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Get a shake on

By Pat Nourse
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Ginger infusions, mint-laced mojitos and classic fruit cobbler - these are the drinks of summer.

Long or short? Asian or Middle Eastern? Dark or light? These are the big questions being asked across bars around the city.

What should the thinking drinking person's libation of choice be this season? We've surveyed a handful of Sydney's mixologists for their take on the hot drinks for this summer and beyond.

Cocktail of the moment

"This is going to be very much the year of the mojito [a long drink of lime, muddled mint, sugar and Cuban rum topped with soda]," says Jeremy Shipley, bar manager at Longrain in Surry Hills.

"There's that freshness to it and that romantic aroma of mint and limes and, if you've got good rum and plenty of ice, it's pure summer.

"It's a glamorous drink, too - people think of that scene in the last James Bond movie with Pierce Brosnan looking at Halle Berry and saying, 'Mmmm, a mojito, please.' "

The Loft's Mike Enright agrees. "I think the mojito is going to be this year's caipiroska [the Brazilian stick-drink made with muddled limes, sugar and vodka]," he says. "It's very refreshing and the soda on top of it also means you can drink quite a few of them on a hot day."

Enright has put together a collection of iced-tea cocktails for summer. "They're long drinks made with mainly fruit-based teas to get different flavours - camomile, passionfruit and tequila; jasmine with apple and mixed berry. They're softer flavours than fresh fruit, so you get the aroma but not so overpowering a taste."

Bryan Duell, of W Hotel's Water Bar, says drinkers have been a lot more adventurous in their cocktail-drinking habits during the past few months. "They're willing to go from the caipiroska to the caipirinha [made with cachaca, the Brazilian cane spirit] or, better still, to the mojito. We've just about tripled our volume in mojitos in the past three or four months.



Temperature's rising: Cooling mojitos will be a big hit this summer.

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"I'm glad. It's a much more interesting drink. You can even make great gin mojitos or bourbon mojitos, kind of like a mint julep."

Other drinks to look out for in the coming months include variations on the Moscow mule (vodka, mint, ginger beer) and, with Grey Goose, Ketel One, 42 Below and other top-shelf vodkas becoming more visible, proper martinis.

Hot flavours

"Ginger is huge," says Naren Young of Bayswater Brasserie in Kings Cross. "Elderflower is coming up, cucumber's big and fresh herbs are playing a role."

Young attributes the popularity of these ingredients to the fact that many Sydney bartenders work more closely with their associated restaurant kitchens, trying to match the drinks to the flavours in the food they're serving.

"I've got a couple of ginger drinks - the mules and ginger mojitos are good," Hemmesphere's Julian Serna says. "I've got a really nice drink called a salsa verde, which is a combination of pineapple, coriander and ginger with lemon vodka and limoncello. It's very aromatic, very easy to drink."

Though too much reliance on fruit can make for "girlie drinks", seasonal fruit is always a big hit in summer drinks. Muddled berries in long drinks are cool. The classic Venetian mix of perfect white peaches pulped with sparkling wine (preferably prosecco) in the Bellini way is hard to beat, while some bartenders, such as Marco Faraone, Lotus bar manager and Bartender magazine Bartender of the Year, are going old-school.

"I'm making cobblers with the fruit of the season," he says. "I make a beautiful cobbler with rum, fresh orange and pineapple syrup with bitters. Very dry, very old-school - that's the school I like - and not too much mucking around."

Mint, another hot summer ingredient, is also

a Faraone favourite. "We do a julep with white peaches, fresh mint, vanilla sugar and spiced rum."

Pomegranate, cinnamon and other ingredients associated with the cuisines of the Middle East are creeping in but Duell says Asian flavours such as ginger, coriander and lemongrass continue to ride high thanks to the greater familiarity of Sydney bartenders and drinkers with Asian food.

