

Hooked on Classics

You don't have to wander through the mists of time to find cocktails such as the sidecar, Manhattan and old fashioned. Operators are serving them here and now—better than ever.

By Katie Ayoub

There's a fine line between a classic cocktail and an outdated one. And although the term "classic" is overused, there are cocktails that earn the distinction and are labeled thus because they have stood the test of time and reinvention. Like classic recipes from Escoffier, there is a sound reason why these cocktails still hold terra firma: The foundation is strong, technique precise and flavor profile pleasing.

But instead of calling it a resurgence of classic cocktails, it's more aptly identified as a polishing of them. The retro vibe comes from a return to housemade mixers instead of the modern convenience of soda guns and pre-made everything. There's also a refinement of these classics: Noilly Prat dry vermouth instead of Smirnoff, and Woodford Reserve bourbon instead of Old Crow. And occasionally there's a touch of whimsy or playfulness on the original cocktail.

The sweet, classic grasshopper is given a makeover at Twin Creeks: vanilla vodka, Godiva white-chocolate liqueur, green crème de menthe, garnished with shaved 74% dark chocolate.



Lavender Side Car

Oscar Morales, Master Mixologist
The View Bar, Regent Bal Harbor
Miami Beach, Fla.

1½ oz. ounces brandy
¼ oz. Cointreau
½ oz. lavender/honey syrup
(recipe follows)
½ oz. fresh lemon juice
Dash of orange bitters

Combine all ingredients in ice-filled cocktail shaker. Shake until cold; strain into sugar-rimmed cocktail glass. Garnish with lavender sprig or purple edible flower.

Lavender/Honey Syrup

¼ oz. dried lavender
4 oz. honey
8 oz. hot water (180°F-200°F)
Combine lavender, honey and hot water in small bowl or metal tumbler of Boston Shaker; stir to dissolve honey. Allow lavender to steep in mixture until it cools; strain through sieve to remove lavender. Transfer syrup to bottle; keep refrigerated for up to 1 month.

However presented, restaurateurs are fortifying their cocktail menus with these giants from history—shaking and stirring with renewed respect and passion, and are being rewarded by rapt attention from their happy customers.

An old fashioned for me and a sidecar for my friend

“The old fashioned is a drinker’s drink,” says Toby Maloney, partner and head mixologist at The Violet Hour, a cocktail lounge in Chicago. “It’s a perfect drink, so we add a little twist, but still keep its character.” He builds his Summer Old Fashioned in a rocks glass with Bulleit bourbon, housemade hibiscus syrup (simple syrup flavored with dried Hawaiian hibiscus flowers) and Peychaud’s bitters, then

garnishes with a lemon twist. “The hibiscus adds a tropical, floral note and a touch more viscosity to the cocktail,” he says.

“For our Lavender Side Car, we’ve recreated the original sidecar,” says Oscar Morales, mixologist at View Bar, the cocktail lounge at Miami Beach’s Regent Bal Harbor. “But we’ve given it our own twist: lavender.”

In a shaker, he combines brandy, Cointreau, lavender/honey syrup (lavender, honey and hot water), fresh lemon juice and orange bitters. He pours into a sugar-rimmed cocktail glass, then garnishes with either a sprig of lavender or an edible flower, depending on which gender orders it.



Simon Hare

The classic sidecar gets a modern twist with a lavender infusion at the View Bar, Regent Bal Harbor in Miami Beach.

The Violet Hour’s Summer Side Car combines Landy Cognac, Marie Brizard Orange Curaçao, Lillet Blanc and fresh lemon juice in a cocktail shaker with ice. Maloney strains it into a coupe glass and garnishes with nine drops of housemade tangerine bitters. “The classic sidecar is made with brandy, Cointreau and lemon juice,” says Maloney. “Ours adds Lillet Blanc, a fortified white wine. It lightens it up and freshens the drink. Cocktails are based on three ingredients: booze, sweet and tart. Getting that combination right is the hardest thing in the world.”



At Twin Creeks at the Silverton Casino in Las Vegas, what's old is new with this New Fashioned, featuring seasonal fruit.

Make mine a gimlet

The traditional gimlet is made with gin and Rose's lime cordial, but a modern update replaces the cordial with a housemade concoction. Double Crown in New York, a restaurant with a sensibility inspired by the British Colonial Empire, features a Perfect Gin Gimlet.

