

Latin Flavors Add Pep to Cocktail Trend



Shown is a Blind Side cocktail at the Epic Roasthouse in San Francisco.

Latin flavors inspire hot new cocktails as bartenders put a little spice on ice

Looking to put a little pep in that mint julep? Add zing to your martini? A growing number of bartenders are playing with fire and ice, looking to Latin flavors for some hot new cocktails.

"Spicy cocktails are good — why not?" says Camber Lay, who serves up drinks using fresh peppers such as fresnos and poblanos at San Francisco's Epic Roasthouse bar.

After all, she points out, "You can only do so many citrus cocktails."

As with so many other things in cocktail trends, the spice surge is related to the rise of fresh, local herbs and other ingredients in mixed drinks.

It also dovetails with a general interest in Latin flavors, which account for more than half of the ethnic food market, says Maria Caranfa, an analyst with market research firm Mintel.

In fact, restaurant menu items with a Latin or Southwestern touch increased 17 percent from 2007 to 2009, Caranfa says.

"A lot of bars have really embraced it because of the Wow!-factor," says Kara Newman, author of "Spice & Ice: 60 Tongue-tingling Cocktails." She says these cocktails have become particularly popular at bars during the past two years.

Recipes in Newman's book include a mint jalapeno julep — "It's equal parts refreshing and hot at the same time." — and a lemon pepper martini.

As with so many trends, drinks with bite are something that have to be done right.

"Balance is so critical to having a successful drink," she says. "You still need to want to have that second sip."

No one could be happier about the trend than Mike Hultquist, a Web site developer from Lake in the Hills, Ill., who in his spare time runs the site JalapenoMadness.com.

Hultquist, who makes a jalapeno spiced simple syrup that he uses as a base for a margarita, isn't surprised to see peppers getting their star turn. "Everyone loves them."

Or almost everyone.

"I'm still trying to get my wife to love spicy food," Hultquist says with a laugh.