

**The Return to Flavor**  
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**for Flavor on the Menu**  
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Perhaps the most exciting development I have had the pleasure of witnessing over the past several years in the world of beverages is a trend visible throughout the industry, regarding our choices in food, wine, beer, non-alcohol beverages, and spirits: the consumer's return to flavor. Consumers today are looking to experiment. They want to explore. They want to learn, even if they don't want to be taught. Their choices in beverages are mirroring the trends we can track with our food menus. No longer is the consumer content with the flavorless, generic, poorly distilled, well liquor. Bland, insipid house wine is not special enough. Mass-produced beers just won't cut it anymore. Now consumers want to step up. They want something better (more exciting equals more flavor.) They are seeking alternatives.

We have emerged from the culinary doldrums of the sixties and seventies, the age of the consumer's "fear of flavor." At one time in this country, we were afraid of anything outside of our incredibly limited scope of food and beverage. Pasteurized and homogenized were the buzzwords of the day, and home cooks preferred canned, prepared meals and TV dinners. If it could be boiled in a bag, even better. Before the microwave, a simple warming up in the oven was the way of the world, and after we became radar-ranged, we could eat even sooner. Our drink choices tended to mirror those desires, and we witnessed the decline of classic cocktails, the advent of the fruit drink, and the rise of the sweet elixir. We barely knew that wine existed. Large breweries took over where once handcrafted beers stood tall. Coca Cola continued its climb to superstardom, and we indeed became the personification of the Pepsi generation. Vodka ascended to the throne as the number one most popular spirit, as we continued to seek out ways to catch a buzz without tasting the booze.

The stock market's woes of the late eighties may have actually carried forth a silver lining. Restaurants were forced to offer better values because customers were no longer throwing their money around (aah, the eighties.) Customers were suddenly seeking out good deals---they wanted more for their money. In addition, strict drunken driving laws and a new national conscience, coupled with restaurant and bar liability laws and awareness education, forced us into moderate drinking. Renewed concerns for our personal physical health certainly added fuel to the moderation movement. Soon we began to explore, to seek out new alternatives. We began to discover the globalization of cuisine, and appreciated the "new" flavors from other cultures. Swanson dinners and Spaghettios were no longer in our regimen; Italian, Thai, Chinese, French, Spanish, Greek, and Japanese cuisines were. Soon other cuisines began to increase in

popularity, until now our global village has helped to spawn a true melting pot of cuisines in this country, from Asian flavors to Latin influences, from the Mediterranean diet to American (whatever that is), to our current state of fusion confusion. American cuisine may be the most exciting cuisine in the world today. There are no boundaries, no limitations, no preconceived notions. We can use anything from anywhere in any way, as long as it works, and sometimes it does!

Since the eighties we have seen the average American drinker become more discriminating in her/his taste, and subsequent choices of beverages, too. Popular slogans tossed about within our industry discuss drinking less but better, the return of the classic cocktail, the need for a premium well, customers calling for their brands by name---all solid indicators of this very fortunate and timely return to the world of flavor. As we discuss ideas of the vital needs for a successful restaurant in the 90's into the next millennium, we will also undoubtedly explore classic examples of this craving for more intensity of flavor. It is the driving force behind virtually every consumer trend, and for once, it is founded in good taste versus adept marketing, though we must be wary of the hype more than ever.

The perfect example, and the perfect place to start, is with the most popular spirit in America, vodka. Still #1 (since 1976) vodka is the shining example of the notorious American "fear of flavor." It has only been able to maintain its #1 status by re-introducing flavored vodkas, and marketing the "New Classic" cocktails made from them, and by unveiling a nearly absurd array of supposed super-premium vodkas from virtually every country imaginable, in tall grappa-esque bottles (that were never meant to be placed in the well---why, when they can sit on the top shelf?) fashioned from a grain or a vegetable you've never considered for vodka, and finished with this week's latest exotic water. In blind tastings, nary a one of these could touch those vodkas you thought were the super-premiums before the new kids arrived, but they answer the call for premiums, and it is up to you to respond to the calls of your customer.

Tequila, America's fastest growing premium spirit category, has, as a category, long been dominated by anything BUT premium tequilas. Is it the popularity of the margarita, America's most popular cocktail, that has fueled the surge of tequila? No, it is a handful of boutique, handmade tequilas and single village mezcals that are the driving force. It is the desire for better taste that makes consumers crave the top quality of these outstanding agave-based spirits from Mexico. A bar without tequilas such as these is a bar that I will not be drinking in, and believe me, I am not alone in that conviction.

Speaking of America's most popular cocktail, shall we give at least a nod to the most important? The martini, enjoying its highest levels of popularity since the Thin Man, has helped to spawn a recent resurgence of perhaps the most important cocktail spirit of them all: GIN. Although vodka certainly is still the dominant force, classic gin still retains its place as perhaps

the finest white spirit distilled today. As a nod to the need of the public for even more flavor, super premium, boutique gins, which claim to be softer and smoother, yet even spicier and more aromatic---perfect for the mixed drink---have recently bombarded the market, and while the brands you already know and love are often still better in many cases, a new array of players is knocking at the door.

You know what is hot, and you know you have to have them: small batch bourbons, cognacs, armagnacs, and single malt scotches. Have you tried the super-premium blended, or even vatted malt scotches yet? Single-malt scotch motivated much of this recent movement for the quest for flavorful premium spirits, and rightfully so, but it is blended scotch that made us aware of the category, it is blended scotch that is still the base for some fine cocktails, and it is the blended scotches that have most recently answered the need for more flavor and even higher quality by introducing super premium blends.

