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A GUY WALKS INTO A BAR (AND SAYS, “MAKE ME A DRINK”)

BAR BIZ WITH BARTENDING REPERTOIRES INCREASINGLY INFLUENCED BY MARKET INGREDIENTS AND SEASONAL FLAVORS, MIXOLOGISTS ARE FLAUNTING THEIR SAVOIR FAIRE WITH TAILOR-MADE DRINKS. KARA NEWMAN REPORTS.

Barkeep's whimsy. Off-the-cuff cocktailing. Dealer's choice. Bartender's choice. Bespoke beverages. Cocktail *omakase*. Call it what you will: At a growing number of bars and restaurants, bartenders are encouraging patrons to go off-menu. *Leave it to me*, they murmur seductively. *Trust me. I'll create the perfect drink for you.*

“*Omakase* means ‘please take care of me,’” translates **Jeremy Adler**, general manager at New York City's **EN Japanese Brasserie**. The concept is familiar to sushi aficionados—the sushi chef is entrusted with selecting the freshest fish, setting the menu and price of the meal.

Head bartender **Gen Yamamoto** adopted a similar approach to creating *Omakase Cocktails* for EN, a flight of ever-changing seasonal cocktails, which he developed “to encourage people to try more flavors.” Depending on market availability and Yamamoto's discretion, guests may be treated to a flight of three tomato cocktails, or a spectrum of fruits and savory tastes such as kiwi, strawberry, and daikon radish.

All the drinks are half the size of a standard 5-ounce cocktail and range from \$6 to \$8 each, depending on market price. The *omakase* program started in June and is conducted only at the bar.

Ironically, just as cocktail menus have become an industry standard, it's become a knowledgeable wink among savvy imbibers to ask the bartender to stray from the list.

“We don't have a ‘bartender's choice’ option on the menu, but we're always willing to go off-menu,” says **Jeffrey Morgenthaler**, bar manager at **Clyde Common** in Portland, Oregon. He estimates that perhaps 5 percent of drink orders are dealer's-choice affairs.

Similarly at **The Vanderbilt** in Brooklyn, New York, it's not explicit, “but it's a request I get every shift,” bar manager **Brian Floyd** says. In addition to six cocktails listed on the menu, he runs what he calls “verbal specials” every day, based on fresh fruit or inspiration from the kitchen. For example, locally sourced apple cider molasses was made into a syrup and added to whiskey, house-made ginger ale, and allspice bitters.

Whatever Floyd chooses as his verbal special tends to be the top seller at the bar on any given evening. It's even become a draw for adventurous regulars: “I have people who come in and don't say anything. They just wait for me to put a drink in front of them.”



A trio of *omakase* cocktails from EN Japanese Brasserie's Gen Yamamoto. From left: Red Cherry (cherries muddled with Hakutake Shiro Shochu); Cucumber (sliced Japanese cucumbers muddled with Absolut vodka); Tomato (cherry tomatoes and Rain vodka). Photo by Christopher Villano.

Meanwhile, at **Eleven Madison Park** in Manhattan, “Bartender's Choice” is highlighted on the cocktail menu, and head bartender **Leo Robitschek** estimates that accounts for 10 percent of drink orders. “On the menu, we have a gourmand's chef tasting,” Robitschek explains. “Adding Bartender's Choice was a natural evolution.” The option is only available at the bar, since it involves a good deal of customer interaction, probing for preferences about the spirit to use, sweetness level, and texture. He usually starts with a particular cocktail in mind, and then tailors it accordingly.

However, Robitschek concedes that the bespoke concept won't work in every restaurant. “It could be a hindrance if people aren't prepared,” he warns. “Nothing's worse than if someone asks



Jeremy Adler and Gen Yamamoto coddle drinkers with flights of seasonal cocktails at EN Japanese Brasserie. Photo by Christopher Villano. Jeffrey Morgenthaler makes off-menu cocktails, such as the one pictured, which includes Plymouth gin, Aperol, Punt e Mes, and lemon peel garnish. Photo by David Reamer.

for bartender's choice, and you don't have something in your bag of tricks." Have an arsenal of potential cocktails, he advises, and take particular note if food is ordered. "You need to know how to balance the acidity or richness," just as with a wine pairing.

