

Flavor Fusion

House-infused spirits allow bartenders to create one-of-a-kind cocktails

BY SALLY KRAL



Bartenders are infusing spirits using innovative ingredients like herbs and fats. At New York's Baar Baar, the Amul Old Fashioned (above left) features butter-washed Bourbon while the Siberian Maldives (above right) uses a sweet grass-infused vodka at Kachka in Portland, Oregon.

While flavored spirits have been around for decades, bartenders haven't always been the biggest fans of them—especially early iterations that featured artificial flavoring and coloring. And even as the quality of flavored spirits has grown considerably, many bartenders still prefer creating their own infused spirits so they can truly put their mark on a cocktail. “It’s such a great and simple way to add a desired flavor to a cocktail without the sugar or additional alcohol,” says Jamie Cecchine, bar manager at Kachka in Portland, Oregon. “It’s become such common practice that it’s rare to see a cocktail menu without some kind of infusion on it.”

Any spirit can be the perfect canvas to take on additional flavors from fresh herbs, spices, fruits, vegetables—and even pantry items like peanut butter—to make an entirely new spin on the base ingredient. “Infusing spirits can change the profile of the spirit drastically, often creating a unique, signature product,” says Jeremy Le Blanche, beverage director at Thyme Bar in New York City. This is especially appealing to bartenders looking to make drinks that stand out from the crowd—plus, infusing spirits is an enjoyable way to experiment and let their imaginations run wild. “I enjoy the creative aspect of infusing spirits, which includes a lot of trial and error that

PHOTO BY (ABOVE LEFT) NOAH FECKS; (ABOVE RIGHT) CARLY DIAZ; (OPPOSITE) JAMIE CECCHINE

Vodka is a favored spirit for infusions because its neutral character makes it a blank canvas for additional flavors. At Kachka, bar manager Jamie Cecchine infuses Taaka vodka with toasted birch bark in her Scandinavian Sour cocktail (pictured).





At Chicago's *Venteux*, bartenders use infusions to experiment with color in the matcha-infused *Emerald Streams* cocktail (top) and the *Spill the Tea* (above), a Mallorca melon tea-infused tequila cocktail.

often develops into something magnificent," says Robert Mack, lead bartender of *Venteux* at the *Pendry* hotel in Chicago. "If we're not exploring different avenues of creativity behind the bar, then there's no fun in the drinks-making process."

Creative Control

Kachka is a Russian restaurant so, naturally, vodka is prominently featured on the beverage menu. There are dozens of labels from around the world represented, as well as a section of 12 different house-infused vodkas. Cecchine uses these infused vodkas in a majority of her cocktails. "With infused vodka being such a huge part of our beverage program at *Kachka*, I definitely lean hard into that," she says. "Vodka is such a wonderful blank canvas to impart flavor into. There are, of course, the very traditional infusions in Russian culture, like horseradish and honey pepper, but it's also fun to use seasonal ingredients that are special to the Pacific Northwest, like hood strawberries or matsutake mushrooms." Her Scandinavian Sour (\$13) features toasted birch bark-infused Taaka vodka, Gammel Dansk liqueur, Linie aquavit, house-made orange and lemon sherbet, Angostura bitters, and egg whites, while

her *Kiss of the Earth* (\$13) blends tamarind-infused Taaka vodka, Monarch amaretto, Giffard Abricot du Roussillon apricot liqueur, Torre Oria Cava, The Perfect Purée apricot puree, lemon juice, and Angostura bitters.

Kayla Saenz, assistant general manager of Restaurant *Olivia* in Denver, notes that the rise of house-infused spirits has coincided with the trend of using seasonal and locally sourced ingredients in cocktails. "It isn't just farm-to-table anymore—farm-to-bar is on the up-and-up too, so we plan a lot of our cocktail menu based on what's fresh from the farmers' market and what's in season," she says, adding that the restaurant's Grape Gin Spritz (\$16), which she created along with co-owner and bar manager Austin Carson, is wildly popular. It features grape-infused New Amsterdam Stratusphere gin, Aperol aperitif, simple syrup, house-made grape bitters, and Nobilissima Prosecco. The grapes are sourced from the backyard of the titular *Olivia*, the daughter and stepdaughter of co-owners Heather Morrison and Austin Carson, respectively. "The grapes still have flavor even after infusing in all that gin, so we jarred them up, covered them with Everclear and added some anise to create the grape bitters in the drink," Saenz says.