Aperitif cocktails and longer drinks

"I really like aperitifs," says Young. "They're meant to be a little dryer, so I'm looking at flavours like green apple, sherry, bison grass vodka, fresh herbs. Our lemon basil martini is a good example. It's zesty and though it's not as bone-dry as classic aperitifs, it's still quite palate-cleansing."

Faraone is also selling more aperitifs than ever. "Sometimes I feel like I'm back in Italy. It's six o'clock and everyone comes in for a Campari and soda. We sell lots of Campari, lots of negronis. People are even coming in and asking for Americanos. There's not much difference between the two but the Americano is such an Italian classic. It's great to see. Campari's obviously the big one but we're using a lot of vermouth too. It's hot and aperitifs, especially bitters, are about 25 per cent [alcohol] where other spirits are about 40."

"The bitterness and the low quantity of the spirit open your appetite. It doesn't have to be in the summer but bitters are nice with citrus and nice with something sparkling like soda or tonic. So they work best in the summer months."

"Australia is full of Mediterranean influences - not just Italian, but French and Greek as well - and these countries all have big aperitif cultures and you can see it in what people are ordering."

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Shipleigh says the Pimms, the Camparis, the Aperols, the dry vermouths and the rossos are all great. "When so many bars are doing sweet cocktails, I think the lighter-style drinks, like the tall Camparis, are something I'd like to see more of. And Aperol is something people should give a go. These are all drinks that are lighter in style, not chock-full with alcohol, and they're actually bloody good. And you can go out and have a few of them."

Spirits

"I'm sure tequila will be one of the biggest drinks this summer," says Faraone. Australia's sudden interest, he says, has much to do with the fact that four of the world's top tequilas - Herradura, Centenario, Porfidio and Patron - have now become available locally. (Try Eastpoint Cellars, Edgecliff, and selected Mr Liquor stores, and over the bar at Moorish, the Bayswater Brasserie, Cafe Pacifico, Water Bar, The Loft, Longrain and Lotus.)

"They've just arrived and now that we've finally got the premium brands in Australia, people can actually taste the real thing, the real agave, and it's good to move on from vodka - that's getting a little bland. Overseas, good tequila has always been a very sexy, interesting drink. Nothing like the awful taste most people expect."

Duell says it's the same with rum. "We haven't had much choice except Bundaberg in the past, but now people are more willing to try a Havana Club mojito and the like. I'm very excited about the new Havana Club Blanco, which should be here soon."

Faraone says people are learning more about cocktails "and I like to teach them," he says. "I don't want to make it like a lecture. I just want to show them things they'll like. When I came here three years ago there were a lot of closed minds - 'tequila is bad', 'rum is too sweet', 'whisky is no good' - and it was white spirits everywhere.

"Now people are willing to try the dark spirits, even before dinner. That's great. It's not new but it's something that's coming back. That's the trend for me."

Booze and don'ts

It's time to give something back to those who have given so much of themselves during the past 12 months. Be kind to your bartender this Christmas - pay heed to the wish-list of things they really don't want you to ask of them. And don't forget to tip. You mightn't be able to recall the next day if the person serving you had one head or two but they'll certainly remember you - hopefully, for the better.

Blender drinks

"Stop ordering frozen daiquiris and margaritas," says Young. "Any time you're adding that much ice to a drink, you're basically dumbing it down and I find them an insult to great drinks. A shaken margarita is still ice-cold and very refreshing. It doesn't need the extra water."

Sweet liqueurs

"Definitely no," says Faraone. "Manufactured popcorn and melon and banana? These artificial things should be banned from the face of the earth."

Creamy drinks

"Wrong at the best of times - really wrong for summer," says Young.

Pre-made cocktails

"Ha ha ha ha," says Faraone. "Ha hah."

"And I'd like people to stop ordering drinks because they're trendy," says

Young. "Take the time to read the list or take the bartender's recommendation.

Don't drink something because it's cool or because someone told you to." Or, for that matter, because you read about it in the paper.

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