Some mixologists say the intense give-and-take of creating bespoke cocktails can be challenging during particularly busy times. But **Eric Alperin**, bartender and co-owner of **The Varnish** in Los Angeles, where roughly half of the drink orders are generated by bartender's choice, disagrees.

"The bartender's choice is about making it easier for the bartender during busy times," Alperin muses. "If you're making six of the same kind of drink, you can use most of the same ingredients and just tweak it. It can be a liberating experience." In fact, faced with a vacillating customer, putting the decision in the hands of the mixologist "can make the machine move faster."

Make me a drink I asked a selection of bartenders to create a cold weather drink. If pressed, I also specified dark spirits (rye or Bourbon), spirit-forward, appropriate to drink before dinner. Here's the range of bespoke drinks each devised:

Michael Neff, Ward III: Rye whiskey, allspice liqueur, small hint of citrus (like orange juice) stirred together. Flambé toasted orange rind on top.

Jeffrey Morgenthaler, Clyde Common: Autumn Leaves: Apple brandy, rye whiskey, sweet vermouth, Strega, and a dash of cinnamon tincture. On the rocks, with an orange twist.

Leo Robitschek, Eleven Madison Park: If you want something a little rich, Bitches' Brew: Unicum, autumnal flavors, mole bit-

But that doesn't mean anything goes, Alperin warns. Even bartender's choice cocktails need to fit with the overall aesthetic of the bar, even down to whether the drink suits the glassware. At **The Varnish**, which focuses on the classic cocktail canon, **Bartender's Choice** drinks tend to be thoughtful riffs on **Sidecars**, **Martinis**, **Negronis**, or other classics.

Another frequently cited challenge: Many customers lack the vocabulary to voice their preferences. At New York City cocktail lounge **Ward III**, co-proprietor **Michael Neff** tried to solve the problem by creating a "Bespoke Cocktails" menu that clearly outlines potential ingredient options by spirit, texture, flavor (sour, sweet, etc.), spice, and fruit.

"It's a grab bag of cocktail-making devices," Neff says. "It's a way for people to focus what they want to say to use, so we can translate it into a cocktail that tastes good." Roughly half of all

ters, and rye. Or, if you want something sour-based, **The Cortez**: amontillado Sherry with cinnamon, lemon, and Champagne.

Eric Alperin, The Varnish: Grapefruit, honey, and Bourbon. An Old-Fashioned-style cocktail on the rocks. "It also depends on the weather. It's different in New York than L.A."

Gen Yamamoto, EN Japanese Brasserie: A flight using different grapes, sweet potato, ginger, pumpkin. "It depends on what's at the farmers' market."

Brian Floyd, The Vanderbilt: A Hard Good-bye: Good dry gin, such as Beefeater, Dolin Blanc vermouth, Bonal (a wine-based quinquina) to give a nice, bitter edge, served straight up with a lime twist. Optional: A dash of A.B. Smeby Licorice-Nectarine Bitters. —K.N.



Neff works on bartender's choice drinks behind the bar at The Varnish in Los Angeles. Photo by Peden & Munk.

Drink orders are generated by the bespoke menu, which can translate into 40 to 50 bespoke cocktails on a busy evening. Custom-

er favorites are transcribed onto an index card and kept at the bar. After one year in business, the box holds about 125 drinks.

Most new customers first order a drink off the cocktail menu, Neff says, then watch someone else create a bespoke drink and give it a whirl. It's also become a publicity tool: "People want to talk about and write about the bespoke thing."

At Vancouver-based restaurant **Boneta** and cocktail lounge **The Diamond**, bartender and owner **Mark Brand** says custom-made cocktails are "our major claim to fame," and some nights can account for up to 90 percent of orders (although other nights, significantly less).

He too has a strategy for busy nights: "If I get in the weeds, I'll make multiples of a style of drink and adjust it for the individual guests, satisfying everyone while maintaining speed. We can get more into the bespoke process in quieter times." He aims to get a drink, including customized drinks, in front of customers in under five minutes.

Across the board, bartenders caution that a bespoke cocktail request is not an excuse to experiment on an unwitting guest. A sloppy drink doesn't breed trust.

Sums up Morgenthaler: "If somebody is trusting you and putting themselves in your hands, you have a responsibility to make it a really great drink."

Kara Newman is the author of *Spice & Ice: 60 Tongue-Tingling Cocktails*.

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