Have you tested the Spanish brandy market? Have you noticed that premium liqueurs are hotter than ever? Do you have the basic pedestrian grappa, or are you offering state-of-the-art Italian distillation? Have you even considered a South American aguardiente? Are you still stuck in the light and dark rum doldrums, or are you the first on your block to serve a rum-to-be-savored-in-a-snifter? One of the hottest trends I see around the country as I teach spirits education to the trade, is rum for after dinner. Many of us have been enjoying premium rum in this fashion for years, but I say it is the next hot trend that will take America by storm (dark and stormy, so to speak) perhaps even the next tequila-type success story. If you still haven't gotten into the swing of offering rum for sipping, now is the time.

How is your wine-by-the-glass selection? Are you offering food-friendly options that are chosen to compliment the food, or better yet to serve as a condiment to the cuisine, to enhance the dishes on your menu? Have you explored the seemingly limitless, top-quality, food-friendly options from such formerly exotic but now essential-for-your-list growing regions from countries such as New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, Spain, Chile, Argentina, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, or lesser known areas of the US, France, and Italy? Have you even begun to tap into the potential of sparkling wines, and the cocktails made with them, with food? Are you planning on waiting until every other restaurant in America has grasped it, or are you going to be a part of the growing movement of Americans who have discovered the many different styles of sherry, and how amazingly versatile they are with all types of food? Have you responded to the consumers' cravings for flavorful, food-friendly varietals, not the chocolate and vanilla of merlot and chardonnay, but the exciting, fruit-forward, crisp, refreshing qualities of Riesling and Pinot Noir and other great cool-climate varietals?

Do you have handcrafted beers? ...from Belgium? ...on draught? Are you providing the option of American craft brews? Have you explored the affinities of beer with food, or tried offering tasting menus with different styles of beer matched with the food? Have you at least offered individual suggestions of potential matches?

Do you have exciting non-alcohol alternatives, such as cocktails, sparkling fruit juices, smoothies, natural sodas, non-alcohol beer, or are you content with the free refills of iced tea? One of the most common ways to lose potential sales is to offer half-hearted alternatives to alcohol. 51% of our nation claims to be tea totalers, and yet we all too often overlook the revenue potential of that segment of our consumer base. If they want iced tea, make it special, and provide options within the category. Children also deserve something more interesting than the usual Shirley Temple, and you might be surprised how many non-drinkers would just love holding that deliciously sexy martini glass with a delicious non-alcohol cocktail in it, created specially for them.

Speaking of tea, there is no longer an excuse for poor tea service, or for basic tea bags without an option. This country has a freshly renewed desire to experience tea, and while there are many small tea companies that would be happy to work with your individual restaurants, the very largest and most well-known of quality tea operations offers a vast selection of delicious teas, and will even provide perfect displays as a vehicle for proper presentation to the guest. You don't have to be an expert--they will do the work for you, but at least make the selection available to your guest.

Have you allowed the Starbucks revolution to pervade your menu space? There is no excuse to not offer a variety of great coffee options, and today's consumer will settle for nothing less than a premium cup of fresh-brewed joe, if not the perfect crema on their espresso, or an ethereal cloud of steamed milk on their latte.

Are you using fresh juices, and premium mixers in your cocktails, or are you still wielding a gun? Premium cocktails deserve premium ingredients--yes, we can taste the difference. Classic cocktails are indeed back, and exciting house cocktails can be just another way to put your personal stamp on your program, not to mention putting a substantial gain to your bottom line. Variations on a theme are recommended here, twists on the classics, and I suggest that you create cocktails within *your* theme. Enhance your food, utilize the same spices, fruits, and ingredients that you feature on the menu. Have you tried matching cocktails with food? Another hot trend I see in forward-thinking restaurants is featuring cocktail or spirits matched with food, and I am not talking bar snacks here, but actual menu items. Take baby steps: begin with appetizers paired with aperitif cocktails, or desserts with after-dinner type spirits in a snifter. Once it catches on, which it undoubtedly will, expand your repertoire into the

remaining menu items, yes, even main courses---it is a golden opportunity just waiting to be seized.

Try to think of it this way: no food should ever be served without an appropriate beverage, and no drink should ever be served without appropriate food. Higher levels of guest satisfaction are inevitable if the guest is offered this type of dining experience. Follow that thought process by offering food on all beverage menus, or at least suggestions of it, and by offering appropriate libations on all food menus. You are not only providing tools for your servers, you are offering more interesting alternatives in dining, which will result in happier guests. To put it another way: cross marketing for higher profits.

A great bar or restaurant doesn't have to boast the world's greatest list for every beverage category in the world, but a well-selected representation of each category is sure a good starting point. The key is to offer the options, and let the consumer determine their drink of choice *and* the price point they are comfortable with (upselling is long since dead, but creative check building is an art form.) We already know that our consumers are stepping up, seeking alternatives, consuming a bit less, perhaps, but certainly paying more for quality. Provide your servers with these types of tools, along with the proper methods with which to present them, and the training to help in discussions with the guest, and watch the servers help you increase your bottom line. Empower your service team, and they will in turn empower your guests. Armed with this knowledge, these tools, and the multitude of options to choose from, in the best case scenario, your server can help to impart the knowledge that the guest requires to make good decisions, decisions that will reflect the individual diner's tastes, which will enhance the dining experience.

This is not rocket science. Think options. Alternatives. Education. Tools. Exploration. Experimentation. Step up. Upgrade. Upsell? The return to flavor. Think bottom line. Hmmm.