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Cocktails and the Pastry Kitchen

by Valerie Peterson

The trend of attentive, inventive mixology shows no signs of slowing and has become an increasingly visible and profitable component of a restaurant, an important element to attracting to customers. So, if your dessert-potable crossover is limited to the Marsala in your zabaglione and the maraschino cherry in the bar's Manhattan, it's time to put more thought into the spirits at the end of a meal. From sharing ingredients and methods, to pairing after-dinner drinks more closely with desserts, to creating "dessert cocktails," enhanced synergy between the bar and the pastry kitchen can offer new venues for chef-inspired creativity, help create additional end-of-meal excitement for the customer, and can give a welcome boost to the bottom line.

As with desserts, cocktail trends differ widely - from the purist's classics; to decadent, over-the-top concoctions;

to fresh, peak-of-the-season creations; to cutting-edge, tech-savvy inventions. And, like pastry chefs, "every mixologist has his or her own style and philosophy," says Junior Merino, "The Liquid Chef," who feels that "the ability to please comes with training, knowledge, and understanding." Whether the bar tends toward hand-crafted artisanal spirits or trendy liqueurs, it behooves the pastry staff to keep their finger on its pulse - for inspiration for their own dishes, and/or to help understand and inspire the restaurant's mixology program.

Johnny Iuzzini, Executive Pastry Chef at Jean Georges Restaurant and aspiring bar owner, is in a unique position to comment. The author of *Dessert FourPlay*, and a regular on a new Bravo series premiering mid-September, he spent his days off last year working in the acclaimed New York City bar, PDT, in order to absorb every detail of the

cocktail world. "I wanted to take what I learned in the kitchen and apply it to make beautiful, delicious, well-balanced drinks." And he advocates kitchen-to-bar cross-pollination, as well. "In many cases, bartenders can benefit from the kind of training we chefs get - learning about flavor profiles, layering and blending flavors, contrasting textures and using fresh, seasonal ingredients."

Sharing ingredients is an efficient and cost-effective way to help extend the kitchen's vision through to the cocktail list. In Merino's business developing exclusive cocktails for clients as varied as Walt Disney World, Tokyo's ANA Hotel, and an Oprah Winfrey project, he regularly raids the pastry larder. "Spices, herbs, compotes, fruits, coulis, sorbets, ice creams, dehydrated garnishes, candied fruit and flowers - to be honest I really can't think of any item from a dessert kitchen that cannot be incorporated into

A duo of 'Sips-and-Sweets' from Abigail Kirsch caterers.



an amazing cocktail." As a case in point, Raphael Reyes, a bartender at Yerba Buena in New York City, takes inspiration from the pastry kitchen, using whatever syrups might be leftover to improvise cocktails; infusing condensed milk (which is used in the restaurant's tres leches cake) with spices, then blending it with cream and strawberries for a drink base; or borrowing a fruit "chip" dessert garnish to perch on the edge of a cocktail glass.

While borrowing from the pantry can enhance the bar's palette of ingredients, 'borrowing' the bar's glassware and equipment can expand a kitchen's presentation repertoire. According to Alison Awerbuch, Executive Vice President and Partner of Abigail Kirsch, Inc. catering firm, "We serve desserts in a martini glass for a 'wow' effect." Presenting butterscotch sauce in a shot glass, or chilled fruit soup served from a mini cocktail shaker, can add elements of surprise or whimsy.

But effective coordination between the pastry kitchen and bar doesn't end with mere swapping. Beverage managers can go beyond offering the typical after-dinner drink liqueurs, Ports and late-harvest Rieslings and increase sales by working with the pastry chef to develop suggested pairings for specific dishes. "Many people automatically go for a sweet wine; I don't recommend that," says Iuzzini. Instead, he suggests experimenting with beers, sakes and lighter spirits in which the flavor profiles echo the notes in a particular dessert, and provide some acidity to contrast the sweet.

When developing cocktail pairings (rather than choosing single spirits) to accompany desserts, master mixologist Merino also recommends complementary balance. To go with a chocolate dish, for example, he looks for a base of something with a bit of acidity and lightness - like sherry - to balance the sweet, thick mouthfeel. Citrus desserts pair well with tea-based cocktails, and can stand up to the nuanced sweetness of ingredients such as honey or maple, he says.

Abigail Kirsch offers "Sips and Sweets" - passed cocktail shots specifically developed to coordinate with the accompanying small dessert bites. The flavors of the duos echo each other, and the two are meant to be eaten in tandem. For example, a tropical "sipper" of housemade roasted pineapple juice infused with dark rum, and topped with a Coco Lopez foam dusted with lime zest is paired with "sweet" crispy banana fritters coated in a coconut-peanut-panko crust in chocolate Domaine de Canton Ginger Liqueur sauce. Another pairing relies on retro-comfort flavors: spiked malted ice



Peanut Whiskey Cocktail

Junior Merino calls this creation "a perfect dessert cocktail."

2 ounces Castries Peanut Rum Crème
1 ounce Dewar's 12
1/2 ounce Dekuyper Buttershots
small bunch fresh red currants, on stem with leaves

Add all the ingredients into a shaker, add ice, shake and strain into a cocktail glass. Garnish with red currants.



cream soda made from Godiva Chocolate Liqueur, malted caramel infused cola and malted caramel ice cream, served with warm, oozing house-made Nutella ravioli with Chocolate Frangelico drizzle and praline.

The ultimate convergence of the dessert and cocktail is a drink that serves as both. According to beverage consultant Danielle Madera, "Presented at the end of a meal, a cocktail menu can be designed to substitute for dessert." And pastry chefs can be key to consulting on those "dessertinis" where, Merino says, "There is a wide range of options - in texture, sweetness... We create cocktails with coffee, chocolate, teas; they can be hot or cold. They can be made like digestives, with sherry or Port or palate cleansers, like a champagne cocktail... You don't have to limit your creativity - your 'potable' dessert menu can be very diverse."

Whatever the preferred style and ingredients, when creating a cocktail, Iuzzini recommends keeping in mind

the same principles as when creating a dessert, layering flavors and textures, and appealing to all the customer's senses. "What's the visual impact? What's the aroma? What do you taste on the first sip? The finish? And don't forget that garnishes can be used to carry flavor outside the cocktail, as well."

Iuzzini and Merino often use cutting-edge kitchen equipment like Cryovacs, dehydrators and Thermo Whips to concentrate garnish flavors and make foams, but even a low-tech garnish has appeal. Rimming the glass with elements such as crushed cacao nibs or turbinado sugar, or spices such as chili powder, adds flavor and texture, as well as visual "pop."

For a visual pop - literally - Abigail Kirsch creates frozen cocktail push-pops. Ices layered with frozen liqueurs and chopped fruit gelees, they have flavors like black forest (Morello cherry ice, Godiva White Chocolate Liqueur gelee cherries), apple-tini (green apple vodka ice, cinnamon schnapps, gelee apples),

and peach Bellini pucker (peach ice, champagne, gelee peaches), to conclude an event with a tasty and fun conversation piece.

And conversation - word of mouth - is, after all, the goal. As Junior Merino puts it, "At the end of the day, success is in the eyes of the customer." When beverage and pastry programs work in harmony, you can leave guests with a final impression that's both sweet and spirited enough to keep them coming back.

Valerie Peterson is the author of Peterson's Happy Hour (Clarkson Potter), a follow up to her "Entertainingly irreverent" Peterson's Holiday Helper and is the co-author of Cookie Craft, a cookie decorating technique book. She writes about cocktails and food for The New York Times and other publications. Visit her at valeriepetersonink.com.