

Curating The Cocktail List

Themed cocktail menus bring fun, creative flair to the bar scene

BY SALLY KRAL

When Pouring Ribbons opened in New York City in the fall of 2012, partner Joaquín Simó decided to offer a rotating seasonal menu that changed four times a year. “We did that for the first three years, but eventually I found it to be very limiting, and it was getting harder to keep the staff motivated, interested, and inspired,” he says.

Simó then took it down to two menus a year, both fitting into an overarching year-long theme. He started with Roads and Travel for fall 2015 through summer 2016. In fall and winter, the menu revolved around Route 66. “Our staff sought inspiration from roadside diners as well as the differing regional flavors and ingredients that come from the mountains and the desert,” Simó says.

For spring and summer 2016, the menu changed over to the Silk Road, staying within the year’s theme, but with widely different results—drinks featured exotic spices like garam masala, turmeric, and Thai basil. Both menus were hugely successful, so Pouring Ribbons has continued with a new concept each year.

The current menu, New York City in 1983, falls under the overarching theme of Time and Place. “Compared to just a seasonal menu, a fun and creative theme that you reinvent twice a year keeps you relevant and in the public eye,” Simó explains.

Themed cocktail menus have been catching on in venues across the country as bars look for ways to stand out and have fun. “Before we started doing themed menus in 2017, we would have creative bursts where we would be constantly reprinting the menu to make room for new cocktails, followed by stagnant



San Francisco’s Trick Dog bar changes its themed menu every six months. The current menu is *Trick Dog Airways*, which includes drinks named after airport codes, such as the GDL (above).

weeks,” says Tippy Ard, bar manager at Bar Argos in Ithaca, New York. “Implementing themed menus means committing to an idea and a date to turn over the entire menu all at once. This gives our staff a creative direction and framework.”

The bar has featured a range of themes, from Greek mythology to the cult TV show *Twin Peaks*. The current Bar Argos menu is inspired by the Brothers Grimm fairytales, with such drinks as the Sleeping Beauty (\$12), featuring chamomile-infused Dudognon 10-year-old Reserve Cognac, Atsby Armadillo Cake vermouth, Aurora Manzanilla Sherry, house-made Ryan William Chardonnay syrup, and rose water, and the Queen Bee (\$12), which blends Brugal Añejo rum, Henriques & Henriques Rainwater Madeira, Bénédictine herbal liqueur, Giffard Banane du Brésil banana liqueur, lemon juice, honey, and aquafaba, a vegan egg white substitute made from legumes.

Having Fun

San Francisco bar Trick Dog has been offering themed cocktail menus since opening in 2013. “It allows us to have a structure and remain engaged with our business,” says Josh Harris, co-owner of Bon Vivants Hospitality, which owns Trick Dog. “We’re creatively inspired and fulfilled, and that comes to life through these menus. When people come to our bar, they’re walking into a space that feels new and invigorated.”

At Trick Dog, Harris—along with Bon Vivants co-owner and creative director Morgan Schick—takes concept menus a step further: The menus themselves reflect the overall cocktail



Themed menus are rising in popularity across the country, from Pittsburgh to Los Angeles to New York. Themes range from pulp fiction novels (*Smallman Galley’s Port of Peril* above) to neighborhood stalwarts (Tony Saloon’s *Nightly Dose*, bottom left; Pouring Ribbon’s *Lady Pink*, bottom right).





Trick Dog's KIX (left), named for Kansai International Airport in Japan, reflects local flavors, mixing gin, sake, and house-made wakame-lychee syrup. The Walker Inn's Big Sur (right), from its Pacific Coast Highway-themed menu, took its inspiration from a road trip.

theme. The current menu, called Trick Dog Airways, has a tri-fold design meant to resemble an airline's in-flight information brochure. Drinks are named after airport IATA codes, such as Schick's KIX (\$14), mixing Plymouth gin, Murai Family Nigori sake, Lillet Rosé aperitif, house-made wakame-lychee syrup and lime cordial, and saline, and his GDL (\$14), comprising Tequila Ocho Plata, Unión Uno mezcal, Dolin Blanc vermouth, lime juice, house-made mango syrup and pico de gallo tincture, and Angostura bitters. The drink titles stand for Kansai International Airport near Osaka in Japan and Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla Guadalajara International Airport in Mexico, respectively, and reflect the flavors and ingredients of each location.

