

Fire And Ice

Mixologists embrace smoky and charred flavors to give their cocktails added depth

BY SALLY KRAL

In recent years, as consumers have grown accustomed to bold flavors in their beverages, bartenders have become more creative and experimental, often looking to chefs for inspiration. Smoked and charred flavors have long been popular in cooking, and are now becoming more common behind the bar. “We’re drawn to smoked cocktails for the same reason we’re drawn to smoked foods,” notes Kevin Felker, beverage director at King’s Seafood Company, which operates 22 restaurants with seven different concepts in California, Arizona, Nevada, and Texas. “Smoked fish, smoked cheeses, smoked meats—all ingredients are intensified by smoking.”

Felker says that there’s an added element of theatrics inherent in smoked cocktails. “The visual appeal is the most impactful—people are instantly intrigued when they see the smoke released from the glass,” he says. Luke DeYoung, bar manager at Scofflaw in Chicago, concurs, noting that people love to see a show. “Any sort of flaming parlor trick really gets people going,” he says. “The human body is trained to defend itself against intense flavors in the wild, as they might be signs of danger, so smoke in a cocktail can make a patron feel like they’re living adventurously.”

Cocktails that feature smoke and smoked ingredients appeal to all the senses, and for bartenders, the range of tech-



Smoked cocktails use a range of ingredients to incorporate unique flavors, like the torched cardamom, clove, and cherry wood in the From Dusk Till Dawn cocktail (above) at Travelle in Chicago.

believes the most effective one is to ignite a woodchip and drop it directly into the glass, then seal it with an airtight lid to extinguish the flame and create smoke. “Once the cocktail has been made in a separate vessel, the bartender removes the lid and dumps out the woodchip before pouring the cocktail into the glass,” he explains. “There’s always some residual fine soot from the process, which adds more flavor to the drink.”

niques and methods involved in bringing smoke to the glass spurs excitement. “You can smoke fruits and vegetables before they’re processed, smoke the cocktail glass by burning woodchips or spices, use a device called a smoking gun, or incorporate smoky spirits such as mezcal or Scotch,” says Michael Schulson, the celebrity chef and restaurateur behind Schulson Collective, a restaurant group that owns concepts in Philadelphia; Atlantic City, New Jersey; and Hollywood, Florida.

No matter the technique, mixologists and consumers alike appreciate the complexity that comes with smoke. “It brings an additional depth of flavor to any cocktail without changing the integrity of the original recipe,” Felker says. “Try smoking a Boulevardier, a Manhattan, or an Old Fashioned—the possibilities are limitless.”

Where There’s Smoke...

While there are various ways to add smoky elements to a cocktail, Felker

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At Chicago’s Upstairs at The Gwen rooftop bar, The Burnside (pictured) is made with gin, anaro, Aperol, and blood orange bitters, and is smoked with rosemary and apple wood using a smoking gun.

Felker's Smoking Gun cocktail (\$14) at Meat on Ocean in Santa Monica, California is made using this method. It features Rittenhouse rye whiskey, brown sugar simple syrup, The Bitter Truth Pimento Dram allspice liqueur, and Fee Brothers Whiskey Barrel-Aged bitters, as well as the smoke of a hickory woodchip.

At Geraldine's restaurant in the Kimpton Hotel Van Zandt in Austin, Texas, bar director Caitlyn Jackson uses a technique that's reminiscent of Felker's. "I'll torch one of our branded pine-wood coasters and then place a cocktail glass upside down on top of it to capture the smoke within the glass," she says. "After pouring the cocktail into the glass, I'll place the coaster back on so the guest can lift it before sipping. It offers a sensory effect and a subtle taste of smoke on the palate." Her Millennial Pink cocktail (\$15) features this pinewood smoke as well as Singani 63 Bolivian brandy, St. George Pear brandy, Zirbenz Stone Pine liqueur, and Domaine de Canton ginger liqueur. Jackson adds that another way to incorporate smoke into a cocktail is with a smoking gun and chamber. "This isn't my preferred method—it's pricier and can alter the mouthfeel of the drink—but it does provide a great visual experience for bar guests," she says.

At The Beatrice Inn in New York City, head bartender Antanas Samkus uses a smoking gun to make his Cherry Wood Smoked Manhattan (\$21), which he notes is popular with guests thanks to its dramatic presentation and delicious aroma. "The device has a chamber where you place woodchips and torch them to create smoke inside the machine," Samkus explains. "Then you put the nozzle at the end of the smoker under the crystal dome where the finished drink sits, filling the dome with thick cherry wood smoke." In addition to cherry wood smoke, the drink comprises Wild Turkey rye whiskey, Carpano Antica Formula sweet vermouth, Grand Marnier orange liqueur, and Angostura and Regans' No. 6 orange bitters. Samkus applies a garnish of three Maraschino cherries that have been sprayed with Laphroaig 10-year-old Islay single malt Scotch for even more smoky elements.

