



Don't Be Mixed Up and Be-Muddled –
Use the Right Ingredients and Technique

By Kelly A. Magyarics | Photos By John McGuire

Building a BETTER



Its five ingredients sipped together evoke images of sultry nights in a café in old Havana, with belt and pulley fans turning lazily, bongos and trumpets stirring festive groups at cozy tables and ice melting in tall, sugarcane-adorned cocktails. Over the last 10 years in the United States, the lime-, mint- and rum-based Mojito has surged in popularity to rival that of the Margarita — it's not uncommon for bartenders at busy establishments to mix several hundred in the course of an evening. Though ratios and recipes vary, the cornerstones of any great Mojito are fresh ingredients and proper technique. The most successful mixologists rely on quality products and a deft hand to satisfy this Cuban concoction's legion of fans.

Back bar efficiency begins with consistency. "The most important thing is to have a good set recipe in place that your staff follows diligently," suggests Justin Curtis Koch, whose title is bartender extraordinaire for the 80-seat Mojito bar at

Mojito



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Café Habana in Ann Arbor, Mich. "If everyone in the house thinks their Mojito recipe is best and they all make them differently, there is no consistency. Drinks will come back, forcing you to remake them and wasting your time." Bacardi Silver is the house rum, although 10 Cane also is popular, he notes.

Koch advises bartenders to stick to and become proficient at the established recipe. And just as chefs can't live without their mise en place — the indispensable station stocked with prepped ingredients to prepare and garnish dishes — skilled bartenders need to have all the essential components at hand. On Friday night, the upstairs and downstairs bars at Café Habana are stocked with a case or more of Bacardi Light Rum, eight quarts of lime juice, eight quarts of simple syrup and two bags of plucked mint leaves, along with sugarcane sticks for garnish.

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mint as the technique that makes the tipple, and, indeed, extracting essential oil from the leaves adds the drink's signature flavor. But because muddling must be done by hand, it also takes time — an important consideration in a bar where the output might be 300 Mojitos on a weekend evening. At Cuba Libre, an operation with locations in Philadelphia, Atlantic City, N.J., and Orlando, Fla., Mojitos are the calling card. Seventy-five thousand traditional Mojitos at \$8.50 a cocktail are mixed each year at the original Philadelphia location; the house rum is the restaurant's proprietary brand. Mixologists at Cuba Libre eschew the muddler, instead using six ripped Hierba

Buena leaves, which possess an appearance and flavor similar to mint and add an air of authenticity.

A Little Forethought

For those operators who do choose to muddle, prepping glasses in advance with the mint, simple syrup and lime juice helps fulfill orders during hectic times like happy hour. At Cuba Libre, bartenders line up as many as six glasses, to which all ingredients except club soda are added and shaken well to combine and integrate the herb's flavor. Café Habana serves upward of 200 Mojitos per night for \$7 or \$8 each, depending on the flavor. "You can stockpile any number of these glasses and then add ice, rum and soda when you need to make a drink," suggests Koch. "As long as they're used in an hour or so, the taste is not compromised."

Building drinks in separate glasses rather than making a batch in a pitcher also assures proper flavor distribution. Café Habana uses the prepped glasses mostly for table service, where patrons may not be close enough to observe the bartender in action. Those seated at the bar often glean excitement not just from sipping the drink but from watching its creation. "Obviously we never refuse a guest that pleasure," Koch admits.

Not all Mojito-makers opt for such prep tactics. Chicago's Kit Kat Lounge & Supper Club enjoys a strong reputation as a great Martini bar. With more than 100 Martini varieties, it's earned Best Martini in Chicago recognition from CitySearch and other accolades. In launching its Mojito program last year, bar manager



Mix Matters

Let's face it, muddling takes time and proper technique, and not every bar has both in abundance. When that's the case, savvy operators look to mixes. "The mixes allow the Mojito to be possible for operations where they don't have the time, talent and product available to do it from scratch," says David Commer, president of Commer Beverage Consulting in Carrollton, Texas. "The other scenario for mixes is a high-volume situation like a cruise ship or a tropical resort hotel. Mixes work for frozen applications, also."

Selecting the right mix is crucial. Commer advises operators look for clean, true flavors. "It's mint, lime juice and sugar, so the challenge is that mixes and syrups can easily taste artificial. Watch out for a spearmint gum flavor!" he quips. "That said, I think these products have gotten better."

A number of mixes available today use natural ingredients. Monin Mojito Mix, for example, involves pure cane sugar, natural lime extracts and natural mint flavor. Stirrings Mojito Mix features key lime juice from con-

centrate, cane sugar and natural mint and lime flavors. Some lines include flavors, such as Rose's, which features Traditional, Mango and Passion Fruit.

