



By Kelly A. Magyarics

Kelly Magyarics is a wine and spirits writer and wine educator in the Washington, D.C. area. She can be reached through her web site, www.trywine.net.



From Cellar to Shaker

Wine Finds its Place in Cocktails

Stepping up to the bar to request a wine-based drink used to prompt the bartender to offer one of a few traditional suggestions: a Champagne cocktail, wine spritzer, fruit-filled Sangria or a warm mug filled with mulled wine and garnished with a cinnamon stick. While these options undoubtedly still have their fans and their place on the menu, mixologists today often pull wines from their racks without bubbles or fortification, with the intention to combine them with potent spirits, bitters and other back bar ingredients. Savvy operators are discovering that these vine-inspired cocktails can bridge the gap between wine lovers and spirits enthusiasts.

“Wine cocktails often can be a transitional cocktail for the wine drinker,” explains Robert Heugel, owner of Anvil Bar & Refuge in Houston, Texas. A guest who probably wouldn’t order a bourbon-based Old Fashioned may venture to try his more approachable Warrant, in which the bourbon is softened a bit with rosé wine, lemon

juice and a syrup of Cabernet Sauvignon and cinnamon. He tops it with soda to enhance the wine’s refreshing quality.

“I guess there’s a reason people have always sort of liked wine spritzers,” says Heugel, who believes introducing wine cocktails to the menu piques the interest of wine consumers, who ideally will try one, and return to sip one another day.

Anvil’s bar menu runs 12 to 15 options long, with at least one wine-based libation always available, and all drinks are priced at \$8. Heugel believes these cocktails distinguish Anvil from the competition — with the added benefit that they are cost-effective, especially if you use a wine that is already a by-the-glass pour.

“Wine generally costs less than spirits, but can add just as much,” he explains. Using it in ways such as in Cabernet syrup adds depth of flavor without a lot of volume.

Satisfying Flavor Seekers

At the buzz-worthy, speakeasy-esque cocktail den PDT in New York City’s East Village, owner Jim Meehan features several wine cocktails on his menu, including Pegu Club founder Audrey Saunders’ Falling Leaves, made with dry Riesling, pear brandy, honey syrup, orange Curaçao and Peychaud’s bitters. Despite the equal playing field — he prices all drinks at \$13 for simplicity — Meehan has found that the fruit-forwardness of Falling Leaves has broader appeal than other wine drinks on the list.

Meehan’s Against All Odds cocktail, served in a mezcal-rinsed coupe glass, includes Chardonnay, apricot liqueur and Clement Créole Shrub, as well as one-and-a-half ounces of Bushmills Irish Whiskey. Those who aren’t fans of the latter, which shows prominently in the cocktail, may be won over by the other more easy-drinking additions.

Mixologists may employ a bevy of eclectic



The Storm Watch cocktail (this page) and the Easter Egg Hunt (opposite page), two balanced wine cocktails served at Belly Timber in Portland, Ore.

tic ingredients to mix with wine, ranging from gin, rum and brandy to bitters and fruit juices. During the wine-cocktail creation process, ascertaining quality is comparable to judging a wine or any cocktail.

"You want the wine to appear in a manner that enhances the cocktail in a balanced, interesting manner," notes Heugel. It should mingle and integrate with the other included ingredients, rather than overshadow or disappear next to them.

With white wines, acidity level affects the final outcome in the cocktail glass. Heugel favors the overly citrus notes in a crisp Sauvignon Blanc, which he believes meld very well with juices and other spirits. The Curve Cobbler — named for Anvil's position on one of Houston's busy streets — combines the zesty white with Spanish brandy, balsamic raspberry shrub and Angostura bitters.

His Uphill Climb is a twist on the classic Italian wine cocktail the Bicicletta, which is traditionally made with dry white wine, Campari and soda. Heugel adds gin, lemon juice, simple syrup and muddled mint leaves and skips the soda. He explains, "It has a lot of complexity, but it is very refreshing at the same time. Sometimes it is hard to get both."