Smallman Galley in Pittsburgh takes a similar approach to themed menu presentation. "We opened the bar with themes like Old School Hip Hop and Pittsburgh Pirate Puns, but it wasn't until our Tony Hawk Pro Skater Soundtrack menu that we incorporated creative menu packaging," says bar manager Matthew Zelinsky. "We put it on a CD case and people loved it."

Smallman Galley's current menu is an illustrated comic book called "The Adventures of Smallman Galley-Volume 6," which features drinks inspired by pulp novels, such as the Port of Peril (\$11), blending Quinta do Infantado Tawny Port, Cockburn's Ruby Port, Maggie's Farm La Revuelta dark rum, Boulard Calvados, and Atxa Vino Blanco vermouth, and the Red Rogue (\$10), comprising Corralejo Reposado Tequila, Maggie's Farm coffee liqueur, Coco Lopez cream of coconut, Jamaica's Finest ginger beer, and house-made hibiscus syrup. "We learned from the beginning that finding a fun theme is a great way to get guests involved and take interest in what we're doing," Zelinsky says.

Schick of Trick Dog notes that it's important to keep the clientele in mind when brainstorming themes for your menu. "We steer away from putting something out that's really controversial or polarizing—anything that might alienate someone and make them feel unwelcome," he says. "At the end of the day, this is a bar and people are supposed to be having fun."

Knowing Your Audience

Smallman Galley's Zelinsky notes that touching on nostalgia is a great way to gain fans and keep things light. The bar recently sought inspiration from the 1993 movie *The Sandlot*, with the menu designed to look like an old VHS case. The Wendy Peppercorn (\$11)—a playful ode to Wendy Peppercorn, a character in the movie—was a popular drink from that menu featuring Del Maguey Vida mezcal, Espolòn Blanco Tequila, orange and grapefruit juices, and house-made hibiscus syrup and Szechuan tincture.

Devon Tarby, co-owner of The Walker Inn in Los Angeles, agrees that drawing on nostalgia is always successful. "Our Wet Hot American Summer menu in 2016 hit sentimentality on the head with childhood summer traditions," she notes. The eponymous movie takes place at a summer camp in 1981, and one of The Walker Inn's popular cocktails riffing on this theme was the Saturday Morning Cartoons (\$20), created by Tarby and fellow owner Alex Day and comprising Avuá Amburana cachaça, Giffard Vanille De Madagascar vanilla liqueur, house-made cacao nib tincture, unsweetened almond milk, and Demerara simple syrup. The drink was served in a glass milk carton with a side of breakfast cereal.

Pop culture references provide a fun way to grab attention. "A lot of people really liked our Wes Anderson theme," says Ard of Bar Argos. "Chances are you've seen one of his films, or

at least know some of the titles. Similarly, our Twin Peaks menu had a small, cultish following in town. We took a bit of a risk with that theme because it didn't feel as topical as Wes Anderson or as ingrained in public knowledge as Greek mythology. But we had so many people come to the bar specifically because of the menu—the way it resonated so deeply with diehard fans made it worth it.” The Arson at the Saw Mill (\$10) from the Twin Peaks menu was “insanely popular,” according to Ard. It featured Del Maguey Vida mezcal, Cruzan Blackstrap rum, Aaverna amaro, lime juice, and house-made black raspberry-and-activated charcoal cordial.

