

# Trend talker

## How worldwide influences can work for you

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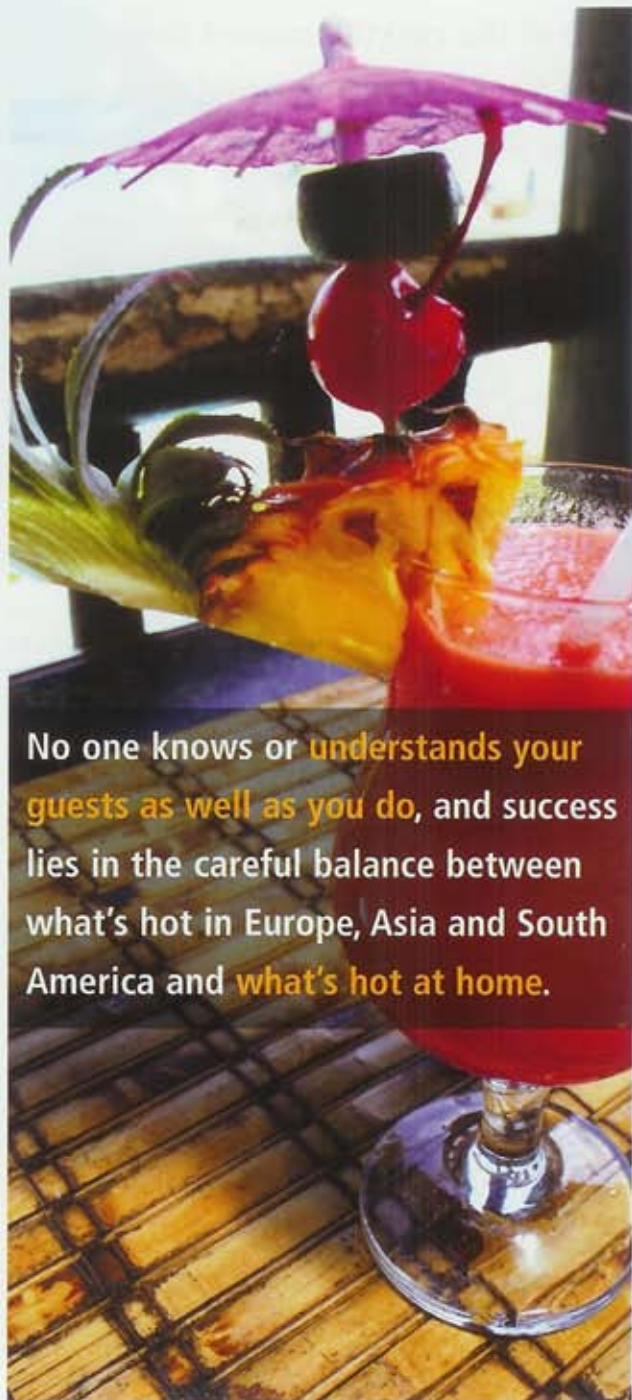
The world of beverage alcohol is continually expanding. As the market grows, the influences that shape it reach across the globe, from major markets to tiny cities; from renowned mixologists to small town cafés. While the abundance of inspiration is exhilarating, it can also be mind-boggling when trying to decide what trend could be the next big seller at your bar. How do we sift through the information and make wise decisions about products to buy and cocktails to serve? The answer is a lot closer than you may think.

Trends in beverage alcohol, and specifically in cocktails, take a long time to form. For example, what is 'hot' in London may not take shape in Vancouver for several years, and even then, it could be several more years before the influence seeps into the mainstream of chain accounts and smaller locales. There are also huge trends that simply don't translate into the Canadian market. There are trends that ignite a city or a region that will never make the trip across the Atlantic.

