

Drinkable Desserts

Cream liqueurs lend themselves to approachable and comforting cocktails

BY SALLY KRAL

Over the past two decades, virtually every spirits category has changed to keep pace with demand for new products and innovating cocktail ingredients. Even smaller subcategories like cream liqueurs are benefiting as bartenders and consumers expand their horizons. “Once upon a time, Irish cream liqueur was really the only option, so flavor profiles for new cocktails were limited,” notes Johnny Swet, beverage director for The Skylark in New York City. “But now, with cream-based liqueurs spanning flavors from cookies and cream to caramel to pistachio, the door has been kicked open for a wider range of cocktails.”

As has been the case with other spirits, the number of cream liqueur brands on the market has grown in recent years, adding some excitement to the category, especially behind the bar. “Even ten years ago, if you asked what cream liqueurs were available, the first one to come to mind would be Baileys and the Irish whiskey knockoffs, but recently we’ve seen other cream spirits bubbling into the scene and opening our eyes to more variety,” says Rick Blumberg, manager of adult beverage, research, and development for Marlow’s Tavern, which has locations throughout Georgia and Florida. He points to Godiva and Amarula cream liqueurs as some of his current favorites. “Godiva helps create a delicious Chocolate Martini, while Amarula, made from the marula fruit from South Africa, is a cream fruit liqueur with a hint of caramel that spawned the separation of whiskey and cream spirits to blending any spirit with cream.” Blumberg adds that several rum-based cream liqueurs have entered the market and made things more interesting. “Blue Chair Bay rum



As the spirits world continues to evolve, bartenders are expanding their horizons, utilizing cream liqueurs to craft cocktails such as the *Elephantiasis* (pictured) from Moneygun in Chicago.

makes a delicious variety of rum cream spirits, and one of my favorite newcomers is Somrus Chai, a rum-based cream liqueur from India laced with cardamom, cinnamon, and nuts,” he says.

As the variety of cream liqueur brands and styles has grown, so have cocktails that feature them. “We’ve seen an increase in the quality of other ingredients that are being mixed with cream liqueurs,” says Ryan DeRosa, beverage director for Milwaukee-based hospitality group Stand Eat Drink. “For a long time, cream liqueurs were relegated to cheap shots with eyeroll-inducing names, but now bartenders are discovering ways these liqueurs can complement thoughtfully made products.”

Jonathan Pogash, a New York City-based mixologist and owner of beverage consulting company The Cocktail Guru, also notes that cream liqueurs haven’t always had the best reputation, but that’s been changing slowly over time. “Instead of collecting dust on a backbar or being buried in a bar fridge, cream liqueurs are coming to the forefront as base ingredients in cocktails,” he says. “Not only are bartenders becoming more aware of their versatility,

consumers at home are starting to experiment more—but there’s still work to be done.”

Comforting Classics

Although some of the newer cream liqueurs on the market are shaking things up in an otherwise straightforward category, most consumers are still drawn to cream liqueurs because of their approachability and comforting taste. “One of the keys to cream liqueurs’ popularity with consumers is that they’re

PHOTO BY (OPPOSITE, CENTER) SEAN WILLE



Traditional coffee-flavored cream liqueur drinks—such as the *Don’s Irish Coffee* (inset top) from Don’s Diner & Cocktails in Milwaukee and the *Noche Bueno* (inset above) from Marlow’s Tavern in Georgia and Florida—are seeing competition from fruit-forward cocktails such as the *Dream Sicko Mode* (pictured) from Furious Spoon in Chicago.

reminiscent of flavors guests already understand and know—there’s no quinine or other elements that might be more provocative or require explaining,” says Jack Keane, general manager of Cincinnati bar Comfort Station. “The sweet flavors of these liqueurs are accessible and easy to relate to for most consumers.”

Indeed, cream liqueur cocktails tend to fall into the easy-drinking category, often relegated to sweet and dessert-like cocktails that bring out the kid in everyone. “Because of their sweetness and richness, cream liqueurs are a great way to have your dessert and drink it too,” says Blumberg of Marlow’s Tavern. His Tiramisu cocktail (\$10), which he created with Marlow’s Tavern chef John Metz, features Kerrygold Irish Cream liqueur, Caffè Borghetti Espresso liqueur, DeKuyper Crème de Cacao liqueur, and half-and-half.