Kelley Swenson, bartender and spirits director of Portland, Ore.'s Ten 01, is also partial to crisp, high-acid wines. When the sommelier added a still white from Spain's Penedès region (known for Spanish sparkling cava) to the menu, Swenson mixed it with aquavit, pineapple juice, simple syrup and lemon bitters to create her La Perla. She says the resulting cocktail has great acid and unique sugar structures without being cloying.

Time spent in oak often translates to decreased acidity, smoother mouthfeel and toasty, vanilla notes in a wine. Meehan passes on white wines that have spent time in new wood.

"Oak is not a flavor profile I'm looking to showcase in my cocktails, or in my wine choices," he explains. Swenson disagrees with this philosophy, however.

"Since I am often blending wine with other higher-proof spirits or assertive ingredients like citrus or bitters, I tend to look for wines that are equally assertive," Swenson says, arguing, "Nothing beats a well-oaked



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Chardonnay when you want a wine with body and weight in your drink."

With red wines, bold and fruity bottles tend to blend well and hold their own when coupled with stronger ingredients. At Belly Timber, a Portland bistro, bartender Bradley Dawson's Storm Watch uses Barbera or a similar Spanish or Italian red as its base, whose fruity notes stand up to the Sailor Jerry spiced rum and Peychaud's bitters. He adds sparkling water, serves it over ice in a tall glass with a cinnamon and sugar grilled plantain garnish and sells it for \$8. At PDT, Meehan uses Cabernet Franc in the Silver Sangaree, whose raspberry and cherry flavors and violet aroma work with the addition of ruby port, Scotch whisky and clove-infused simple syrup.

Vintage Appeal

Wine-based drinks have the capacity to appeal to a wide range of guests. Heugel finds that since wine is an ingredient with which everyone is familiar — unlike some of the newer or exotic spirits on the market right now — these cocktails sell well. Dawson, whose home experimentation led to the wine-based tipples he has on his menu ("I was making dinner for my wife and wanted something fun to drink while I cooked," he confesses), markets them to patrons who enjoy trying new things.

"You need to feel people out," he Dawson advises. "Some only like safety when it comes to their cocktails. It also depends on the bartender's enthusiasm to sell." At Belly Timber, wine cocktails account for 15 to 35 percent of drink sales from week to week.

Operators in close proximity to wine country, where the grape tends to be integrated into daily life, may find wine-based cocktails an easy sell. Ten 01 is just 45 minutes from the Willamette Valley, home to arguably some of the world's best Pinot Gris and Pinot Noir.



"Thinking locally in Oregon means thinking wine," notes Swenson, who likes using local products, such as a Pinot Gris-based syrup, which accentuates gin's floral notes while adding flavors of fresh peach or pear.

Though traditionally people enjoy a cocktail before the meal and sip wine during it, hard-and-fast food and drink pairing rules are outdated, and mixologists all over the country have been collaborating with chefs to create cocktail-themed pairing dinners. How exactly does the wine cocktail fit into a meal? Heugel recommends employing the same guidelines used for matching food and wine: white wine cocktails with lighter foods and bolder red wine drinks with stronger dishes.

Dawson actually makes specific food and cocktail pairing suggestions for his menu. The well-flavored and plantain-garnished Storm Watch partners perfectly with two dishes at Belly Timber: Fried Plantains with Habañero and Pineapple Salsa, and Jamaican Jerk Chicken Wings. He recommends trying the herby, citrus-tinged, gin- and Verdejo-based Easter Egg Hunt with a fresh Cucumber and Fennel Bulb Salad.

The wine cocktail seems poised to continue gaining momentum. Meehan believes, "With very few wine-based cocktail recipes out there to work with, this category is ripe for the picking." Operators seeking differentiation may consider popping more corks behind the bar.

Although varying philosophies and matters of personal taste exist, only one definitive guideline exists. As Dawson advises, "Only corked wines don't work." **NCB**