Venteux's Mack favors vodka, gin, and blanco Tequila for infusions. "With the *Emerald Streams* cocktail, I infused Bombay Sapphire gin with matcha, which both bring unique earthy notes but have enough subtleties to let each other shine through," he says. In addition to the matcha-infused Bombay



House infusions allow bartenders to make custom mixes to pair with their house-made syrups and juices. The *Kiss of the Earth* (left) at *Kachka*, *The Goa Punch* (middle) at *Baar Baar*, and the *Far East Side* (right) at New York City's *Ophelia* all blend custom spirits infusions with house-made syrups or juices to further enhance the flavors of each cocktail.

Sapphire, the drink (\$16) comprises Chopin Botanika Angelica Elderflower liqueur, lime juice, Demerara sugar, and egg white. "Our spicy Margarita-inspired *Spill the Tea* is quite popular at *Venteux* as well, and I get a lot of questions about the Mallorca melon tea-infused Casamigos Blanco," Mack adds. Created by general manager Danielle Nolan, the drink

(\$16) mixes Rare Tea Cellar Mallorca Melon tea-infused Casamigos Blanco Tequila, Casamigos mezcal, lime juice, agave syrup, and *Scrappy's* Firewater bitters. "When guests try the drink, they're completely blown away by not just the bright flavor but also the bold pink color the Casamigos takes on from the infusion," Mack says. "Infusing spirits can add

Cocktail Recipes Featuring Infused Spirits

KISS OF THE EARTH By Jamie Cecchine

Ingredients:

- 1½ ounces tamarind-infused Taaka vodka¹;
- ¼ ounce Monarch amaretto;
- ¼ ounce Giffard Abricot du Roussillon apricot liqueur;
- 1 dash Angostura bitters;
- 1½ ounces Torre Oria Cava;
- ½ ounce The Perfect Purée apricot purée;
- ¼ ounce lemon juice;
- Lemon wheel;
- Tajín seasoning-dusted apricot.

Recipe:

In an ice-filled cocktail shaker, combine vodka, amaretto, liqueur, bitters, purée, and juice. Shake, then add Cava to the shaker. Strain into Collins glass over fresh ice. Garnish with a skewered tajín-dusted apricot and lemon wheel.

GOA PUNCH By Chetan Gangan

Ingredients:

- 1½ ounces curry leaf-infused Old Monk rum²;
- ½ ounce Malibu Coconut rum;
- ½ ounce DeKuyper Peachtree Schnapps liqueur;
- 2 ounces pineapple juice;
- ¾ ounce lime juice;
- Fried curry leaf.

Recipe:

In an ice-filled cocktail shaker, combine rums, liqueur, and juices. Shake and strain into tiki or Collins glass over a large ice cube. Garnish with a fried curry leaf.

THE FAR EAST SIDE By Amir Babayoff

Ingredients:

- 1½ ounces shiso-infused Mizu shochu³;
- ½ ounce Tanqueray gin;
- ¼ ounce Yellow Chartreuse liqueur;
- ½ ounce fennel seed syrup⁴;
- ¾ ounce yuzu juice;
- Shiso leaf.

Recipe:

Pour shochu, gin, liqueur, syrup, and juice into a cocktail shaker, then fill ¾ of the shaker with ice. Shake and strain into a coup glass. Add 1 big ice cube and garnish with a shiso leaf.

¹Combine 200 grams wet seedless tamarind and 1¼ liters vodka together in a covered non-reactive container and let sit for five days at room temperature. Strain through a fine mesh strainer and mix with 2 ounces of a 2:1 Demerara syrup.

