

Mix masters take cocktails to new level of artistry

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Drinking away one's recessionary sorrows need not be depressing.

San Francisco's cocktail renaissance is in full flower, with a flight of 2.0 joints recently opened or set to open later in 2009.

The current ground zero for carefully crafted cocktails is Heaven's Dog, Charles Phan's new Chinese restaurant where the bar and lounge take up more space than the dining room proper. Eric Adkins is the general manager and set up the bar program there. Tending bar with him is a merry band of mix masters who've shaken and stirred at all of the serious booze halls in town.

This tight-knit group of finesse freaks is the sort to insist on fresh, organic citrus, specially-made ice, small-batch artisan liquor and vintage mixers from San Francisco-based Tiny Hands, measured ingredients and a prescribed number of shakes or stirs to ensure a "just right" level of dilution.

"What we want to focus on here is simple, well-executed drinks," Adkins said. "The state of cocktails has been so bad for so long, if people take the simple step of measuring their ingredients, they're in the top 5 percent of bars in the country."

But there's deception in his "simple." A drink at a Heaven's Dog — or Beretta in the Mission or Flora in Oakland or Bourbon and Branch in the Tenderloin — might take several minutes to compose. The difference in taste between that and a carelessly crafted well-drink makes the wait, and cost, worth it, believers say.

And this bartending crew, who hopscotch between bars on both sides of the bay, are committed to keeping it old school.

For Adkins, that means going by the book. The book in question is Charles Baker's "The Gentleman's Companion."



Adkins makes merry at the bar at Heaven's Dog, Charles Phan's new SoMa outpost.

All eight drinks on the Heaven's Dog menu (there will eventually be 16) come from this 1946 travelogue.

"We all can riff on classic drinks," Adkins said. "It's more fun for me to find old drinks that existed in a place and period and bring them back."

Another telling sign of a serious cocktail establishment is its ice. Not just any frozen water will do. Heaven's Dog uses a Kold Draft machine, the Escalade of ice makers, providing perfectly shaped, nonsticking, slow melting cubery. Locally, places with a Kold Draft include Bourbon and Branch, Alembic, Gitane and Beretta in San Francisco and Flora in Oakland.

The cocktail craze has gained real legs, and legitimacy, through restaurants eager to set up bars that mirror what the chef is doing in the kitchen.

"Chefs open restaurants and they want a bar that has the quality of their kitchen and wine list. They want to use good producers, want things to be fresh. ... People have become more and more mindful of what they eat, returning to real simple, agriculturally driven foods and wine," said Thad Vogler, who helped to set up the bar programs at places ranging from Slanted Door to Beretta to Camino in Oakland. "The last thing to catch up has been the bar. Like with food and wine, there's been a harkening back."

That harkening back makes vintage cocktails particularly appealing to this new breed of barkeep.

Committing more of a restaurant space to the bar also makes good economic sense, particularly in tight times like these, said Andrew Freeman, a San Francisco restaurant consultant.

"Restaurants really are looking for ways they can diversify and use their space as much as possible, and also to be able to offer as many experiences under their roof that fit their concept," Freeman said. "By creating more of a cocktail-lounge scene, it gives people an experience like those who want to date, but do not want to get married."

In short, a destination bar offers high-quality, foodie options to people who may only want an appetizer and a couple of cocktails without committing to the rigamarole

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What makes a good cocktail?

It's all about consistency, according to Eric Adkins, general manager at Heaven's Dog



Having the right ice cuts down on drink dilution inconsistencies.



Proper measurements means the drink will taste right every time.



Stirring or shaking a prescribed amount is also part of the recipe.

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of white tablecloths, fawning service or whatever else notions of fine dining conjures.

Adkins of Heaven's Dog has said that in the current recession, patrons seem more hesitant to spend money on food than booze.

Freeman predicts that cocktails and big bar scenes within restaurants will become even more prevalent as the recession plays itself out, and that the bar program will even further differentiate itself as a distinct destination from the main dining room.

"The bar is no longer somewhere to sit until your table is ready, or for the solo

business traveler," Freeman said.

Indeed, at Vogler's new bar, called Bar Agricole and scheduled to open at 11th Street and Folsom in September, the bar is the main event, and an all-day one, while the food is a secondary affair.

Should the opening play out as planned, Vogler may have timed the cocktail trend just right, giving it time to grow out of "trend" and settle into life as city folk live it.

"This is a great time to be a bartender," said Adkins. "If you're not great in the kitchen, people slam you. If you make a cocktail that doesn't suck, people think you're great."

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