

HOT SAUCE?!

Taste jalapeño and cumin in your swill? Oh yes, you will!

BY KELLY A. MAGYARICS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY POWERS AND CREWE

A twist of the pepper mill renders mesclun with moxy and a dash of curry spices turns a stew into a vindaloo. But these days, flavor goes beyond the fork. DC's savviest mix masters are raiding the spice racks and toiling alongside chefs as they create zesty concoctions that keep spice on the front burner—and in the cocktail shaker.

"Pepper as a spice and source of heat is now making a mark in cocktails," says spirits genius Gina Chersevani of EatBar. Even black pepper gains A-list status when sipped smartly.

The wine world's version of black pepper-in-a-glass is a Northern Rhône Syrah—the motivation for one of Jill Zimorski's inventive creations at Café Atlantico. "Syrah's distinctive aromas and flavors might make for a tasty new drink, I imagined." Her Faux Syrah, Syrah is a wine cocktail—without the wine. Zimorski starts with Hangar One Vodka, a spirit distilled in part from Viognier grapes, the same white varietal that brings a floral whiff to Rhône reds. Blackberry purée, a smoke-infused syrup and ground black pepper pull off the fakery, and the drink is rimmed with crushed candied violets (another Rhône stamp). Does this swill appeal to everyone? Maybe or maybe not. But Zimorski says that's the point. "It's unique and inspired without forcing the concept," she says.

Pepper in other forms is finding a way into drinks. Chersevani sprinkles white pepper in her watermelon martini. She rims a mango cocktail with her new favorite, red pepper flakes, leaving lips begging for mercy—or begging for more.

"Being from Texas, I love anything spicy," explains PS 7's Tiffany Short, who represents part of DC's Southwest cocktail contingent. She gravitates toward *muy caliente* concoctions Her diabolical El Diablo blends spicy 1800 tequila, guajilo peppers, cilantro and muddled limes.

To advance herbs and spices from the pantry shelf to the bar, Restaurant Eve and PX cocktail guru Todd Thrasher advocates a little culinary thievery. "Look at what the chef is doing—and take his ideas!" he says. Nage's ace mix man, Galen Johnson, also cites kitchen collaborations as fuel for libation inspirations. But why stop at the kitchen when you can plunder the garden? Oyamel's Will Earls applies the farmers market mantra: He buys seasonally, locally and organically to keep his sips hip.



EatBar's BCC blends blood orange, tequila, Cointreau, lime, soda and a pinch of cumin.

Once these spice lords have procured their ingredients, they often turn to infusions to coax flavor from exotic elements. At Firefly, Alice Gaber lets cinnamon, cardamom, nutmeg, star anise and allspice enjoy a week's soak in 10 Cane Rum. She then mixes the kicked-up booze with milk, honey and a splash of brewed black and Earl Grey tea. The resulting Chai Tea Martini is a sexy, grown-up version of the chai latte: rich, spicy and creamy—with a kick. "I try to make things that challenge the palate, but are also pleasing," says Gaber, who admits she'd be hard-pressed to find a spice she doesn't adore.

Authentic flavors created in-house are far superior to artificial mixes any day of the week. "My menu is not just limited to or inclusive of what a liquor company makes," explains Nage's Johnson. "If I want my own special flavor, I will create it myself." Hence, Johnson infuses vodka with black peppercorns to fuel the fire for his white peach-based Hot Fuzz, rather than relying on one of the countless manufactured versions. Over-the-counter just doesn't raise the bar.



Firefly's Chai Tea Martini.



PX's PawPaw with serano chili.

Inventive minds rarely rest, as this crew of hot cocktologists proves. Oyamel's Earls spends his spare time testing the waters. His Lone Star State roots and Mexican journeys explain his penchant for piquins, anchos and chipotles. One test-balloon teaser sports fire-roasted jalapeños and bell peppers, piquin-infused V8 juice, pepper vodka and a pickled cactus pad topper. "I use my friends as guinea pigs, because they won't lie," he says. This drink remains in the lab.

Toting her notebook, Chersevani is at the ready when inspiration strikes. Case in point: An impromptu gathering led to her bleu cheese-and-chocolate-flavored St. Pete's Denial. At EatBar, she has cocktail carte blanche and loyal fans.



Café Atlantico's Faux Syrah, Syrah.

Chersevani's tricked-out take on the classic champagne cocktail eschews a bitters-splashed sugar cube for a sliver of candied horseradish and a dose of horseradish syrup. The kicky root adds an irresistible savory element to the bubbles, and the drink makes Mimosas unmemorable.

But some sips that hit the tumbler become stumblers. Zimorski has encountered some crazy stuff, like fenugreek and galangal concoctions. "Some work, some are scary," she says. Turmeric is a medicinal no-no to Chersevani, who is stumped by curry leaves but loves their nutty flavor and vows to plod on. Thrasher takes a bolder, all-inclusive approach and believes any spice can work—with the right drink.

"People are either skeptical or eager about spicy cocktails. The skeptical ones are converted quite easily."

—Galen Johnson, master mixologist at Nage

How do gourmands react when mixologists pique their palate with ingredients that have migrated from their entrée to the glass? They clamor for more! Chersevani has a rum, cumin, pineapple and vanilla soda cooler in the works. Johnson will turn up the heat with a jalapeño and habanero infusion. Thrasher uses serrano chili in his PawPaw and cardamom in his Lou Brown.

Zimorski's new menu is in development, but she hints at farm-fresh herbal surprises. "I love the use of spices and herbs in cocktails," she says. So do we. As the boundary between kitchen and bar evaporates like pepper smoke, it's time to savor the trend that rocks the sauce. ■

DUPONT CIRCLE: Firefly (1310 New Hampshire Ave., NW, www.firefly-dc.com), Nage (1600 Rhode Island Ave., NW, www.nage.bz). PENN QUARTER: Café Atlantico (405 8th St., NW, www.cafeatlantico.com), Oyamel (401 7th St., NW, www.oyamel.com), PS 7's (777 I St., NW, www.ps7restaurant.com). ARLINGTON: EatBar (2761 Washington Blvd., www.eat-bar.com). OLD TOWN ALEXANDRIA: Restaurant Eve (110 South Pitt St., www.restauranteve.com), PX (728 King St.).