Carefully Crafted

The craft cocktail movement brings new spirits to events
Beverage director and mixology guru Scott Beattie leads groups in spirited hands-on cocktail making classes at Meadowood Napa Valley.
The New Cocktail Culture

By Martha Burr & Kathy A. McDonald

Raise the bar & spirits at your next event.
The craft cocktail movement is changing the way people drink at events. There's soaring demand for creative, quality cocktails. That demand is being met by caterers and hotel food and beverage teams who can now serve hand-crafted drinks with top-notch ingredients and presentation—without guests having to cool their heels while the mint is muddled or the lemon peel zested. Today's most innovative bartenders, or as some prefer to be called, mixologists, have moved well beyond stirring martinis or blending margaritas. Devoted to their craft, some are making syrups, ginger beers, infusions and bitters from scratch. There's a rise of pre-Prohibition recipes. Vodka is out, gin and all manner of whiskies are in. But thanks to molecular gastronomy techniques (think foam) and unique ingredients (yuzu, orgazat and rose petal soda, for example), the classic cocktails have a decidedly modern twist.
Too Left: A peek into Bourbon & Branch speakeasy in San Francisco.
Too Right: The cocktail bar room at Honeycut can fit up to 75 people.
Middle: Crafted cocktails from Meadowood Napa Valley (left and right) and (middle) Polite Provisions in San Diego.
Bottom: The secret door at Prohibition in San Diego leads to a comfy and clubby bar.
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e-creating an artisanal experience that’s not watered down takes great ingredients and proper technique. A signature or celebratory cocktail at the beginning of a gathering takes prep and staging. “So much of it is mise en place [French for putting in place],” when preparing complex or even simple concoctions for dozens, says Eric Alperin, co-owner of the celebrated downtown Los Angeles bar The Varnish.

Pre-batched or draft cocktails are one way to serve mixed drinks. Variations are based on the season. “We focus on one or two choices and batch them for tray-passed cocktails,” observes Catherine Morel, lead sommelier at Bourbon Steak Los Angeles, part of Michael Mina’s restaurant empire. In summer, that might be a fun sangria; in winter, an aged-in-cask Old-Fashioned.

Punches are another option. At the freshly renovated Agua Lounge at the Island Hotel in Newport Beach, general manager Miguel Rodriguez-Vidal has his mixologists take punch making tableside; it’s ideal for pre-event groups of eight to 10, who often reserve a comfortable banquette. The hotel’s ice program is also notable: Punches are cooled by 4-inch-square blocks, while the hotel’s specialty ice machine makes denser ice that melts more slowly than conventional cubes, maintaining the cocktail’s flavor profile.

As sommelier and co-owner Caroline Styne of the restaurants Lucques, a.o.c. and Tavern in Los Angeles sees it, the key to a first-rate cocktail program is considering the beverage experience as every bit as important as the food. At the L.A. Loves Alex’s Lemonade fundraiser, some of the country’s top mixologists were working alongside celebrity chefs. The trend is to raise the bar (so to speak) for event beverages, with everything from artisan ice and small-batch spirits to award-winning cocktail recipes. Cocktail geekery is now mainstream. Here’s how it’s done.

**GO UNDERGROUND, SPEAKEASY-STYLE**
The nostalgic allure of the speakeasy creates a bit of fun and drama, as well as a stylish haunt for intimate cocktail events. From the Bay Area to San Diego, California’s Prohibition past inspires some elegant venues that serve up single malts and sophisticated vintage recipe cocktails.

In San Francisco, Bourbon & Branch is the first confirmed speakeasy in the city (and actually operated illegally until 1933). Its dark varnished wood, vintage fixtures and gold-hued atmosphere make a glamorous backdrop for Sazeracs and Manhattans. Private events can be booked in different spaces—the Library (10-50 guests) is lined with vintage books, with exposed brick and a pressed tin ceiling; Russell’s Room (10-35) was once a cigar store and secretly a fancy bar that served up bootlegged liquor and featured five secret exit tunnels (which are closed, but open for viewing); upstairs, Wilson & Wilson (10-25) is another “speakeasy within a speakeasy,” with a private detective theme. The full venue is also available as a buyout.

