

Something Old, Something New

Mixologists are serving up cocktails that have been aged in whiskey barrels

For centuries, distillers have been aging whiskies and Cognacs in wooden barrels to add a variety of flavors, aromas, colors and textures to their spirits. Now bartenders across the country are doing the same thing with mixed drinks.

After tasting a cocktail that had been aged in glass during a visit to London, Portland, Oregon-based mixologist Jeffrey Morgenthaler decided to try his hand at aging drinks. He opted to use whiskey barrels from Tuthilltown Spirits in Gardiner, New York. “Barrel-aging seemed like the next logical step,” says Morgenthaler, who is the bar manager at Clyde Common in Portland. He served his first aged cocktail in December 2009, and the 1-gallon batch sold out within a couple of days. Now the venue goes through two and a half barrels in two to three weeks.

Clyde Common offers two cocktails (\$10 each) that have been aged in barrels for eight weeks. The classic Negroni, comprising Beefeater gin, Campari and Cinzano Rosso sweet vermouth, is always on the menu, and Morgenthaler recently added his Norwegian Wood cocktail, a mix of locally produced Krogstad Aquavit, Laird’s applejack, Cinzano Rosso, Yellow Chartreuse and Angostura bitters. Unaged cocktails cost \$8 or \$9, so the profit margin is significant. “Our pour cost on the aged Negroni is 15 percent. Typically the average pour target is 25 percent,” Morgenthaler notes.

Ironically, another benefit of aged cocktails is quick preparation. “The bar staff loves them because it takes two seconds to serve the drink,” Morgenthaler says. “You just pour it out of the bottle, stir with ice and strain into a coupe glass.” Artisanal cocktails can take longer to make than simpler drinks, and customers appreciate the faster service. “It’s still a hand-crafted cocktail—it was just hand crafted two months ago,” Morgenthaler explains.

Ben Schiller, resident mixologist for Boka Restaurant Group in Chicago, has been barrel-aging cocktails at the company’s flagship restaurant and most recently at The Girl and the Goat, helmed by “Top Chef” winner Stephanie Izard. The latter is serving an aged Manhattan (\$15) made with Buffalo Trace Bourbon and Dolin sweet vermouth. “I decided to age this Manhattan in the barrels that the Bourbon came in,” Schiller explains. “It’s a nice introductory cocktail that everyone is used to, so it’s an easy sell.” The first batch was pulled out of



The Negroni at Clyde Common in Portland, Oregon, is aged in Tuthilltown whiskey barrels for eight weeks before serving.

the cask after one month, the second will be drawn after two months and the third will age for three months, producing a total of 1,500 Manhattans.

The cocktail isn’t on the menu, but the bartenders and waitstaff suggest it to guests. Depending on the response, which Schiller expects to be strong, the restaurant may cut back on promotion. “Everyone loves it,” he says. “We’re not only seeing traditional Manhattan drinkers, but we’re also seeing younger people or people who might not be whiskey drinkers.”

Bars in other cities are getting in on the barrel-aging game as well. At Dram in Brooklyn, New York, co-owner Tom Chadwick aged a classic Martinez (\$15), blending Beefeater, Luxardo maraschino liqueur, Carpano Antica sweet vermouth and Angostura bitters, in a Tuthilltown whiskey barrel for eight weeks. The batch produced 100 cocktails, which sold out

immediately, and another batch is currently aging in the same barrel. Chadwick hasn’t calculated the aged version’s profit margin versus a regular Martinez (\$10). “The ingredients are the same, so it’s technically more profitable, but that’s not why we’re selling it,” he says. His first couple attempts at barrel-aging failed due to leakage problems, and time and labor also play a factor. “There’s a lot of potential,” Chadwick says. “It’s problematic because you could dump a couple hundred dollars of booze into a barrel and you may not know how it’s going to turn out, but that’s kind of fun, too.”

Temple Bar in Boston also serves a Martinez, made with Beefeater, Luxardo, Dolin sweet vermouth and Angostura bitters, as well as a Negroni that mixes Knockabout gin, Campari and Carpano Antica sweet vermouth. Both cocktails (\$11 each) were aged in Tuthilltown whiskey barrels for two months. “The drinks would probably be around \$9 apiece otherwise, but people seem to be OK with paying a higher price for something unique,” says bar manager Alex Homans. If guests are curious, he’ll offer them a side-by-side tasting of aged and unaged versions of the same cocktail.

Boka’s Schiller credits the popularity of aged cocktails to the widespread proliferation of classic drinks and craft mixology. “When consumers can find a well-made drink that has an interesting side story to it, they get excited,” he says. **mw**

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