"Our philosophy has us going back to basics, but being creative," says

head barman Brian McGrory. For the housemade lime cordial, he combines sugar, water, lime juice, lime zest, citric acid and cream of tartar. "It's kind of zingier than the bottled stuff," he says, "and doesn't have that artificial flavor to it. The gimlet is easy to make, but offers a layered and complex drink."

At retro-diner Dine in Chicago, the gimlet is made with Tanqueray X, fresh lime juice and a housemade tonic. "The tonic adds great flavor and makes it our signature drink," says Andy Rohrer, director of food and beverage.

For the tonic, he brings to a boil water, lemongrass, the juice and the zest from lemon, lime and orange, allspice berries, citric acid, salt and agave syrup. He covers and lets simmer for 20 minutes, then strains it, heats it back up and adds more agave syrup. For carbonation at service, he adds seltzer water.

"The cool thing about this tonic is that we can change it up," says Rohrer. "We can add juniper and bay leaf for a more savory touch or perhaps ginger and cinnamon for something more exotic."

Hey, who invented this drink?

"The history of the cocktail is an important element to the classic cocktail," says John DuPont, master mixologist at Twin Creeks, Silverton Casino, Las Vegas. "People are intrigued by their stories."

Take the Sazerac, for instance. This is one of the original cocktails, dating back

to New Orleans, circa 1842. "This drink predates bartenders," DuPont says. "You had apothecaries, who created medication, not cocktails. Bitters was a medicine. The Sazerac was made with absinthe, simple syrup, bitters and cognac. It switched to rye in the 1870s. Absinthe was abolished in 1910 because they thought it contained hallucinogenic properties. In 2007, it became legal again, and that's what we feature in our Sazerac."

He pours absinthe, simple syrup and Peychaud's bitters in a glass, then stacks ice and Sazerac rye atop.

According to DuPont, the younger set is now ordering the old fashioned—thanks to the TV series, "Mad Men," which is set in the early 60s. At Twin Creeks, the drink—typically a combination of orange and cherry muddled with simple syrup, bitters and then topped with ice and bourbon—is refashioned into a New Fashioned.

"As the seasons change, we muddle different fruit for the drink," says DuPont. "Right now we're using raspberries, blackberries and cherries." He muddles the fruit with simple syrup, adds Peychaud's bitters, and then Basil Hayden bourbon. "That bourbon has enough spiciness to counteract the sweetness in the drink. It's a well-balanced cocktail," he says. It's garnished with a spear of berries and a lemon rind.

I'll have what she's having

At Proof on Main, Louisville, Ky., general manager Brooks Reitz describes

the restaurant's old fashioned as deconstructed. "We use rye instead of bourbon, Luxardo Maraschino liqueur instead of cherries and Cointreau instead of oranges," he says. Finished with a dash of Peychaud's bitters, stirred with ice and strained into a martini glass, it's garnished with a cherry.

Tru in Chicago is known for its impeccable yet playful food. Ditto for its bar menu. Rolled out this fall, a few of Tru's cocktails feature what executive chef Tim Graham and wine director Chad Ellegood have named "spICE cubes."

"We took popular cocktails and made them complicated," says Ellegood.

"Seriously, though, we added elegance and made them special."

For the spICE Manhattan, the glass is first washed with sweet vermouth. Ninety-nine tiny ice cubes are added, half made from the water of rehydrated cherries and the other half from cinnamon-steeped water. Cherry brandy and Buffalo Trace bourbon are poured, and the drink is garnished with brandy-soaked cherries.

"We're a Champagne- and wine-based place," says Ellegood. "We used not to list cocktails, but now we do—as a nod to the trend."

Back at Proof on Main, the Champagne Cocktail is passed as a welcome drink to guests attending the annual PJ Party. "Our take on the mimosa is a French Mimosa: white rum, Lillet Blanc, orange juice and Champagne," says Reitz.

Another year featured the Tranquility, a Champagne cocktail starring Finlandia grapefruit vodka, Chambord and Champagne, garnished with currants.

"Classic cocktails have so many dimensions and are well structured," says Reitz. "They're fun to play with."

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