San Diego’s Gaslamp Quarter, known for its historic buildings and lively nightlife, is home to the city’s artisanal cocktail mainstay, Prohibition. Once you’re through the nearly hidden entrance, exposed brick walls and ambient lighting frame a long bar laden with fresh fruit and produce for lovingly handmade craft cocktails mixed by some of the city’s top bartenders. There’s live jazz, soul and R&B music, too. Down another flight find the bar, with more than 40 varieties of Scotch and bourbon, wine and beer. The venue can hold up to 75 people for private events, with a dedicated and experienced staff.

With an almost hidden entrance off a downtown Los Angeles alley, Honeycut blends expertise made cocktails (more than 50 kinds are available) and a 1970s-style disco dance space. The 3,000-square-foot space is divided into two rooms: the 75-person capacity cocktail bar (where groups can be attended to easily with bottled pre-mixed cocktails served with crunchy ice) and disco with an LED dance floor (capacity 90). Both have chummy booth seating and colorful interior (which get dark in the evening) that shouts modern speakeasy. During E3, a video game convention, the disco space was lit up even more, as arcade games were brought in for a convention after-party.

**MOCKTAIL MOMENT**
As cocktails at events have become more sophisticated in the past decade, so have mocktails, the tasty, nonalcoholic drinks guests enjoy quaffing for a variety of reasons. Beyond being a designated driver, being pregnant or in recovery, many folks may want to simply take a break and stop drinking alcohol but keep socializing; a deliciously concocted virgin cocktail offers the perfect respite.

“Mocktails are some of my favorite drinks to make because they are essentially culinary, and I love to surprise people with unexpected flavors,” says Matthew Biancianiello, one of LA’s most inventive mixologists. “I always use the same stemware as for alcoholic cocktails, but usually I replace the liquor with about two ounces of Pellegrino, so the bubbles lift up other flavors.”

One of Biancianiello’s most popular drinks is a blend of golden raspberry, sage, ginger, and lemon, sweetened with agave, shaken and strained into a rocks glass and garnished with fresh blackberries. “It’s beautiful,” he says, “and a great conversation piece. Another favorite I have right now is one made with fresh flame-grape juice and smoked persimmons. Or one with fresh blueberry juice, passionfruit, bergamot mint and cucumber is very refreshing.”

Biancianiello also likes to stagger dinner party pairings with virgin cocktails to cleanse the palate and slow down the pace of alcohol consumption over a long evening. This works well with other larger events too. “I did the Mad Men Christmas wrap party,” he recalls, “and I was requested to make mocktails because they were still shooting as it began.”
Most people didn’t want to drink while they were working. I was right next to the set, and the actors and crew would be stopping by all night for mocktails, until they wrapped. And then they hit the booze.”

BAR CRAWL TO LAUNCH A BRAND

Launching a new consumer product in today’s crowded marketplace is a challenge for even the most creative marketer. Freya Estreller, co-founder of Ludlows Cocktail Co., and one of the innovative talents behind the Cool Haus ice cream truck and products, organized a bar crawl for the launch of Ludlows jelly shots (spirit-infused gelatin shots in disposable plastic shot-sized cups, made with premium spirits and all-natural ingredients). As a collegiate party must-have, Jell-O shots have a bad rap in the cocktail community, Estreller acknowledges, but Ludlows’ versions are made with care and can be used as an event starter or between courses. The packaging can be customized with logo-flag toothpicks for events. Traditional yet thoroughly modernized, “they’re a great way to bridge the gap between millennials and senior managers,” Estreller says.

“The overall goal was to do something fun,” explains Estreller of the three-night rollout, which took her five months to organize. Each bar crawl involved approximately 50 guests (a mix of those who bought tickets, media, tastemakers and friends), who took part in a progressive visit to three venues. At each bar—Mas Malo in downtown Los Angeles, for instance—a signature cocktail was paired with a jelly shot (in this case, fresh lime margarita). What made the event more of a shared experience and facilitated communication was the free transportation between venues, which was provided through Uber SUVs.

