

Flavor Punch

From historic brands to contemporary labels, liqueurs play an important role in cocktail creation

BY SALLY KRAL



Cocktail trends go through cycles, with popularity for certain spirits and ingredients ebbing and flowing. This has certainly been the case with liqueurs. “Liqueurs came and went and came and went and now are back again,” says Jeremy Allen, beverage director of MiniBar Hollywood in Los Angeles. “We bartenders eliminated anything with artificial or natural coloring from our programs for a minute, striving for all organic ingredients. During this time, a lot of people viewed liqueurs with disdain, thinking of them as just the sugary-syrupy stuff that hadn’t been touched in years on the bottom shelves of dive bars.” But Allen adds that this mindset has shifted as bartenders have rediscovered legacy brands. “There are some real quality liqueurs that have stood the test of time,” he says. “If they made it through the last 15 years of



FROM LEFT: The Better Luck Next Year from Concord Hill in New York City; The Regulator from Café Rule in Hickory, North Carolina; and Concord Hill’s Earhart feature liqueurs that add flavor and innovative twists in drinks.



the cocktail revolution, they’re pretty much invincible.”

Gina Buck, beverage director at Concord Hill in Brooklyn, New York, notes that bartenders seem to be using liqueurs more frequently these days. “I’ve seen more bars working with liqueurs as opposed to basing flavor profiles on house-made syrups,” she says. “I think a big reason for this is that the shelf life of liqueurs is much longer than that of syrups, creating less waste.”

Using liqueurs—ready-made and packed with flavor—also cuts down on prep time and the need for additional ingredients. “Liqueurs tend to be fortified with sugar, which takes a step out of the cocktail process and saves us time as we build our cocktails,” notes Russell Greene, mixologist and tobacconist at Bar 1896 at the Castle Hot Springs resort in

PHOTOS BY (LEFT & RIGHT) LILLY BROWN / MST CREATIVE PR

Liqueurs remain popular with bartenders because they cut down on the need for extra ingredients in cocktails. At Bar 1896 in Arizona, Yellow Chartreuse is an ever-popular option in cocktails such as the Arugula Smash (pictured).



Arizona. “We don’t have any restrictions when we use liqueurs—they save time and bring a shelf-stable ingredient to your bar’s arsenal.”

With so many brands and flavor profiles to choose from, bartenders are learning just how useful liqueurs can be. “Many of us are searching for new, unique flavors, and liqueurs help to fill that void,” Greene says. “Lots of older brands have made a comeback on menus—it’s a great part of the cocktail world that was almost forgotten about. And now there are small distilleries making new liqueurs, so the options have never been better.”

Classic And Consistent

At Minibar, Allen notes an appreciation for such storied liqueur brands as Giffard, Disaronno, Galliano, and Combier, because they offer a certain authenticity. “They’re not trying to be cool, they’re just being themselves: a little folk-y and from a place of tradition,” he says. “They’re solely aimed at providing enjoyment to humans—Combier was the town candy maker 200 years ago.”

Allen’s Amaretto Sour (\$14) features a split base of Disaronno amaretto liqueur and Wild Turkey 101 rye, plus lemon juice, egg white, and Angostura and Peychaud’s bitters. “A liqueur can be a nice way to add that last tiny twist that makes your version of a classic stand apart,” he adds. His This Old House (\$14) is a variation of the classic Rusty Nail, blending Drambuie Scotch whisky liqueur and Monkey Shoulder blended malt Scotch in a St. George Absinthe Verte-washed glass, while his New World Brandy Old Fashioned (\$14) mixes Bordiga Maraschino liqueur, Capurro Pisco, and Diplomático Reserva Exclusiva rum.

“Adding amaro to a Manhattan or a liqueur to an Old Fashioned can spruce it up, making it an exciting variation on guests’ favorite cocktails,” Concord Hill’s Buck says. At Petite León in Minneapolis, co-owner and bartender Travis Serbus offers the First We Take Manhattan (\$12), comprising St. Agrestis amaro, and equals parts J. Carver straight rye whiskey and Dolin Rouge sweet vermouth. “The drink is basically a Manhattan with the vermouth boosted up to an equal proportion and amaro added as a bittering agent,” Serbus says. “St. Agrestis brings flavors of cinnamon, clove, allspice, mint, and sarsaparilla to the drink—this amaro just screams nostalgia to me, which is why I love it.”

Classic cocktails are always popular and liqueurs are a major ingredient in many of these drinks—the Sidecar, Negroni,

and Blood and Sand all feature liqueurs, to name just a few. At the Beacon Theatre’s Wonderbar in New York City, co-beverage director Lynnette Marrero’s The Constant Gardener (\$18) is her take on the classic liqueur-based Pimm’s Cup, blending Pimm’s No. 1 liqueur, CioCiaro amaro, blackberry-infused Saison Pale rum, house-made ginger syrup, and lemon juice. “This cocktail brings me back to visiting pubs on the East Side of London,” Marrero says. “Here we upgrade the original recipe by using a fruit-infused rum and bolstering the Pimm’s with complementary amaro.”