"It's very popular to smoke all kinds of brown spirits, like whisk(e)y, Cognac, or rum, because barrel-aged spirits usually go well with smoky wood notes," Samkus notes. "But you can always experiment by intensifying or adding different smokiness to mezcal, or changing the nose and flavor of gin or any other spirit." In The Belmont (\$17), Samkus smokes a single ingredient using a smoking gun rather than the entire drink. The cocktail blends prune-infused Wild Turkey Bourbon, cherry wood-smoked Galliano herbal liqueur, Combier Crème de Pêche De Vigne peach liqueur, lemon juice, and house-made ginger syrup. "People like the flavor and aroma of burning wood; I think it comes from when our ancestors used to sit around the fire—it triggers something inside that makes us feel cozy, safe, and warm," Samkus adds.

At King's Seafood Company-owned chain King's Fish House—which has several locations in southern California, as well as one in Henderson, Nevada and one in Tempe, Arizona—Felker's Smoke on the Water (\$10) is smoked in the same manner as his Smoking Gun at Meat on Ocean: He smokes a mesquite woodchip in the cocktail glass before pouring in the contents. The drink



Drift in Miami serves The Kindling (top) sealed with a cork to keep in the smoke. The Smoking Gun (above) at Meat on Ocean in Santa Monica, California receives its smoky flavor from a burnt woodchip.

also features Evan Williams Black Label Bourbon, maple syrup, Fee Brothers Whiskey Barrel-Aged bitters, and a mist of Laphroaig 10-year-old Scotch. "The Smoke on the Water has several layers of smoke: the burning woodchip, the inherent smoky quality from the new charred oak barrels used to make the Bourbon, and the mist of Laphroaig, which is heavily peated," Felker says.

Jackson of Geraldine's notes that the simplest way to add smoky flavors to a cocktail is to use spirits and other ingredients that have those characteristics inherently. Her Bay Area Buzz (\$16) comprises activated charcoal-infused Hangar 1 vodka, Ardbeg 10-year-old single malt Scotch, pineapple and lemon juices, and house-made pistachio orgeat syrup. The drink is served alongside dry ice on which hot water is poured to give a smoky effect, but the main smoky flavor of the drink comes from the Scotch. Her BBQ Peach Old Fashioned (\$15), meanwhile, features Nine Banded American whiskey, Giffard Crème de Pêche de Vigne peach liqueur, Cuisine Perel Spicy



The King's Fish House chain uses smoked mesquite woodchips for its Smoke On The Water (left), while the Millennial Pink (center) from Geraldine's in Austin, Texas is made with pinewood smoke. At Chicago's Scofflaw, the Trailblazer (right) is topped with a torched marshmallow.

Pecan vinegar, and house-made BBQ bitters that feature spices and mesquite wood flavors emulating smoked brisket.

Scofflaw's bar team prefers to incorporate smoky spirits and ingredients rather than actual smoke into their drinks. "Smoke can throw a cocktail out of balance very quickly, so we use smoke flavors in small quantities," DeYoung says. "We use a smoked tea rinse in one drink while another has a marshmallow garnish that's charred to order, which adds a smoky element that pairs well with peated Scotch." The former drink,

called the Partisan (\$10) and created by former bartender Nick Vidal, blends Rittenhouse rye, Lustau East India Solera Sherry, honey syrup, Fee Brothers Black Walnut and Angostura bitters, and a house-made Lapsang Souchong tea tincture, while the latter cocktail, called the Trailblazer (\$10) and developed by bartender Alex Williams, features Bank Note Peated Reserve blended Scotch, Punt e Mes vermouth, Marie Brizard Crème de Cacao white cocoa liqueur, Fernet-Branca amaro, and charred marshmallow.



Miami's El Cielo serves the Lady Old Fashioned (left) in a glass smoked with a cinnamon stick, while its Margarita Ancho de Reyes (center) includes hot sauce and cayenne pepper. The BBQ Peach Old Fashioned (right) from Geraldine's in Austin, Texas features house-made BBQ bitters.

...There's Fire

Jackson points out that torching other ingredients, either in addition to woodchips or in their place, adds unique aromas beyond the usual campfire characteristics. "Igniting spices and herbs lends more of an aromatic smoke to the senses rather than the actual taste of smoke on the palate," she says.

At The Gwen, a luxury hotel in Chicago, the rooftop bar Upstairs at The Gwen offers the Burnside cocktail (\$16), which was created by beverage program manager Nolan Ruffing. The drink features Sipsmith gin, Averna amaro, Aperol aperitif, and Stirrings Blood Orange bitters; it's smoked with rosemary and apple wood using a smoking gun. Also using a smoking gun, bartender Kevin Slaybaugh infuses smoke from torched cardamom, clove, and cherry wood in his From Dusk Till Dawn cocktail (\$19) at The Langham's Travelle restaurant in Chicago. The drink also includes Flor de Sierro sotol, Luxardo Bitter Bianco liqueur, and Cocchi di Torino sweet vermouth.