“Everyone was in it together,” says Estreller. Also adding to the “cool startup vibe,” she says, was the enthusiasm generated by the first-ever tastes of the packaged product. The Ludlows Cocktail Co. bar crawl offered an enviable level of engagement; a start-up tech company has asked Estreller to do a version for their product launch.

SPIRITED TEAM-BUILDING

Pros who create sophisticated cocktails are also finding ways to share and spread that knowledge, elevating cocktail culture for all. Even the luxurious Meadowood Napa Valley resort and spa, an epicenter of fine wine, now has a dedicated cocktail guru, Scott Beattie, beverage director of estate events. Meadowood offers a team-building cocktail-making event, often held on the property’s verdant croquet field. After a short lesson on cocktail-making, participants move among eight to 10 stations, each with a different drink recipe and hands-on guidance from a Meadowood mixologist. The course can be customized (Latin spirits, tiki-themed or whiskey drinks, for instance). “There’s great expectations for the cocktail experience at events,” Beattie says.

A specialist in farm-to-glass cocktails (Beattie wrote the book Artisanal Cocktails: Drinks Inspired by the Seasons from the Bar at Cyrus), Beattie was brought to Meadowood specifically to elevate the event cocktail program. Unconventional ingredients, like shiso, cucumbers and nasturtiums, often come from the resort’s 2-acre garden. Foraged California Bay Laurel (also from the grounds) are found in Beattie’s recipe for the Coastal Pimm’s Cup.

In San Diego, Polite Provisions’ Spirit Society classes can be adapted for groups. Developed by general manager Erick Castro, the exercise gives each participant a station, outfitted with the tools of the trade: jiggers, strainers, proper glassware and appropriate ingredients. A two-hour session goes through the creation of three classic cocktails, plus advice on how to set up a home bar.

At Bourbon Steak Los Angeles at the Americana at Brand, an elegant mobile whiskey cart can be used as a station for receptions or tabletop for seated dinner. In a well-choreographed interactive presentation, the essence of a whiskey (or whiskies, depending on budget) is highlighted through a comparison to smoke or spices. For a bourbon tasting, an orange peel is lit and caramelized, and the smoke is infused into a glass to enhance the tasting experience, bringing out the floral/fruity nature of the spirit. The bourbon is then sipped and savored; a lively discussion inevitably follows.

How to Get a Liquor Sponsor

A liquor sponsor is a great way to cut costs and add some panache to your event, especially with specialty brands. But there are a few things to consider before writing that carefully crafted proposal to company reps.

The first step is to make sure your event is legally allowed to receive donations. Liz Brusca, senior events and PR manager for San Francisco-based Anchor Distilling Co., notes that many people aren’t aware of the liquor laws in their state. In California, an event must be civic-related, run through a non-profit, or a completely private event to accept liquor donations (Check the California Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control website at abc.ca.gov for details).

Once you’ve over that hurdle, ask the careful question: Are the participants at your event a good match for the brand? Brusca outlines her criteria: “We look for the right match and brand alignment. There are different consumers for beer than for spirits, so it’s a different approach I also look to see how the liquor will be presented, our spirit portfolio has fairly expensive products, so I do care how they are served. Our spirits are in tune with the mixologist movement, so I like to make sure the event will have a good bartender if it makes sense, we will provide a mixologist to come to the event as well, especially if its a private event and not being held in a bar.”

Be realistic — look at your attendees and determine if this is a great marketing opportunity for the company. Is it more male oriented and upscale, better suited for a whiskey sponsorship? Are you throwing a 1920s-era themed event where perhaps a cognac-based sidebar will be the highlight? Don’t be afraid to ask the sponsor for help and suggestions. Most of all, focus on the target audience. If you can provide a network of potential customers, then it’s truly a win-win situation, Brusca says. After all, “Sponsorship is big on educating consumers.”

PHOTO: LEE POLTILK TOGETHER
After a Spirit Society class at San Diego’s Polite Provisions, students proudly toast the cocktails they’ve concocted.

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