Grant Gedemer, food and beverage director for the Godfrey Hotel in Chicago, asserts that as classic builds and fresh ingredients continue to be the biggest trends in cocktails right now, sugary liqueurs like sour apple and peach schnapps are trending down in favor of more bitter, earthy, and herbal liqueurs. “Brands like Aperol, Campari, and Chartreuse are definitely popular right now,” he says. “They work well because you don’t need a lot of ingredients to make a well-balanced cocktail with them and people are favoring simpler recipes right now.”

Bar 1896’s Greene notes a preference for legacy brands Ramazzotti amaro and Yellow Chartreuse. “Ramazzotti is so well-rounded with fruit and spice, and it pairs perfectly with whiskies and fresh juices, while Chartreuse brings big herbs to drinks that would otherwise fall flat,” he says. The venue’s Arugula Smash (\$16), created by director of wine and service Sarah Gilbert, features Yellow Chartreuse, Hendrick’s gin, grapefruit and lemon juices, and fresh arugula and cilantro.



The sugar content of liqueurs allows bartenders to showcase sweet and bitter flavors, such as in the Grapefruit Spritz (pictured) at the IO Roof lounge in Chicago, which uses St-Germain liqueur alongside the bitter taste of grapefruit.

Contemporary And Creative

While classic recipes and historic liqueurs will always have a place on bar menus, innumerable new liqueur brands have entered the market in the

last ten years or so, and bartenders continue to push the envelope with their unique creations. “I really like St-Germain elderflower liqueur—I know it’s so common now but it’s really useful in some of my most nuanced cocktails,” Wonderbar’s Marrero says. Her Clara Bow (\$20), which she created along with New York City mixologist Jim Kearns, features St-Germain, Four Roses Bourbon, house-made grenadine, fresh lemon juice, and mint. At Café Rule & Wine Bar in Hickory, North Carolina, assistant front-of-house manager and bartender Megan Campbell offers her drink The Regulator (\$10), which blends St.-Germain with Hendrick’s Midsummer Solstice gin, house-



Liqueurs often can spice up classic cocktails, as *The House Spritz* (left) from *Concord Hill* does with the *Aperol Spritz* and *The Constant Gardener* (right), from *Wonderbar at the Beacon Theater* in New York City, does with the classic *Pimm's Cup* cocktail.

made lavender syrup, lemon juice, muddled blackberries, and Fever-Tree Elderflower tonic water.

Marrero adds that Wonderbar's co-beverage director Jessica Gonzalez is a big fan of John D. Taylor's Velvet Falernum liqueur, which is a classic 19th-century liqueur that Gonzalez uses in her uniquely 21st-century cocktail builds—her Dolores del Rio (\$18) mixes the liqueur with Los Vecinos Del Campo mezcal, Barbadillo Amontillado Sherry, house-made ginger syrup, lime juice, and Angostura bitters. Also featuring a historic brand in a more modern way, Buck's drink *The Earhart* (\$15) at Concord Hill blends Giffard Crème de Violette

liqueur and Orgeat syrup, plus French lavender-infused Poland Select vodka and lemon juice.

"Luckily we're getting more and more nuanced liqueurs in the U.S., and I think we're going to continue seeing more creative ones coming out," Marrero adds. "I've seen inventive new liqueurs like *Italicus Rosolio di Bergamoto*, and the coffee liqueur sector has exploded with more options and a focus on the true coffee flavor. It's an exciting new space." At Concord Hill, bar manager Victor Bautista's *Better Luck Next Year* (\$14) features a new coffee liqueur brand, Mr. Black, as well as Ancho Reyes ancho chile liqueur, which was introduced



a few years ago. The drink also includes banana-infused Elijah Craig Small Batch Bourbon, pineapple juice, maple syrup, and egg white.

"Liqueurs have become much more versatile—today there are more fragrant and herbal liqueurs that top the list, which is a change from the fruity, tropical ones in the past," says Campbell of *Café Rule & Wine Bar*, adding that *Domaine de Canton* ginger liqueur is her favorite. "Ginger is one of my go-to ingredients when crafting new cocktails, and *Domaine de Canton* allows me to fuel my ginger obsession without overpowering the other flavors in the cocktail." Her *Wright Stuff* (\$12) comprises *Domaine de Canton*, *Deep Eddy* vodka, lemon juice, simple syrup, muddled blackberries and mint, and *JCB No. 21 Brut Crémant de Bourgogne* sparkling wine. Senior bartender Jessica Stafford's *No Carrots Given* (\$12) blends *Domaine de Canton* with *Gordon's* gin, house-made ginger syrup, lemon and carrot juices, and muddled basil.

Bubbly And Balanced

Since many liqueurs have quite an intense, concentrated flavor and a fair amount of sweetness to them, bartenders most commonly use them in smaller quantities than other spirits to counter-balance that strong flavor and lighten up the whole cocktail. "Very few people like overly sweet drinks, so if you're working with liqueurs, be sure to check that the flavors and sweetness are well-balanced," advises Greene of *Bar 1896*. "Additionally, some liqueurs can have many flavors in one package. Adding too many ingredients to an already complex liqueur can lead to a muddy cocktail, in which the driving flavor concept can get lost." Keeping it simple, Greene's *Desert Flower* (\$16) mixes house-made lavender liqueur and *Gruet* Brut sparkling wine.

