYS CATCH-UP

While a growing number of restaurants and bars like Vandaag embrace the range of flavors and styles beer bring to a drink, wine still lags behind. Part of the problem is advocacy; bitters, market-fresh mixology, rye and white whiskey, barrel-aged cocktails all have their champions, while beer and wine companies in general haven't put much energy into promoting their products' use in mixed drinks.

Beer cocktails have an edge in the well-established European tradition of mixing two beers together; in addition to the Radler and its German relative, the Diesel (beer and cola), there are the traditional British Black and Tans and Half and Halfs. Few wines, by contrast, have ever been mixed together, although variations on the Calimocho (cola and red wine) are common in bars in Spain, Eastern Europe and South America.

But wine producers are starting to show interest in the concept, as witnessed in the launch last summer of the "Rioja Pour Genius" program inviting bartenders to create drinks using red, white or rose Rioja. Admittedly, the Riojans are more interested in developing awareness among bartenders of the broad flavor qualities and affordability of the region's wines, as Americans increasingly drink wine at the bar and seek advice from bartenders. Still, it's the first time a major wine-producing region has been known to offer its wares as a mixable ingredient.

A NEW WINE CULTURE

"As the U.S. is becoming the No. 1 wine consumer in the world, a wine culture also has been developing at the bar," says Ana Fabiano, brand ambassador at Vibrant Rioja.

Wine cocktails, while thinner on the ground, are starting to show up on more menus, especially fine-dining operations.

"Wine cocktails can offer a perfect solution for customers who want something light and easy and not too boozy," says Lynn House, a former wine buyer and now chief mixologist at Blackbird in Chicago.

"As a sommelier, I felt almost expected to have at least one wine cocktail on the list at all times," says Fred Dexheimer, beverage program consultant. "There are inherent flavors in

different wines that I always felt worked with the different seasons, so I always played around with this. Also, I found customers generally know a little bit about wine, and when they see a wine they know on a list there is a sense of comfort in many cases.”

Some wine varietals in general work better in mixed drinks than others. Dexheimer is partial to using white wines like Sauvignon Blanc and Riesling but has used Grüner Veltliner and other more esoteric varieties.

“I am not a fan of using oaked whites unless with spirits like bourbon. I use reds a bit less and find, depending on what I am looking to do, that varieties with softer tannins and juicy fruit work best, like Pinot Noir or Grenache.”

Blackbird’s House favors Merlot and Tempranillo for their complexity, earthiness, fruit and spice, which lend them to use with tropical fruits like mango and passion fruit.

VERSATILE BEER BLENDS

While awareness of wine as an ingredient develops, there’s a slew of experimentation going on with beer, enough to give such mass-market beer operations as the Yard House thoughts about including beer cocktails down the road. Meanwhile, with their 100-plus draft brew lines, Yard House keeps its selection of blended beer drinks (currently 10 variations on the menu) actively changing, says Beverage Director Kip Snider.

“We have a ton of beer blends. One of our most popular is a Belgian Shandy, made with pear cider and Belgian blonde ale. There have always been beer blends, and we just took a more extreme approach as beers continue to change and our palates change with them.”

Snider notes that operations like his, where beer is the central focus, need to adapt continuously and offer mixed beers in new and exciting ways in order to keep customers interested. One success is the Berry Chocolate (Young’s Double-Chocolate Stout and Lindemans Framboise), reminiscent of a chocolate-covered raspberry. Yard House also has long served beer in floats, a concept gaining traction in independent restaurants lately, as in a mix of vanilla ice cream with Lindemans Framboise.

FORM FOLLOWS FLAVOR

Aside from blends, beer and wine drinks take one of two forms: mixed with spirits, juices, sodas or syrups or used strictly as a modifying ingredient in a drink.

Most common among beer drinks are the variations based on the classic Michelada recipe: Mexican beer, lime juice, tomato juice, hot sauce and spices. At the Hotel San Jose in Austin, a variation is served with soy and Worcestershire sauces replacing tomato juice.

Jim Meehan of New York’s PDT developed a recipe for the Backyard Michelada that includes local pale ale, blended Scotch whisky, white grapefruit juice, honey syrup, dill-pickle brine, Gulden’s Spicy Mustard, black pepper and a pickle-spear garnish. Then there’s the Bloody Bangkok at Social Wine Bar in Charleston, S.C., made with smoked doppelbock and Thai chile, Sriracha sauce, Thai basil and jalapeño-infused simple syrup in the Bloody Mary mix.

