

# Cheers

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## Culinary Cocktails

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## Culinary Cocktails

Herbs and spices have been used to flavor beverage alcohol for centuries—see Benedictine, Chartreuse, vermouth and others. And with today's emphasis on crafted cocktails, more restaurants and bars are including these kitchen staples in their drinks.

Spices and herbs add complexity and also “look great, smell delicious, and bring a freshness to drinks,” says Maxime Belfand, head bartender at Saxon + Parole in New York. “Customers also know the bartender really cares about the drink” when he or she uses unique, fresh and quality ingredients.

As with food, “people judge what they order long before they even take the first sip. And in that way, herbs and spices are approachable and inviting,” says Damian Arms, bartender at the JW Marriott Chicago.

The Marriott serves three cocktails in its lobby lounge developed through the hotel chain's Cocktails with Purpose program—appealing libations created with fresh juices and herbs to have a healthier edge.

Green Mountain Dynamite is the most popular cocktail. It mixes Absolut Citron vodka, lemon juice and grade B maple syrup, “which has a robust, almost smoky flavor to it,” Arms says, plus a shake of cayenne pepper. The drink is finished with a few dashes of Urban Moonshine maple digestive bitters, which contains dandelion, burdock, fennel, dock, angelica, ginger and gentian.

Barrel Spice is Marriott's version of the Old Fashioned, made with tequila instead of whiskey. It also contains Amontillado sherry for its nutty flavor, Fernet Branca, crème de cassis, two dashes of mole bitters and a dried chili de arbol.

“You pick up the heat immediately, then you get the fruit, tequila and the nuttiness. Then [the heat] comes back at the end but is faded because everything else is there,” Arms says. “After that first sip, it's all mellowed out; you've almost reset your palate. Everything's more in harmony in the second and third sips.”

The Amaro Sour is made with muddled strawberries, Averna Amaro, Myers's dark rum, lemon juice, honey syrup, Fernet Branca, and a healthy dash of turmeric. “It's a very complex drink,” Arms says.



*Green Mountain  
Dynamite.*

## Seasonal Seasonings

Saxon + Parole's Bluegrass Swizzle summer cocktail (\$13) uses bourbon, lemon juice, and a syrup made with herbes de Provence—rosemary, thyme, sage and lavender. "We sous-vide the herbs with a Provence rosé wine to concentrate the flavors for about 25 minutes," says Belfand. Then he strains the wine and makes it into a syrup.



*The Basil Gimlet.*

Why sous-vide—which involves vacuum-sealing food and heating in a controlled, low-temperature water bath? The herbs would lose flavor and alcohol if cooked in a pan, Belfand says. The syrup packs a flavorful punch, he notes. "We only use the syrup in this drink; it would be overpowering in many others," Belfand says. "You have to use herbs very wisely because of such strong flavor."

Blackbird in San Francisco changes its menu on a regular basis, "and there are definitely spices that are more seasonal than others," says bar manager Matt Grippo.

For instance, nutmeg, clove, cardamom and cinnamon work well in fall and winter, "and I like to use pepper—white, black or pink peppercorn—and even some chili spice in the summer, like arbol," he says. "For spring, I like more herbal flavors like thyme, mint or tarragon."

The cocktails served at Mills Tavern in Providence, RI, are mostly seasonal offerings, though the Basil Gimlet is a year-round favorite. Mixologist Shawna Dietz (pictured above in lead photo) makes it by muddling basil with limes, then adding Hendrick's gin, lime juice, thyme syrup, and club soda.

She makes her own thyme syrup and boils it for no more than 15 minutes to extract the flavor. "It will get bitter if you cook it too much," Dietz says.

For the fall, the restaurant has a Spiced Pear Martini made with brandy-infused with pears mixed with baking spices (cinnamon, allspice, ginger, clove and star anise), simple syrup, St. Germain elderflower liqueur and lemon juice. All cocktails are priced at \$12.

### The Essence of Infusions

Most of the Marriott's herbal cocktails involve infusing liquors, "which is pretty easy and can add a subtle flavor or can be more pronounced, depending on your intent," Arms says. He typically uses recognizable ingredients for infusions, such as thyme, ginger, clove and cinnamon.