²Muddle 15-20 curry leaves and combine with 750-ml. rum. Allow to infuse for 24 hours, then strain.

³Pour 750-ml. shochu and 30 shiso leaves into an iSi siphon. Double charge it and let it sit for an hour or two, then strain through a cheese cloth.

⁴Combine 2 cups white sugar and 2 cups water in a pot on the stovetop and let it simmer until sugar dissolves, then add 18 grams crushed fennel seeds and cook for no longer than 5 minutes. Bring to room temperature, then strain through a cheese cloth.

PHOTOS BY (TOP LEFT) MIMI LIE; (BOTTOM LEFT) ARLENE IBARRA

PHOTOS BY (LEFT) CARLY DIAZ; (CENTER) NOAH FECKS



gin, Yellow Chartreuse liqueur, house-made fennel seed syrup, and yuzu juice, and his Ophelia's Ascension (\$17) comprises smoked habanero pepper-infused Del Maguey Vida mezcal, Maker's Mark Bourbon, Kandy Mountain Kithul wild palm syrup, and The Bitter Truth Jerry Thomas' Own Decanter bitters.

"The ingredients bartenders use for infusions are consistently being elevated," says Tanner Johnson, beverage director at Landrace in the Thompson Hotel in San Antonio, Texas. "For example, at Landrace we infuse Bourbon with mesquite pods, which are the seed pods from a mesquite tree, for our Sin and Smoke cocktail. This adds a nice smoky and earthy flavor that compliments the whiskey." The drink (\$16) was created by owner and chef Steve McHugh and it features mesquite pod-infused Maker's Mark, simple syrup, Angostura bitters, and Regans' No. 6 Orange bitters.

"In recent years, infusing spirits has become one of the biggest things in bartending and our guests love to try any and all infused spirits and cocktails," says Chetan Gangan, head mixologist and beverage manager at Baar Baar in New York City. "I personally love earthy ingredients like raw turmeric and ginger, and aromatic ones like lavender and berries," he says. Since Baar Baar is an Indian restaurant and bar, Gangan's infusions and cocktails feature many aromatic spices and herbs to complement the food menu. His Hyderabad Gimlet (\$17) blends turmeric-infused Jin Jiji India Dry gin, St-Germain, house-made passion fruit syrup, and lime juice, while his Saffron-Pineapple Vodka Soda (\$17) mixes saffron-infused Ketel One vodka, house-made caramelized pineapple syrup, lime juice, and soda water, and his Goa Punch (\$17) comprises curry leaf-infused Old Monk rum, Malibu Coconut rum, DeKuyper Peachtree Schnapps liqueur, and pineapple and lime juices.

Endless Experimentation

Babayoff notes that when coming up with infusions he likes to use a combination of a common ingredient with a less common spirit or a less common ingredient with a common spirit. "This way I can meet my guest in the middle by making it familiar while still provoking interest and curiosity," he says. "For example, I'll take sweet vermouth and infuse it with tonka bean—which is a dried out seed from South America with hints of almonds, marzipan, and vanilla—and then use it in a well-known drink like the Negroni." He does just this with his New-Groni (\$18), which comprises tonka bean-infused Cocchi Di Torino vermouth, Tanqueray gin, Select aperitivo, and The Bitter Truth Chocolate bitters.

"Our guests at Ophelia have learned to trust us and are open to try almost everything," Babayoff adds. "We often



Bartenders are adding spicy and smoky flavors to their infusions in drinks like the Baklava Boulevardier (left) at Olivia in Denver and the Sin and Smoke (right) at Landrace in San Antonio, Texas.



The technique of infusions tend to vary by bartender. While some bartenders lean towards spice infusions, like the turmeric-infused gin in the Hyderabad Gimlet (above) at Baar Baar, others favor fat-washing, as seen in the peanut butter-washed Bourbon blend used in the Gynoeicum Old Fashioned (top) at NYC's Thyme Bar.

so much to the presentation of the cocktail. The Emerald Streams is a beautiful lush green from the matcha infusion. This all adds to the guest's experience and that's what we strive to enhance as bartenders."