At Tony's Saloon in Los Angeles, bar manager Tim Heller notes the importance of keeping both your guests and your surroundings in mind when developing your cocktail menu. “Our continuous goal is to connect with the community, so we always like to reflect our neighborhood,” he says. “Currently all of our drinks are riffs on neighboring business names. The Nightly Dose is an ode to the Daily Dose Cafe around the

corner. We use egg whites and apple syrup to bring to mind breakfast flavors. And our La Drinka cocktail pays respect to our longtime friends and neighbors La Reyna Tacos.” Both created by Heller, The Nightly Dose (\$12) features Plymouth gin, Liquid Alchemist apple syrup, lemon juice, simple syrup, egg white, and fresh rosemary, while La Drinka (\$12) blends Espolòn Blanco Tequila, Ancho Reyes chili liqueur, agave, lime and pineapple juices, and Angostura bitters.

Making A Connection

With the current theme of New York City in 1983 at Pouring Ribbons, Simó is appealing to longtime New Yorkers. “It's been fun looking back at that time and specifically our neighborhood—the East Village was a real crucible of creative energy,” he says. “With this menu, a lot of people recognize the landmarks we're referencing and say, ‘Oh, I used to drink there’ or ‘I used to go dancing there.’ But there are still enough additional cultural references featured that a younger person can make a connection as well.”

Themed Cocktail Recipes

KIX

By Morgan Schick

Inspired by Japan, named for Kansai International Airport

Ingredients:

1½ ounces Plymouth gin;
¾ ounce Murai Family Nigori sake;
½ ounce Lillet Rose aperitif;
½ ounce wakame-lychee syrup¹;
½ ounce lime cordial²;
3 drops saline;
Micro purple shiso leaves.

Recipe:

Combine gin, sake, aperitif, syrup, cordial, and saline in a cocktail shaker with ice. Shake and strain into a small cocktail glass. Garnish with micro purple shiso leaves.

LADY PINK

By Brooke Toscano

Inspired by the eponymous graffiti and mural artist

Ingredients:

1½ ounces Lady Grey tea-infused Tanqueray gin³;
½ ounce Copper & Kings Immature brandy;
½ ounce Lavender-infused Lillet Blanc aperitif⁴;
¼ ounce Italicus Rosolio di Bergamotto liqueur;
¾ ounces lemon juice;
⅔ ounce vanilla syrup⁵;
1 teaspoon rose syrup⁶;
Dash Bittercube Bolivar bitters;
Egg white;
Crushed dried cornflower and rose petals.

Recipe:

Combine gin, brandy, aperitif, liqueur, juice, syrups, bitters, and egg white in a cocktail shaker. Dry shake, then add ice and shake again. Fine strain into a coupe glass. Garnish with crushed dried cornflower and rose petals.

BIG SUR

By Devon Tarby and Alex Day

Inspired by the eponymous California location along the Pacific Coast Highway

Ingredients:

1½ ounces Dolin Blanc vermouth;
1 ounce Clear Creek Douglas Fir eau de vie;
¼ ounce Laphroaig 10-year-old single malt Scotch;
Dash Pernod absinthe;
¾ ounce lime juice;
¾ ounce simple syrup;
2 drops saline;
August Uncommon Civil Disobedience black tea;
Dry ice.

Recipe:

Combine vermouth, eau de vie, Scotch, absinthe, juice, syrup, and saline in a cocktail shaker with ice. Shake and strain into a goblet. In a pitcher containing hot tea, add dry ice to create fog. Pour the fog into the drink, being careful not to get any of the tea into it.

¹Heat 2 pounds white sugar and 1 quart water on the stovetop to incorporate, then remove from heat. Add 30 ounces lychee purée. Add 15 grams wakame seaweed to steep for 30 minutes. Strain.

²Combine 7½ pounds lime peels, 3 quarts water, 18 grams kaffir lime leaves, and 3 grams wormwood in a large container and transfer into a large Cryovac bag, then add 5 pounds sugar. Cryovac and leave for 1-2 weeks, then open and strain. Add 1 tablespoon of malic acid per quart yielded.

³Steep 5 grams Lady Grey tea in 12 ounces of Tanqueray gin for 25 minutes. Strain.

⁴Steep 1 tablespoon lavender in 12 ounces of Lillet Blanc aperitif for 90 minutes. Strain.

