

Matching Spirits and Cocktails with Food

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One of the most exciting trends in restaurants and bars today is the concept of matching spirits and cocktails with food. Not just bar snacks, but actually pairing a drink with an item from the menu. The first step to succeeding at this is to create variations on a theme, using Classic cocktails as your guide, and making these new House drinks work within your establishment's theme. Work with the chef to incorporate ingredients that mirror the menu, or at the least enhance the cuisine. It may be necessary at first to take baby steps: try just one or two appetizers, or begin with the easiest area, the dessert menu. Earn your customer's trust with your astounding matches, and the fun begins!

A few guidelines when matching cocktails with the menu:

- 1) The first rule is that there are really no rules. We tend to make this process way too scientific. Everyone tastes differently, and has different preferences. This must be respected, and yet we must find matches that appeal to the majority of guests.
- 2) Have no preconceived notions: often the least likely match is the most exciting.
- 3) Try to get the chef excited about the program and involved with your matching. There might be a wealth of great ideas to draw from.
- 4) All menus should employ cross marketing. No food menu should be without beverage suggestions, and no beverage menu should be presented to the guest without food recommendations.
- 5) When actually creating the cocktails, incorporate spices, fruits, sauces, flavors, and even garnishes that can be found within the menu itself. Use Classics as a guide. Create cocktails that are balanced and appealing, refreshing and delicious without any food. Keep in mind that crisp acidity in your cocktail is crucial to balance, and to inspiring great food matches.
- 6) When pairing with the food, consider the components of the food as the building blocks, and evaluate your cocktail in the same way. The acid is key, and it is the balance of acid to fruit and / or sweetness that will make or break your match. Textural elements: sweet, salty, sour, bitter, umami, or astringency are your components.
- 7) Whether you prefer to seek out similarities in the components or contrasting elements, you absolutely must be sure to match texture. The richness factor is essential to consider---do not allow the drink to overpower the food, or vice versa.
- 8) After matching textures, and finding interesting component contrasts or similarities that offer enhancement of the drink and the food, you can begin to play around with the flavors.
- 9) Often the best matches can be found when combining the simplest of cocktails with the most sophisticated dishes, or simple dishes with elaborate mixed drinks. Try not to let the complexities of the two combat one another.
- 10) Well-made spirits can be the perfect vehicles for flavor, and as such, can carry many flavors and push them forward, making them perfect complements for food. Think of the cocktail as a condiment to the food, like salt and pepper, or Worcestershire or ketchup, added to the menu to enhance the dining experience.