

Change is in the air

Time to break your back bar syndrome

BY THE MARTINI CLUB

In the mid-1900s, writer and staunch defender of the cocktail H.L. Mencken hired a mathematician to calculate the number of cocktails that could be created using the ingredients from a standard bar. The number was a staggering 17,864,392,788 different cocktails. "I have myself invented 11," Mencken wrote, "and had nine named after me."

Considering the number of spirit products that have been released since that time, including everything from flavoured vodkas to exotic liqueurs, one can only imagine that the modern bar possesses seemingly endless cocktail possibilities. But with so many flavours and colours to attract the consumer's attention, are we risking possibility overload? With so many products, how do we keep the products from gathering dust on the back bar?

Consumer demand has fuelled the spirits market for decades. As people travel more, read more magazines and surf the internet, they become aware of products they never had access to even a decade ago. Major grocery chains carry exotic ingredients, such as guava, dragonfruit and thai basil, on a regular basis, and chefs working everywhere from the local bistro to a TV talk show are encouraging consumers to experiment with new tastes every day. This increased awareness leads to a desire for new and innovative products and spirits that push the envelope of flavour and imagination.

Spirit producers have responded, creating an astounding selection of new products, from blueberry, blackberry and black cherry flavoured vodkas to passionfruit, rose, green tea and lychee flavoured liqueurs, and new products utilizing ingredients, such as acai and goji berry, acting as forerunner to the trends of tomorrow.

For the operator of a bar or restaurant, this wealth of opportunity can be overwhelming. Nobody wants to take a chance on a new product only to watch it languish on



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afford, take some time to listen to your guests. Keep products that already sell, but try to ascertain what interests them, what new tastes they might want to try. Once you come up with a solid list, you are ready to stock your shelves, but you aren't in the clear yet. Someone has to get that product from the shelf into the glass, and even a gorgeous back bar will fail if the staff don't know what to sell.

It is imperative that your bartenders know at least a little bit about every product you stock. Not only should they know the name and taste profile, but they should also know two or three things to mix with that product. This becomes the basis of a sale, knowledge that the bartender will give to customers that will encourage them to try a product. Your servers should also know all featured cocktails by heart and know the names of the spirits, liqueurs, beers and wines you sell. When asked if

the back bar, taking up valuable real estate and not providing a return on investment. The first issue to address is how much physical space you have. Back bars vary greatly in size, and a crowded shelf can be as detrimental as an empty one. Once you calculate the number of bottles your area can

they carry Crown Royal, for example, a definitive 'yes' is much more encouraging than an "uh ... I'll have to go and check."

New products provide an opportunity to introduce guests to something they have never tried before. For example, a guest who asks for a Cosmopolitan Martini and is urged to try a Smirnoff Raspberry Cosmopolitan, or even more simply, orders a Rum and Coke and is offered a Captain Morgan Spiced Rum and Coke, finds something that no other bar has offered – an alternative to their 'default purchase'. This sensory encounter can put your establishment at the top of their mind when they next head out, building a loyal and dedicated group of regulars and positive and lasting word of mouth.

Changing with the times while staying loyal to your brand is a benchmark for a successful establishment. The market for cocktails and spirits continues to grow, and opportunities exist on every level to increase your cheque average through pre-dinner cocktails, food pairings and after-dinner sippers. When looking into a new product, ask your spirits rep what the best mixes are, or taste the product with your staff to see if it is a brand they want to get behind. If a bottle is starting to gather dust, use that product to create a fantastic cocktail that can be featured as a daily, weekly or seasonal special. There is no doubt that tasty, mixable and popular flavour products are out there, and with a little attention, those new ideas can keep your back bar spinning, one cocktail at a time.