

Cutting-edge cocktails light up New York

February 5 2012, by Sebastian Smith

You're not allowed to light a cigarette in New York bars, but there's nothing to stop a bartender from setting your cocktail on fire with a 815 degrees Celsius (1,500 degrees Fahrenheit) poker.

In fact, the red hot rod is just the tip of the mad scientist treatment meted out to drinks at Booker & Dax, a new Manhattan drinking hole that's taking cocktail trends to extremes.

Dave Arnold, culinary technology director at the French Culinary Institute, has brought molecular gastronomy techniques to the liquid meal, calling on his background in science and art for extra inspiration.

The 30cm (one foot) long poker delivers instant, fierce heat. Liquid nitrogen, at minus 200 degrees Celsius (minus 328 [Fahrenheit](#)), chills and produces a lot of weird mist around the glass. A centrifuge and an impressive machine called a rotary evaporator transform ordinary herbs and fruits into pure, clear juices and essences.

Arnold, 40, is widely recognized as one of the leaders of a national revival of the cocktail culture in which old favorites get creative makeovers and the likes of bottled vodka-tonics get tipped down the drain.

Yet Arnold insists that his bar, which opened this month, has only one aim: to serve delicious drinks.

"We don't have anything on the menu that's challenging you or pushing

out of your comfort zone," he said. "We're not mixing flavors that you would think bizarre. The less customers know the better: we don't want them thinking we're doing a bunch of gimmicks."

Maybe so, but Arnold and his acolytes grapple with some eye-popping procedures.

As he speaks, Arnold demonstrates the hot poker technique, whipping something called a French Colombian -- Pernod, lemon juice, brown sugar, cinnamon -- into flaming froth.

The [poker](#), which heats electrically to a fierce red glow, is Arnold's own design and, he admits, "one of the most unpredictable" tools in the bar.

Not that the other tools are for amateurs. The carbonation system requires "a little bit of an art," while liquid nitrogen, although "pretty consistent," must be watched for potential burns. As for the fragile and expensive, laboratory-style rotary evaporator, Arnold is adamant: "I don't let anyone else use it."

Serving on a busy Friday evening, mixologist Claire Needham, 24, said she'd been trained for three weeks on the gizmos, which, if handled wrongly, could give new meaning to the dangers of drinking.

"We have to remain very, very calm, however busy we get. Otherwise it's dangerous," she said. "Everyone's being very careful, very smart. We've had a lot of cautionary tales told to us."

Apart from the fire-and-ice challenges, bartenders at Booker & Dax have to memorize the contents of all the little pharmacist-style bottles containing juices clarified downstairs in the big centrifuge machine. The bottles are not labeled and from time to time Needham sniffed at one, or tasted a drop, to double check.

Sother Teague, another barman, said he likes "all these toys we're playing with." But although "people want to see the spectacle, at the end it's not worth the drink if it's not worth drinking."

Watching intently from his stool, customer Bob Ciabocchi, a 57-year-old executive recruiter, asked Teague to prepare him a Manhattan, a classic whisky, vermouth and bitters drink.

"I'm a true connoisseur of cocktails," Ciabocchi warned. "I'm a lifelong Manhattan drinker. I can't tell you how many I've sent back in New York. It can take me five minutes to order one: if the cherry is wrong I send it back; if the colors are wrong, I'm sending it back."

Then, taking his liquid-nitrogen cooled glass, Ciabocchi sipped, and said, simply: "Wow."

Arnold's wizardry is cutting-edge, but to some extent cocktail bars everywhere are tooling up to compete in a sphere that wants to be taken almost as seriously as cuisine.

Derek Brown, who owns the Columbia Room in Washington, DC, and other bars, and writes about drink for The Atlantic, said Booker & Dax are "trailblazers." However, technology is always advancing and becoming more accessible, especially for bars that are in restaurants.

"Bar tending today, it's successfully grown into this branch of the culinary arts, and the knowledge you need to have as a barman is pretty immense," he said.

There's no telling where the bartender of the future will go -- or if there will even be bartenders, Brown said. One of the weirder experiments has been the use of ultrasound machines, a device usually found in hospitals, to age drinks like wine or whiskey.

"It's a little bit of an arms race," Brown said. "What do you next?"

In reality, there will always be room for that mythical, white-jacketed server pouring the drinks our grandfathers knew, [cocktail](#) aficionados say.

"I do think having an understanding of the classics -- drinks like a Manhattan, a Negroni, an Old Fashioned -- is important, no matter what your ultimate approach is to making drinks," said Karen Foley at Imbibe, one of many publications devoted to drink.

"There's a reason why those cocktails are so enduring," she said. "They're perfect in their simplicity, they're accessible and, made well, they'll always make people happy."

(c) 2012 AFP

Citation: Cutting-edge cocktails light up New York (2012, February 5) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-02-cutting-edge-cocktails-york.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--