

Hold the Alcohol, Not the Flavor

PS 7's Innovative Alcohol-free Program

Today's bar menus are frequently peppered with descriptions of infused syrups, house-made bitters and artisanal spirits that showcase a mixologist's abilities. But requesting an alcohol-free drink can be an even greater litmus test of a bartender's skills and focus on customer service. Soda with a lime twist does little to spark the interest of patrons and does even less for the bottom line. Combining fresh juices and mixers and thoughtful garnishes raises the bar a bit. And at PS 7's Restaurant in Washington, D.C., the entire cocktail list is duplicated with creative alcohol-free tipples tasting strikingly like the original featured cocktails, generating fans and tapping into an often-ignored demographic.

PS 7's mixologist Gina Chersevani remembers when many of her girlfriends and regular customers started to have families and complained of the scarcity of great drinks available to pregnant women and non-imbibers. "I guess it shows a lack of creativity on behalf of the bartender," she muses. "It's not

that difficult to provide an alternative — even if it's just one." She started to serve alcohol-free options while behind the bar at D.C.'s Rasika, and she added a "Not imbibing tonight?" menu section during her stint at EatBar in Arlington, Va.

Before Chersevani arrived at PS 7's, the alcohol-free options were bare-boned at best, admits general manager Robert Hall. Led by her penchant for chef collaboration and a culinary focus behind the bar, Chersevani experimented with replacing the alcohol with ingredients like bitters and syrups and discovered ways to delight the guest without making them miss the spirit.

Chersevani cautions against over sugaring to compensate for the omitted alcohol. Instead, she strives to mimic its flavor. Her original Across the Pond is a smooth blend of Bulleit Bourbon, Six Grapes Port and lemon juice. The revamped version uses Stirrings Blood Orange Bitters ("technically not true bitters, but it serves a purpose for me," she admits) and house-made sour mix, topped with soda. The approachable yet complex blend is PS 7's best-selling mocktail.

Most difficult to replace has been absinthe's distinctive licorice flavor, but a star anise and wine reduction is a respectable stand-in for absinthe in the g.H. Sazerac cocktail. More easily substituted is the ginger flavor in Chersevani's Thai's the Limit. Both versions contain coconut and lemongrass, but the alcohol-free beverage uses ginger syrup in place of Domaine de Canton liqueur. Admittedly, also eschewing Plymouth Gin noticeably affects the drink's weight and body, but its delectable flavor makes the exclusion forgivable.

Featured cocktails at PS 7's cost \$10 - \$12; all alcohol-free drinks are \$6. They are well received by guests who appreciate management recognizing that abstainers still deserve a great drink. Beyond expectant mothers and designated drivers, Chersevani's alcohol-free beverages are a popular lunchtime option and for meetings where ordering something stronger might be frowned upon for cultural or other reasons.

Creating a successful selection of alcohol-free drinks can be just as difficult as creating a regular cocktail list, however. "Start slowly and use ingredients you would find on your drink menu already," instructs Chersevani. "Take it seriously and watch the amount of sugar you are using."

Alcohol-free options allow bars to capture a different demographic and derive revenue from a sector that isn't know for generating sales, according to Hall. Chersevani agrees, but adds, "I was brought up in this industry on the philosophy of 'love what you do,' and to me that means all beverages." **NCB**

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