At Drift, the lobby bar of 1 Hotel South Beach in Miami, The Kindling cocktail (\$30) is served in a terrarium of succulents that's sealed with a cork to keep the smoke inside until serving. Created by beverage director Steven Minor, the drink blends Russell's Reserve 6-year-old rye, Laphroaig 10-year-old Scotch, Candela Mamajuana liqueur, Cocchi Barolo Chinato fortified wine, Braulio amaro, Aperol aperitif, a dash of salt, and the smoke of eucalyptus and cedar wood from a smoking gun. "It mimics fragrances at the 1 Hotel South Beach," Minor says. "We smoke it to order with our custom eucalyptus and cedar blend to make a cocktail that's complex, balanced, and appealing to all of the senses."

Schulson of the Schulson Collective notes that a good rule of thumb for smoking ingredients other than wood for a cocktail is that if you wouldn't smoke it in the kitchen, don't do it behind the bar. "One of our most successful drinks involves igniting cinnamon and clove on a whiskey barrel stave with

a culinary torch, covering the lit spices with a snifter to capture the smoke, and then pouring in a Manhattan variation with a split base of Bourbon and rye," he says, referring to his drink called The Monkital (\$15), which is available at the Collective's Monkital restaurant at the Diplomat Beach Resort in Hollywood, Florida. In addition to the smoke, the cocktail comprises Maker's Mark Bourbon, Bulleit rye, Martini & Rossi Rosso and Extra Dry vermouths, and Angostura and Regan's No. 6 orange bitters. At El Cielo in Miami, mixologist and sommelier Angel Guillén smokes a glass with an ignited cinnamon stick before mixing in Jack Daniel's Tennessee whiskey and house-made cinnamon, almond, and passion fruit syrups to make his Lady Old Fashioned (\$18).

Both Schulson and Guillén also enjoy using smoked peppers in their cocktails. "Charring peppers over a charcoal grill is a great way to add heat, smoke, and some bitterness to any cocktail you want to turn up a notch," Schulson says. Guillén's Margarita Ancho de Reyes (\$18) at El Cielo blends Alipus San Luis mezcal, Ancho Reyes ancho chile liqueur, lemon juice, house-made cinnamon syrup, and a dash of Tabasco Original Red hot sauce, garnished with a worm salt rim, a house-made saltwater foam, and a flambéed cayenne pepper.

Whether through the use of smoky spirits, charred ingredients, or actual smoke, mixologists can call on a wide array of methods to add unique aromatics and textures to their drinks. "Smokiness can turn an otherwise regular cocktail into something special," Schulson says, noting that he doesn't see the popularity of smoked cocktails waning anytime soon.

The Beatrice Inn's Samkus agrees. "As long as bartenders continue to find innovative and creative ways to use smoke in drinks and push the boundaries of what can be done with wood, herbs, spices, and fire, this trend will stay alive and draw people to drink and eat smoky." mw

Smoky Cocktail Recipes

SMOKE ON THE WATER

By Kevin Felker

Ingredients:

2 ounces Evan Williams Black Label Bourbon;
¼ ounce maple syrup;
Dash Fee Brothers Whiskey Barrel-Aged bitters;
Mist Laphroaig 10-year-old single malt Scotch;
Mesquite wood chip;
Orange peel;
Luxardo Maraschino cherry.

Recipe:

Light a mesquite woodchip on fire. While lit, place inside a small rocks glass and cover immediately. In a mixing glass, combine Bourbon, maple syrup, and bitters. Add ice and stir. Remove the lid from the rocks glass and discard the burned mesquite chip. Mist the inside of the glass with Scotch. Place a large ice cube in the glass and strain in the cocktail. Express the oil from an orange peel and place inside the glass along with a Luxardo cherry.

MILLENNIAL PINK

By Caitlyn Jackson

Ingredients:

1¼ ounces Singani 63 Bolivian brandy;
¾ ounce Zirbenz Stone Pine liqueur;
¼ ounce Domaine de Canton ginger liqueur;
¼ ounce St. George Pear brandy;
Pine wood coaster.

Recipe:

Blowtorch a pine wood coaster on one side until it ignites. Place a Glencairn glass upside down over the coaster to capture the smoke. In an ice-filled mixing glass, combine and stir the brandies and liqueurs. Quickly flip the Glencairn glass right side up and strain cocktail contents into smoked glass. Top the glass with the smoked coaster, charred side down.

TRAILBLAZER

By Alex Williams

Ingredients:

1½ ounces Banknote Peated Reserve blended Scotch;
½ ounce Punt e Mes vermouth;
¼ ounce Marie Brizard Crème de Cacao white cocoa liqueur;
Barspoon Fernet-Branca amaro;
Marshmallow.

Recipe:

In an ice-filled mixing glass, combine Scotch, vermouth, liqueur, and Fernet. Stir and strain into a double Old Fashioned glass over fresh ice. Torch a skewered marshmallow to order, and use to garnish drink.

PHOTOS BY (CENTER) KIRSTEN HOLLIDAY; (RIGHT) CHRISTIE LAQUINTAIN

PHOTO BY (RIGHT) RICHARD CASTEEL