Blackbird's Grippo is currently playing around with dill in a twist on the classic Vesper cocktail. He infuses vermouth with dill for a few days, then he strains the liquor and mixes it with gin and vodka.

Grippo prefers to use dried dill vs. fresh to speed up the infusion time, plus it's easier to keep the product in stock. "It's very crisp; the dill stands out along the background of those neutral spirits, and the gin has the botanicals that play nicely with the dill," he says.



*The Ruby.*

Infusing spirits with herbs and spices requires some restraint, Arms says. Too much or too long can turn infusions bitter. Infusions can take from 15 minutes for a strong spice such as clove to a week for a leafy aromatic herb like basil, he says. Taste frequently to get the exact flavor you are seeking.

"Bartenders want to have the precision of a pastry chef, yet the intuition of a sous chef," Arms says. "It is important to measure, weigh and be precise with the ingredients," he notes, "yet a bartender needs to have the intuition to taste and alter his creations on the spot."

If infusing spirits with herbs, the alcohol should be at least 40% proof "to ensure a proper absorption of flavor compounds into the alcohol you're using," Arms says. "Generally anything less than 40% alcohol by volume will result a weaker and less balanced infusion."

Grippo agrees: "The more alcohol, the more flavor and the faster the extraction," he says. "And if you want that flavor to stand out, the more neutral the spirit the better."

## Turning up the Heat

Gripco infuses 151 proof rum with dehydrated chili de arbol with for four to five days “though sometimes we let it sit [longer], and it gets pretty spicy, but that’s the point.”

He uses the infused rum in an Elote Old Fashioned made with Mellow Corn whiskey, which has been infused with roasted corn on the cob. In fact, Gripco keeps the arbol-infused rum around “just for something to play with,” for when someone asks for a spicy cocktail, he says.

Another specialty involves infusing Benedictine with raw root horseradish and letting it sit overnight at a minimum. Gripco uses this in the Improved Japanese cocktail, along with Nikka Coffey Japanese grain whisky, nigori sake, and lime, finished with freeze-dried wasabi powder and a lime twist.

The Bowery Fix (\$14) is a year-round cocktail at Saxon + Parole made with tequila and mezcal, yellow bell pepper juice — “which is so earthy and smoky,” Belfrand says—lemon juice, simple syrup and two types of chili. The first is a bird’s eye chili that’s been made into a tincture (soaked in high proof vodka for a week or two).

The second is a chili oil, made with dried chili flakes that have been mixed with olive oil and left to sit for about a week. Five or six drops of the chili oil are added to the top of the drink “which look like red pearls,” Belfrand says.



*The Bowery Fix.*

## Unique Touches

To let customers know about the herbs and spices and how they’re being used, “We try to put everything on the description that’s relevant,” says Blackbird’s Gripco. “And often those are great selling points, because they’re something people are universally familiar with. It also creates talking points and there’s a little more mystery.”

Gripco likes to use chicory, which “is a flavor you don’t see in a lot of things.” He makes a chicory tincture with 151 proof rum as a base for his New Orleans Coffee cocktail (\$10).

The drink, which also includes bourbon, cold-brewed coffee, simple syrup and water, is made in a keg and carbonated and served tall on ice. “It’s almost like coffee exaggerated with a cocoa thing going on,” Gripco says. “It’s burnt and roasted in a very pleasant and interesting way.”

Herbs and spiced garnishes can also add flavor and visual appeal to a cocktail. Mills Tavern’s springtime sip called The Ruby, made with strawberry- and rosemary-infused Tito’s vodka, Pavan, Aperol and fresh lemon juice, is served in a glass adorned with a rosemary sugar rim. “The rosemary adds some depth to the drink and a really nice mouthfeel,” Dietz says.

Dietz also candies herbs such as lavender, rosemary, thyme and sage for garnishes. She dips the herb sprigs into simple syrup to coat, then shakes them in a bag of dry sugar, and puts on a rack to dry. The candied herb garnishes help sell the drinks, she notes.

“People enjoy herbaceous and spiced notes because it gives them a sense of place, or triggers a memory of something they enjoy,” Dietz says. “I think it helps sell the drinks, mainly because herbs and spices add flavor, and people look for flavor in everything they consume.”