“Cream liqueurs are fun because you can easily explore dessert flavors like ice cream and crème brûlée—no pastry chef skills required,” says DeRosa of Stand Eat Drink, adding that when mixed with coffee, cream liqueur cocktails are perfect for brunch. At the Stand Eat Drink property Don’s Diner & Cocktails in Milwaukee, Don’s Irish Coffee is a great compliment to the venue’s food menu, which is focused on diner classics, including all-day breakfast. The drink (\$8) features Tullamore D.E.W. Irish whiskey, Kerrygold Irish cream liqueur, and coffee, topped with whipped cream and nutmeg.

Coffee is perhaps the most common ingredient to mix with cream liqueur, thanks to the enduring popularity of a simple Baileys and coffee. Blumberg and Metz’s Noche Bueno (\$9.50) blends Amarula Vanilla Spice cream liqueur, Riazul Blanco Tequila, Tiramisu liqueur, and cold-brew coffee. Blumberg says the drink, topped with fresh whipped cream and cocoa powder, is one of the most popular cream liqueur cocktails the chain offers.

“On the rocks or in coffee comprises nearly all cream liqueur orders in our restaurant,” says Austin Carson, beverage director and co-owner of Olivia in Denver. “I unapologetically love Baileys and coffee and will occasionally use Coole Swan or Mrs. Walker’s Drumgray in an Irish coffee-type drink.” His Chocolate-Peanut Butter Irish Coffee (\$13) blends Coole Swan Irish Cream liqueur, peanut butter-washed Jameson Black Barrel Irish whiskey, coffee, and The Bitter Truth Chocolate bitters.

“Martini-style cocktails with cream liqueurs are the most popular, and there’s been a comeback of the Espresso Martini,” The Cocktail Guru’s Pogash says. The Espresso Martini (\$16) at Tuscan Kitchen in Boston features vanilla bean-infused Prairie Organic vodka, Baileys Irish cream liqueur, Borghetti di Vero Caffè espresso liqueur, and espresso. “Some bartenders these days aren’t using the standard cream liqueurs in these styles of cocktails—they’re thinking more outside the box,” Pogash adds. At the Stand Eat Drink venue Hotel Madrid in Milwaukee, DeRosa’s Midwest Express (\$10) is his own take on the Espresso Martini, mixing Finlandia vodka, RumChata cream liqueur, and Great Lakes Distillery Good Land Coffee liqueur.

“I find that cream-based products shine more when used with flavors and products that are equally dense: Think heavy fall and winter flavors and textures like spices, chocolate, and coffee,” says Donavan Mitchem, beverage director at the Chicago bar Moneygun. “These are all bold flavors that can stand up to the sometimes-intense body of cream liqueurs.” His Sanka, Ya Dead? cocktail (\$12) comprises one bold, hearty flavor after another: El Dorado rum cream liqueur, Combier Crème de Banane liqueur, Blandy’s Rainwater Madeira, Hamilton Jamaican Pot Still Gold rum, Big Shoulders espresso, egg white, and Fee Brothers Aztec Chocolate bitters. For a TV segment on The Today Show in New York City, Pogash created his own take on the traditional Caribbean egnog-



LEFT TO RIGHT: The Sanka, Ya Dead? from Chicago’s Moneygun, the Smoke Over the City from The Skylark in New York City, and the Chocolate Peanut Butter Irish Coffee from Denver’s Olivia showcase how traditional coffee and cream liqueur pairings still drive the category.

style drink Coquito. Called the Jonathan’s Coquito, the drink comprises Amarula, Maggie’s Farm Coffee liqueur, Saint James rum agricole, Perfect Purée Coconut purée, condensed milk, and a blend of ground ginger, nutmeg, clove, and cinnamon.

Additional Applications

Outside of coffee and coffee-flavored liqueurs, there’s a wide world of ingredients and drink styles to explore that work well with cream liqueurs. “Tropical flavors pair exceptionally well with cream liqueurs, as do red and dark fruit ingredients,” Pogash says. His Jack Rabbit Punch, which he created for the cream liqueurs company Creamy Creation, comprises Creamy Creation Melon Coco Breeze liqueur, Laird’s Straight Apple brandy, apple cider, and homemade grenadine. At Moneygun, Mitchem’s Elephantiasis (\$12) mixes Plantation Pineapple, Hamilton Jamaican Gold, and Brinley Gold Shipwreck Coconut rums with Amarula and house-made pineapple gomme syrup.