Featuring liqueurs in Spritz-style cocktails lightens them up even more, as the soda water and/or sparkling wine in these drinks help lengthen the other flavors. At the *Godfrey Hotel's* *IO Rooftop Lounge*, *Gedemer's* *Grapefruit Spritzer* (\$15) is a guest favorite: It blends *St-Germain*, *Ketel One Botanical Grapefruit & Rose* vodka, simple syrup, grapefruit and lemon juices, and *Avissi Prosecco*. "I try to balance things as much as possible when working with liqueurs," *Gedemer* says. "A Spritz is a good way to go because you can combine a liqueur such as *St-Germain* with something bitter like *Campari* or *Aperol*, and with the effervescence from a dry *Champagne* or *Prosecco* it can be very refreshing."

At *Concord Hill*, *Bautista's House Spritz* (\$14) features equal parts *Giffard Crème de Pamplemousse* Rose pink grapefruit liqueur and *Aperol*, plus *Christophe Thorigny Brut Vouvray*



At *Petite León* in *Minneapolis*, the *First We Take Manhattan* (top left) uses *St. Agrestis amaro* as a bittering element, while the *Capelletti Spritz* (above) highlights *Cappelletti aperitif* alongside *Lustau Amontillado Sherry* and *Torre Oria Cava*.

sparkling wine. "We like working with *Giffard* liqueurs—there's so many varieties to choose from," Buck says. "But they can be sweet, so it's important to start with a small amount." Indeed, the sugar content—plus the lower proof—of liqueurs means you have to balance them differently than you would a different distilled spirit, *Wonderbar's* *Marrero* says. "Acidity—whether from citrus, Sherry, or other fortified wines—helps create that balance," she says. *Gonzalez's* *Putting On The Spritz* (\$12) comprises *Averall* *Damson Plum* gin

liqueur, *Luxardo* *Maraschino* liqueur, *Dolin* *Dry* vermouth, *Conquilla* *Brut* Cava, and soda water. At *Petite León*, *Serbus' Cappelletti Spritz* (\$12) features *Cappelletti* aperitif, *Lustau Amontillado* Sherry, and *Torre Oria* Cava.

"Softer citrus or non-citrus juices help to dilute and expand the concentrated liqueurs, to open them up instead of cover them up, while bubbles help lighten sweetness," *Minibar's* *Allen* says. His *Paper Plane Spritz* (\$14) blends *Aperol*, *Lazzaroni* amaro, lemon juice, and *Sorelle Branca* *Prosecco*, and his *Wallbanger Mimosa* (\$14) mixes *Galliano L'Autentico* sweet herbal liqueur, orange juice, and *Sorelle Branca* *Prosecco*. "A little liqueur goes a long way, so find something mild to highlight and accentuate it rather than overshadow and compete with it," *Allen* adds. "The flavors are already in there; you just have to let them come out." mw

Cocktail Recipes Featuring Liqueurs

ARUGULA SMASH By Sarah Gilbert

Ingredients:

½ ounce Yellow Chartreuse liqueur;
1½ ounces Hendrick's gin;
2 ounces grapefruit juice;
½ ounce lemon juice;
5 cilantro sprigs;
5-6 arugula leaves, plus more for garnish;
Orange peel.

Recipe:

In a cocktail shaker, muddle arugula and cilantro. Add liqueur, gin, juices, and ice. Shake and strain into an ice-filled rocks glass. Garnish with arugula and orange peel.

THE CONSTANT GARDENER By Lynnette Marrero

Ingredients:

½ ounce Pimm's No. 1 liqueur;
½ ounce CioCiaro amaro;
1½ ounces blackberry-infused Saison Pale rum¹;
¾ ounce lemon juice;
½ ounce ginger syrup²;
Top soda water;
Cucumber ribbon;
Blackberry.

Recipe:

In an ice-filled cocktail shaker, combine liqueur, amaro, rum, lemon juice, and ginger syrup. Shake and strain into an ice-filled Collins or highball glass. Top with soda water and stir to incorporate. Garnish with a skewered cucumber ribbon and blackberry.

CAPPELLETTI SPRITZ By Travis Serbus

Ingredients:

1 ounce Cappelletti aperitif;
½ ounce Lustau Amontillado Sherry;
3 ounces Torre Oria Cava;
Grapefruit peel (optional).

Recipe:

In an ice-filled cocktail shaker, combine aperitif and Sherry. Shake and strain into an ice-filled wine glass. Top with Cava and, if desired, garnish with grapefruit peel.

¹Gently muddle 1 pint blackberries in a pitcher. Add 750-ml. bottle of Saison Pale rum. Cover and let sit overnight. Strain.

²Blend 2 parts granulated sugar and 1 part ginger juice for 15 minutes in a blender or until sugar is dissolved.

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PHOTOS BY (TOP LEFT) NEIL BERTUCCI; (BOTTOM) TRAVIS SERBUS