⁵Slice 1 vanilla pod lengthwise and scrape out seeds; add seeds to a pot. Roughly chop the skin of the pod and add to pot. Add 3 cups water and 3 cups sugar. Heat on medium-high, stirring occasionally. Bring to a boil and then simmer for 5 minutes. Place in a large clean container and let sit overnight. Strain through cheesecloth.

⁶Combine 2 parts simple syrup with 1 part Baraka rose syrup.



All aspects of a themed menu demand careful thought, from concept and ingredients to presentation. Upstairs at The Gwen in Chicago uses bear bottles to present its JC's Bear Champ cocktail (above). Red Rogue (top) is part of Smallman Galley's pulp novel theme.

The menu features such drinks as Simó's Mudd Club (\$16), blending Johnnie Walker Red Label Scotch, Contratto Bianco vermouth, and three different amaros: Greenbar Grand Poppy, Lo-Fi Gentian, and Cappelletti Sfumato. "The Mudd Club was an iconic Tribeca nightclub that was the epicenter of cool for

the New Wave and post-punk crowds," Simó explains. "This smoky Manhattan variation is served in a bitters bottle resting in an ice-filled miniature clawfoot bathtub, which is how beers were served at the club's second-floor bar."


The Lady Pink (\$16), meanwhile, was created by bartender Brooke Toscano and named for the eponymous New York City graffiti and mural artist. It mixes Lady Grey tea-infused Tanqueray gin, lavender-infused Lillet Blanc aperitif, Copper & Kings Immature brandy, Italicus Rosolio di Bergamotto liqueur, lemon juice, egg white, house-made vanilla and rose syrups, and Bittercube Bolivar bitters. "The Lady Grey infusion is a nod to Lady Pink's love of England and royal titles," Toscano says. "Then I went for typically 'feminine' flavors like vanilla and rose, and the garnish of crushed dried flowers reflects her colorful murals."

Similarly capturing a specific locale and artist's work, the JC's Bear Champ at Upstairs at The Gwen in Chicago pays homage to Chicago native JC Rivera's "Bear Champ" murals, which can be found on buildings throughout the city. Made by mixologist Freddie Sarkis, the drink (\$50 for 2-4 servings) comprises Maker's Mark Bourbon, Sacred Bond brandy, house-made black tea-honey syrup, grapefruit and lemon juices, and Angostura bitters. It's served in a bear-shaped honey bottle and is part of the venue's current menu of drinks inspired by artworks ranging from the Renaissance period to contemporary street art.

The Walker Inn's very first theme was the Pacific Coast Highway, with the bar team concocting drinks that evoked the region and told a clear story. "In addition to creating several cocktails inspired by specific places along the highway, there were just as many drinks inspired by things one might do on a road trip," Tarby explains. "Drinking whiskey at a beach bonfire, the feel of sea air blowing through your car windows, stopping at a burger place for a milkshake and fries: It's important to explore the idea from a 360-degree view to ensure it goes beyond a simple theme and becomes something that guests can connect with."

Tarby and Day's Big Sur (\$20) from the Pacific Coast Highway menu featured Dolin Blanc vermouth, Clear Creek Douglas Fir eau de vie, Laphroaig 10-year-old single malt Scotch, Pernod absinthe, lime juice, simple syrup, and saline. The drink was garnished with "fog" made of dry ice and hot black tea.

Although The Walker Inn was recently overhauled and is no longer offering themed menus, Tarby notes that they're a great way for bartenders to push creative boundaries. "We'll see them become more common, but it's important for anybody considering it to understand the time commitment and creative capacity required to pull it off," she adds.

Echoing this sentiment, Simó stresses the importance of putting careful thought into each element of a themed cocktail menu, from concept to ingredients to presentation. "I'm wary of themed menus becoming purely gimmicky Instagram bait and just about the aesthetic rather than telling a cohesive narrative beyond the vessel," he says. "That's where it can very easily become trite and played out—people will jump the shark if they don't go beyond the obvious." 

PHOTOS BY (TOP) GRACEFUL FAWN; (BOTTOM) KALLEY LINDMAN