“Cream liqueurs are popping up outside of traditional cocktails—it’s not just Mudslides anymore, not that there’s anything wrong with them,” says Andy Mullins, retail and beverage director for New York City-based OddFellows Ice Cream Co. “There’s more interest in how cream liqueurs can integrate with flavors beyond wood, toast, and chocolate. Both spirits manufacturers and bartenders seem to be more interested in mixing fruit and cream flavors.” Though an ice cream shop, the new OddFellows location in Chestnut Hills, Massachusetts has a full liquor license, and cream liqueurs come into play in fun, interesting ways. The shop serves a Limoncello Affogato (\$10), which is olive oil and strawberry ice cream topped with Fabrizia Crema di Limoncello liqueur and candied lemon and orange. “The fruit and cream combination comes naturally to those of us in the ice cream world, and crema di limoncello is a personal favorite at the moment and is surprisingly versatile,” Mullins adds.

“It can be good with clear spirits like gin and dark spirits like rum, and richer styles

of Sherry like Amontillado or Palo Cortado can also add some depth and interest. Fabrizia Crema di Limoncello is fresh and fruit-forward, while still creamy. You can play with the sweetness and acid, or amplify the citrus pith tone and take it in a bitter direction.”

Cream liqueurs are indeed a natural pairing for all types of fruit flavors and ingredients. Chicago restaurant chain Furious Spoon offers the Dream Sicko Mode (\$8.50), created by Danny Williamson, director of operations, at all locations. The drink features Somrus Mango cream liqueur and Greenbar Distillery Fruitlab Orange liqueur, topped with whipped cream and a Filthy Black amarena cherry. At The Skylark, Swet’s Jelly Donut (\$14) blends Havana Club rum, RumChata, and Chambord raspberry liqueur. “Right now, RumChata is my favorite cream liqueur—the flavor notes of cinnamon and vanilla work well with a mixology program because they add depth to the flavor profile as well as a nice viscosity to cocktails that are served up,” Swet says. “In general, balance is crucial to any cocktail, and since cream liqueurs are sweet, they require a stronger base spirit to add that balance. Cream liqueurs enhance the base spirit, while also giving a fuller body and flavor to cocktails.” His Smoke Over The City (\$19) features Banhez mezcal, Mozart Chocolate Cream liqueur, house-made cinnamon syrup, and Regans’ No. 6 Orange bitters.

“Cream liqueur-based cocktails will always see a big following in fall and winter, but I think the biggest trend we’ll see in the future is more niche, artisanal brands cropping up, kind of the way craft brews took a foothold years ago,” Swet notes. Mullins is also hopeful that more micro-distillers will get into the category. “There’s such a diversity of small-batch distillers in the U.S. and around the world,” he says. “It would be great to see more experimentation in cream liqueurs by the little guys.”

Cream Liqueur-based Cocktail Recipes

CHOCOLATE-PEANUT BUTTER IRISH COFFEE

By Austin Carson

Ingredients:

2 ounces Coole Swan Irish Cream liqueur;
2 ounces peanut butter-washed Jameson Black Barrel Irish whiskey¹;
3 ounces freshly brewed coffee;
3 dashes The Bitter Truth Chocolate bitters;
Grated nutmeg.

Recipe:

In a heated mug, combine liqueur, whiskey, coffee, and bitters and stir. Garnish with grated nutmeg.

¹Spread peanut butter from one 16-ounce jar across a large, lipped baking pan, creating a thin layer. Pour one 750-ml. bottle whiskey on top. Cover the pan tightly with plastic wrap to prevent evaporation and allow it to sit overnight at room temperature. The next day, strain the whiskey through a coffee filter and funnel it back into the bottle. Discard the peanut butter.

²In a pot, bring 1 quart sugar, 1 quart water, and 8-10 cinnamon sticks to a boil. Let simmer for 15 minutes, then strain and cool.

DREAM SICKO MODE

By Danny Williamson

Ingredients:

2 ounces Somrus Mango Cream liqueur;
¾ ounces Greenbar Distillery Fruitlab Orange liqueur;
Whipped cream;
Filthy Black amarena cherry.

Recipe:

Build liqueurs into an iced-filled cocktail shaker and shake well. Strain into a crushed ice-filled highball glass. Top with whipped cream and a Filthy Black cherry.

SMOKE OVER THE CITY

By Johnny Swet

Ingredients:

1½ ounces Banhez mezcal;
1 ounce Mozart Chocolate Cream liqueur;
½ ounce cinnamon syrup²;
3 dashes Regans’ No. 6 Orange bitters;
Charred cinnamon stick.

Recipe:

In an ice-filled cocktail shaker, combine mezcal, liqueur, syrup, and bitters. Shake and strain into an ice-filled rocks glass. Garnish with a charred cinnamon stick.

PHOTOS BY (CENTER) FRONT OF HOUSE; (RIGHT) THE DENVER DISH