

# FOOD DRINK SPIRITS

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**PEACHES AND HERBS:** Mendocino Grille mixmaster Michael Hardee is ecstatic for aromatics. *Left:* His Mendocino cocktail blends infused vodka with peach, ginger, lavender and grapes. *Below:* Hardee's Hibiscus Royale features champagne and rosemary over the tentacular flower.



## FLOWER POWER! *Skip the sweet tarts and sip these sensational aromatic aperitifs*

You know what would be perfect this summer? To stop and smell the roses without leaving the bar. What great luck, then, that just as gardens are awash in bright hues and heady aromas, DC's cocktail scene is blossoming with perfumed syrups, petal garnishes and quite a few floral flourishes.

Why pluck stems destined for a vase and pop them into a glass instead? The nose knows. "Florality as a component in a cocktail adds to one of the most important elements: aroma," explains Tabard Inn mixologist Chantal Tseng. Gin's herbal aromatics make it an obvious choice for a base spirit, but Tseng favors bubbly for its ability to transport intoxicating fragrances and flavors. "In a champagne-style cocktail, the bubbles help to aerate the floral aromatics of its other ingredients—flower garnishes, floral liqueurs, bitters or botanicals." When Tseng observed the restaurant's pastry chef, Huw Griffiths, plating his desserts with edible pansies, she was inspired to pilfer some of the purple petals to top creations like her bubbly- and gin-based Monte Carlo Imperial.

Aesthetics are an inspiration as well. Vegetate's Jon Harris equates the use of floral garnishes to the splash of color a scarf brings. His vermouth-based Scotland Yard uses a medley of herbs (cilantro, sage, lemon verbena, lemon balm and Kaffir lime leaves), which turn bright green when mixed and create a perfect backdrop for the showy pansies that float on top.

For Mendocino Grille's Hibiscus Royale, mixologist Michael Hardee tucks a tropical blossom into a flute along with a touch of floral syrup and a rosemary garnish. When he adds sparkling wine, the trumpet-shaped flower dramatically opens. (Hardee encourages customers to take a nibble.) For Mendocino's namesake cocktail, he infuses hibiscus with Christiania vodka, adds a peach, ginger and lavender syrup and tops with grapes. Hardee interprets the floral bar trend as a nod to the elegant escape, and both concoctions induce longing for an island holiday.

Lavender, so closely associated with Provence, also sprouts up in aromatic cocktails this season. Often a component in the region's ubiquitous culinary *mélange herbes de Provence*, "lavender has a spicy, sweet aroma and a hint of bitter mintiness in its aftertaste," according to Trish Penn of

Mrs. K's in Silver Spring. But its distinctiveness requires skill to prevent a dish (or a drink) from tasting like the guest soap at a country inn. Penn conjures up a delicately infused syrup and combines it with blueberry vodka, rum, Chambord and limejuice for her seasonal lavender berry martini. At Butterfield 9, Jeremy Lippman muddles the French flower with an orange wedge for his vodka-based citrus lavender martini. He says most customers who order it are sipping lavender for the first time, and are surprised at how well it complements the citrus.

Meanwhile, perfume bottles have relocated from the vanity to the back bar. Last year saw the release of fashionable St. Germain, a liqueur distilled from elderflowers picked from the French Alps. John Wabeck of New Heights mixes it with Citadelle gin, Peychaud's bitters and tonic for his popular Number 8. He also pours *Verveine du Velay Extra*, which shares Chartreuse's lemon verbena notes. Most recently, mixologists have begun rediscovering the subtle aroma and gorgeous hue of *crème de violette* for use in classic recipes as the Aviation and Blue Moon.

If not for the bar-chef, whose presence on the cocktail circuit has only increased, we might not have such a trend. Those souls so focused on flavor have turned their nose to fragrant aromas as well, observes Harris. Exotic yet approachable, petal power also serves as liquid escapism—the modern-day equivalent to the lotus eaters of Homer's *Odyssey*, longing to remain on the island of the edible, intoxicating plants for even just one more night. ■

*Butterfield 9* (600 14th St., NW), *Mendocino Grille* (2917 M St., NW), *Mrs. K's Toll House* (9201 Colesville Rd., Silver Spring), *New Heights* (2317 Calvert St., NW), *The Tabard Inn* (1739 N St., NW), *Vegetate* (1414 9th St., NW).