Using mixes doesn't have to negate the fresh element, however. "If I'm using a Mojito mix, I hit the drink with a fresh squeeze of lime and garnish with mint," Commer explains. "That way, you get the aroma thing happening. If I'm doing a frozen Mojito, I use a little mix, toss in some mint for the fresh cue, and you've got the speed and the fresh thing going."



Top 100 Tip

Be fresh and be ready is the Mojito mantra at Mango's Tropical Café on South Beach in Miami. Mojitos are a highlight of the venue: Each bartender mixes up to 200 per evening, and, in keeping with the sexy, tropical theme, the bartenders also perform signature choreographed Latin dances on the large bar, which serves as Mango's main stage. "Making a great Mojito is an art," enthuses owner David Wallack.

Fresh limes are squeezed daily, and each station at the bar is set up with all ingredients easily accessible. Bar manager Frank Coniglio calculates that the always-packed, high-energy venue uses about five cases of limes per weekday, and seven cases each day on the weekend. He is steadfast in his belief that no shortcuts be employed — each of the 500 to

600 Mojitos made daily is mixed from scratch with fresh lime juice, simple syrup, four to five mint leaves and Bacardi Silver, served in a souvenir glass emblazoned with the Mango's logo.

"We also created a special VIP private party room, aptly named 'The Mojito Room,' with a bar and entire back-bar wall done in a fantastic copper sculpture by copper artist Kim Brandell, and original acrylic paintings by Humberto Benitez depicting the sensuality of Havana, Cuba," says Wallack. "This room, complete with its own state-of-the-art sound and light system also has a complete line of custom-designed Mojitos — Banana, Watermelon, Pineapple, Coconut, Orange and, of course, Mango! We also serve the original Cuban Mojito, and our Ultimate premium rum Mojito. All are carefully made, and all are delicious!"



Dan Suvanto and his staff stuck with their made-to-order mantra.

"We're muddling every drink to order, busting them out as fast as we can but always striving for quality over speed," he says. "We're used to working under pressure. On a Friday night, from the time I get the ticket to the time it's made is less than three minutes."

Echoing Koch, Suvanto cites the necessity of a "very organized back bar, with all ingredients within reach: extensive squeeze bottles of fresh juice, well-stocked fruit trays and so on. It looks like a produce stand."



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Taste Test

Beyond mixing and extraction methods, there also is the question of what sweetening agent to use, which literally is a matter of taste. At Cuba Libre, staff members squeeze sugarcane each day to make guarapo — the juice used in the original Mojito. Stacy Schulist, director of marketing for Cuba Libre restaurants, describes the light-brown liquid's flavor as "crisp and more vegetal" than simple syrup. It's also highly perishable and labor intensive — juicers are big and unwieldy, and large amounts of sugarcane yield a relatively small amount of juice — making this choice not logistically feasible for many operations.

More commonly used is muddled sugar or simple syrup. Café Habana makes large batches of the latter using both brown and white sugars, to which the kitchen staff adds a bunch of mint to infuse extra flavor. A garnish of hand-cut sugarcane renders a

visual nod to the drink's original recipe.

As with any well-made cocktail, balance is key to an excellent Mojito. The kick from the rum and the sweetness from the sugar are kept in check by the addition of tart lime juice. Though some bartenders muddle lime wedges to incorporate the juice, others believe mashing too much of the pith can add bitterness. Cuba Libre bartenders use freshly squeezed juice from regular limes.

Creative variations on the Mojito drive sales and appeal to fans seeking fresh and innovative takes on a classic, and bars employ different flavoring options depending on the flavor. At Cuba Libre, the Mango Mojito is the second most popular after the traditional, although it accounts for just 1 percent of total Mojito sales. For this version, bartenders replace Cuba Libre's proprietary rum with mango-flavored rum, which provides authentic flavor without the need for nectar. However, Cuba Libre hasn't found an acceptable commercial watermelon flavoring, so fresh juice is squeezed every day for the Watermelon Mojito. Café Habana's most popular variant is the Volcanic Mojito, in which the pomegranate juice topper swirls to the bottom of the glass and gives the drink the appearance of flowing lava. It's visually striking without a laborious preparation.

Kit Kat Lounge takes advantage of the Cruzan portfolio of flavors to add variety to its Mojito program. A VIP menu offers 10 Mojitos made with various Cruzan rums, each priced at \$9. The recent favorite among Kit Kat patrons is the Pineapple Mojito, made with fresh pineapple and Cruzan Pineapple Rum. Second to the pineapple rendition is the Mango Mojito; Suvanto's personal favorite is the Black Cherry Mojito, which uses Cruzan Black Cherry Rum.

The Mojito is festive, aromatic and refreshing, a drink with a romantic past and a solid future. Ordering one translates to liquid pleasure along with a smattering of history and a shot of showmanship. Its popularity demands bartenders know how to make it both quickly and correctly. **NCB**

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