At New York’s tequila-and-mezcal-focused Mayahuel, barman Phil Ward features a handful of classic cerveza drinks on his menu, including variations on the Michelada and his original El Jimador’s Shifty (pineapple-infused mezcal, lime, sugar cane, Negra Modelo and a salt rim).

Though as a concept, the beer cocktail has spread further than wine drinks, few brewers have gotten involved in promoting them. But at Scholars American Bistro & Cocktail Lounge in Boston, General Manager Kati Semanski organized a competition recently for guests and staff. Twelve recipes made the final competition, judged by those attending, and while her entry — Harpoon weizen, cherries macerated in absinthe, gin and sour cherries — didn’t win, Semanski says it was instructive to view the competition as the guests did.

“Something like this keeps us grounded and in touch with what people want, and not just on our esoteric palates,” she says. The winner, a mix of elderflower liqueur, pureed blackberries, sloe gin, lemon juice and beer, went on the menu in September.

Scholars already has a half-dozen or so beer drinks on the menu, including Kati’s Weissen-gria (served in pitchers or by the glass and made with Allagash White, spiced rum,

Variations on the beer-based Mexican Michelada are ripe with flavor from syrups, juices and sodas.



MONIN



The winner (center) in a beer-cocktail competition at Scholars in Boston combined elderflower liqueur, pureed blackberries, sloe gin, lemon juice and beer. Runners-up were the Weissen-gria (left) and the Milwaukee Matador.

peach liqueur, triple sec, fresh lemon juice and fresh fruit) and the Milwaukee Matador (house-infused habanero tequila, Miller High Life, orange juice and fresh lime, much like a beery Mimosa).

PLAYFUL PAIRINGS

Even in the half year or so Scholars has been open, Semanski has seen the beer cocktail scene expand in the Boston area. "It's a really fun mixer, and once you start, it's like you have opened up a whole new world of ingredients. Beer already comes with so much of its own individuality, and it can be fun to play with and surprise people with."

That playfulness shows through in the wine drinks crafted by Lynn House at

Blackbird. Last summer, she featured a cocktail made with Pinot Gris, fresh grapefruit juice and sweetened fennel syrup. One of her most successful wine cocktails, the Moon River, is based on an 1800s drink, the Bishop, a precursor of Sangria made with red wine, Cognac, spices and seasonal fruits. For her version, House mixed Merlot with raspberry vodka, clementines and cloves and served the result in a champagne flute.

CULINARY TECHNIQUES

Some creative ways to introduce beer and wine into drinks are purely culinary, as with reductions and syrups. Stipe uses beers sweetened with Demerara or cane sugar at Vandaag, while House frequently develops her own wine reductions as ingredients. At Blackbird last winter she featured the Jalisco Sunset, made with reposado tequila, poached pear, agave nectar and a Pinot Noir reduction drizzled on the top of the finished drink, a riff on the original Tequila Sunset that was finished with blackberry brandy. When making reductions, she simmers the wine with sugar to add some viscosity and create an alternative sweetener with more body and flavor.

As with beer drinks, a beverage crafted with a 12 percent alcohol Pinot Gris as the base might end up around nine percent alcohol once modifiers and ice are added. "I'm always very aware of alcohol content and not blowing out a customer's palate," House says.

While bartenders have been reluctant to get involved with wine drinks, House suggests educational efforts are needed to demystify the concept for both staff and customers, though at the fine-dining Blackbird, customer reaction has been great. In fact, she's hearing from wine makers and producers looking to see if she'd make cocktails using their wares.

With Rioja on the bandwagon and the beer business in a state of flux, creative bartenders and beverage managers can expect more suggestions about how to lighten and brighten their beverage menus with beer and wine cocktails. ☺

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Take-Away TIPS

EASY DOES IT: Lighter, brighter beers and lower-tannin wines adapt easily to the addition of other flavors. Fruity lambic beers offer great promise as mixers.

NO SPIRITS NEEDED: Operations without full liquor licenses can build sophisticated programs by adding juices, syrups and other culinary touches to the beers and wines they carry.

SIMPLE STEPS: If you already menu quality sodas, house-made lemonade, syrups and chilled green, black and herbal teas, you have all the ingredients you need to launch a beer and wine cocktail program.