Amir Babayoff, bar director at Ophelia in New York City, notes that as bartenders have continued looking for ways to be more innovative and unique, the ingredients they use for infusions has broadened from familiar fruits to herbs, spices, and other less common ingredients. His Far East Side (\$24), for instance, features shiso-infused Mizu shochu, Tanqueray

play around with brown spirits, but we don't limit ourselves—whatever serves the final product, that's where we put our focus. We've infused Cognac with salted caramel black tea, gin with buchu leaves, shochu with shiso leaves, Campari with coffee, and amaro with bananas." His Paradox cocktail (\$19) blends cacao bean-infused Grey Goose vodka, banana-infused Averna amaro, cold brew coffee, Cointreau orange liqueur, Tempus Fugit Crème de Banane banana liqueur, Angostura bitters, and house-made vanilla and cinnamon syrups, topped with frothy half and half. "Sometimes bartenders want to be too creative and infuse too many ingredients in one cocktail, which then leads to one big mess and you lose track," Babyoff adds. "I try to infuse just one or two ingredients in a cocktail—and if it's two, they have to be complimentary to one another so you can taste both."

At Kachka, Cecchine's Siberian Maldives (\$13) comprises sweet grass-infused Taaka vodka and coconut-infused Capel Pisco, plus Avua Prata Cachaça, Giffard Blue Curaçao liqueur, pineapple juice, and house-made sour mix. "I love experimenting with different ingredients and combinations of ingredients and seeing where it takes me," Cecchine says. "I might have an idea for a cocktail and an infusion that I believe will be perfect for it, but once the infusion is complete and I taste it, that cocktail I had in mind quickly evolves into something else."

As house-infused spirits become more popular, bartenders are getting even more creative with this trend and infusing entire cocktails. At Olivia, Saenz and Carson's Baklava Boulevardier (\$16) is a blend of Henry McKenna Bourbon, Dolin Rouge sweet vermouth, Campari aperitif, and Strega herbal liqueur, which is infused with cinnamon sticks and cloves for ten days. At Dusek's

Tavern in Chicago meanwhile, the Dusek's Martini (\$12)—created by bar manager and assistant general manager Taryn Shaw—features Letherbee gin, a blend of Dolin Blanc and Dry vermouths and Carpano Bianco vermouth, and saline, which is infused with rosemary sprigs for 30 minutes before serving.

Another way bartenders are experimenting with infusions is through new techniques. "Infusion has always been in practice behind the bar, but the methods have evolved a lot recently," Thyme Bar's Le Blanche points out. "Fat-washing, sous-vide, and pressure infusion are some new ways bartenders are infusing spirits and other ingredients." His Bloomist Cloche (\$26), for example, features roasted barley-infused Burning Chair Johnny Drink's Exclusive Blend Bourbon and makrut lime leaf-infused St-Germain—both of which are infused sous-vide style at 70 degrees Celsius for half an hour—plus Montenegro amaro and a dark chocolate lollipop garnish. And his Gynoeicum Old Fashioned (\$30) blends a peanut butter-washed house Bourbon blend (Le Blanche keeps the specifics of the blend secret), house-made tonka syrup, house-made creole bitters, and salt. At Baar Baar, Gangan's Amul Old Fashioned (\$17) comprises Amul butter-washed Jim Beam Bourbon, house-made Jaggery syrup, and Angostura bitters. "While infusing began as resting ingredients in the spirit for days so that it can take on its flavor, color, and character, now the fat-wash process has become popularized in the modern world of bartending using equipment like rotary evaporators, centrifuges, and iSi canisters," Gangan says. "It's really fun to work with different kinds of fats, and with proper fat-washing, you can make even a complex spirit like Bourbon more smooth and flavorful." **mw**