Take, for example, a sweeping trend that I read about in a European magazine two years ago. There was a new drink being ordered in nightclubs throughout China and Japan, and the sheer volume of this drink, and its popularity among the 20-30-year-old demographic, sounded like a dream come true. With millions of these cocktails being served, and the wide press the trend was receiving, it seemed like a slam-dunk money-maker. The problem? The drink in question was a combination of red wine and Coke, and not one of the 20-30-year-old Toronto nightclub goers we tested gave it higher than a 4/10 when asked to rank its taste. Even more telling, when posed the question 'would you order this in a club?', the answer was a resounding and overwhelming 'no'.

It's important to use an example like this as a cautionary note. We can influence our customers, we can excite them and introduce them to something new, but we can't change them. Offering them a cocktail menu that is too far beyond their scope will turn them off rather than fire them up.

Many times, operators follow very strict protocol when bringing in a new food menu item, from testing to cost control to soft launch, but take a much less structured approach to a drinks menu. As our customers change and become savvier around bar culture, the quality of service we



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provide at the bar becomes an essential component to our profit margins, in some cases as important as our kitchen.

There are several steps to follow when deciding on a new cocktail menu or feature. The first is to look to your customers. Your bartenders and servers hold a wealth of knowledge about your guests. They hear first-hand the likes and dislikes of your regulars, and that information is invaluable. Set up a staff meeting and pick their brains. This will give you direction. You can also give your staff questions to ask your guests, such as "Have you ever heard of a Mojito? Would you try one if it were on our menu?" Once you understand your guests, you are ready to make decisions about their capacity for something new.

The next step is to look at the trends. From magazines to online blogs, the biggest trends these days are authenticity (classic cocktails), premiumization (super-premium brands) and the bar chef (exotic ingredients). There are also general trends in our foodservice that can also be applied to the bar: fresh & healthy, local & natural ingredients and fusion. The next step – creating a menu that works.

Are your guests ready to try a Caipirinha (the local cocktail of Brazil, combining Cachaca, lime and sugar)? While Brazil's national cocktail is creating a buzz among cocktail enthusiasts, its strong taste is often too much for guests. Everybody has heard about a Mojito (a Cuban cocktail, combining rum, mint, sugar, lime and soda), but in truth, it is a very difficult cocktail to make consistently, and some people find the rum flavour too predominant.

An Old Fashioned is a wonderful classic cocktail and certainly fits in with the trend towards authentic gin- & whisky-based selections, but will the recipe of rye, bitters and lemon zest really fly in your dining room?

Constructing a successful bar menu means finding answers to these questions and getting creative about how to keep your customers happy. If a classic Mojito doesn't work, why not make a version that substitutes rum with Smirnoff Raspberry Vodka (a drink we coined The Mojita), or start your guests on a Smirnoff One Pour Vodka Mojito, an all-in-one cocktail in a bottle that allows your bartenders to simply pour the product over ice and serve. This innovation in itself shows the growing desire to make complex cocktails more readily available to the consumer. The Caipirinha becomes a Caipiroska when you substitute vodka for Cachaca, and adding some strawberries to the muddle allows guests to experience the trend they are intrigued by with a taste they love.

Guests who are cocktail curious are also willing to spend a bit more money for a quality experience, and you can add a super-premium element to the drink by offering it with Ketel One vodka, bringing the back bar to the cocktail. The same applies to the Old Fashioned. Work with your bartenders on a New Old Fashioned, perhaps combining crushed orange, lemon and cherry with Angostura and orange bitters, before crowning the cocktail with Crown Royal Deluxe, a very male-oriented offering that highlights the quality of a splendid Canadian whisky.

The growth of the cocktail market over the past decade has been phenomenal, and the trends that are driving sales offer a great potential to increase our liquid profits. Whether you're operating a five-star restaurant or a casual pub, there is an opportunity to absorb ideas and learn from the successes of bars and restaurants in other markets. In the end, no one knows or understands your guests as well as you do, and success lies in the careful balance between what's hot in Europe, Asia and South America and what's hot at home. From the Caipirinha to the Cosmo (and even to red wine & Coke), there is always something that will appeal to your customers, bring them back to the bar, and help pour on the profits.