

Imitation Libation


The Faux Syrah, Syrah delivers varietal flavors without the wine.

Wine cocktails are nothing new, and they certainly are back in vogue. Pitchers of fruity, festive sangria liven up the party at a range of restaurants today, not just Mexican eateries; white wine spritzers refresh poolside sippers on scorching summer days; and the ubiquitous (at least in Spain) Calimocho draws legions of local fans with its mixture of equal parts red wine and cola served over ice.

But more off the beaten path are libations designed to evoke the aromas and flavors of wine without a single drop of the grape stuff. When I'm not enjoying a glass or two of wine, I gravitate toward cocktails that are a bit off the wall, and not super-sweet. So, when I heard a wine-like but wine-less cocktail called the Faux Syrah, Syrah, was available at Washington, DC's Café Atlantico, my interest was more than piqued.

Beverage director and self-proclaimed "wine geek" Jill Zimorski of Café Atlantico is fascinated by wine's diverse range of non-grape aromas and flavors, including berries, citrus, smoke and herbals such as anise and vanilla. She recalls that last year chefs at the restaurant's innovative minibar asked her to compile a list of these to help compose a red version of a dish called the Deconstructed Glass of White Wine. In this food-course-turned-blind-wine-tasting exercise, white grape juice-gelée is sprinkled with small items representing white wine flavors and aromas, such as diced apple, passion fruit seeds and lemon zest. Just prior to eating, chefs use a small atomizer to spray white wine on the dish, which reintroduces the alcohol. Guests scoop up bites of the gelée, while attempting to identify each component. Inspired by the exercise, and with a preference for savory over sweet in her cocktails, Zimorski set out to create a deliberately counterfeit concoction that resembled a Northern Rhône red wine, which she coined the Faux Syrah, Syrah.

Hangar One Vodka—partially distilled from the viognier grape—was an obvious base spirit

 The visually appealing cocktail may fool the palate.

choice for Zimorski. Astute oenophiles will know that a very small amount of this white varietal is added to Northern Rhône reds to give them a touch of floral aromatics. Blackberry purée from Les Vergers Boiron, and juice from a lemon wedge, serve as the mixers, but the star ingredient is the flavorful simple syrup. Zimorski steeps whole black peppercorns in still warm simple syrup, wraps the container tightly in plastic wrap, and introduces smoke from pecan chips using a small battery-operated pipe via a small hole in the wrap. She then seals the hole and lets the syrup absorb the smoky aroma and flavor. The syrah stand-in is served in a Martini glass, garnished with fresh pepper and rimmed with crushed candied violet, priced at \$10.

When my cocktail arrived, the presentation was stunningly attractive, its hue somewhere between burgundy and purple, with a lovely floral rim. The candied petals added a nice sweet crunch to a drink that was fruity without being cloying. I could definitely perceive fresh blackberry flavor, as well as the black pepper that resulted both from the steeped syrup and the cracked pepper on top. However, after having heard the chemistry involved to capture the smoke for the syrup, I was intrigued that its flavor was not very noticeable to me. But perhaps subtlety was the point?

The cocktails' flavors were very balanced. I sipped it all by itself, but Zimorski also recommends enjoying it with any dish with which you might instead select syrah, such as well-seasoned lamb or beef.

While the Faux Syrah, Syrah appears as a regular selection on Café Atlantico's cocktail menu, Zimorski says it's unique among the venue's drink offerings. "A lot of our drinks are tropical in nature," she explains. "I wanted something a little more savory with intellectual and visual appeal." She believes it attracts guests who like Syrah, creative cocktails or even simply the color purple. On the menu, the Faux Syrah, Syrah is not described in detail, save for a few of its components. However, the staff has been trained on its inspiration and ingredients, so they can explain it to guests.

Although Zimorski was initially concerned that guests wouldn't "get it," the cocktail

FAUX SYRAH, SYRAH

Created by Jill Zimorski of Café Atlantico, Washington, DC.

- 2 oz. Hangar One Straight Vodka
- 1 ½ oz. Les Vergers Boiron or fresh blackberry purée
- 1 oz. black pepper- and smoke-infused syrup
- Juice from 1 lemon wedge
- Coarsely crushed candied violets for garnish
- Freshly cracked pepper for garnish

Combine first four ingredients in a cocktail shaker with ice and shake well. Strain into a Martini glass rimmed first with the black pepper/smoke-infused syrup, and then dipped into the candied violets. Garnish with five turns of a pepper grinder on a coarse setting.

For Black Pepper- and Smoke-Infused Syrup

Using a fan and tubing, blow smoke from smoldering pecan chips into a tightly wrapped container of syrup. Or substitute liquid smoke:

- 1 cup water
- 1 cup sugar
- 5 - 10 whole black peppercorns
- Liquid smoke (pecan or hickory)

Combine sugar and water and bring to a boil. Remove from heat and add black peppercorns. Let mixture steep for 1 hour. Remove peppercorns and add a few drops of liquid smoke, to taste. Makes 1 ⅓ cup.

has become one of the restaurant's top sellers. It is proof, she says, that understanding a mixologist's concept isn't a prerequisite for appreciating a well-made drink.

Next up for Zimorski on the wine cocktail front is a drink containing a riesling-based syrup. "I like playing with wine as an inspirational ingredient—whether I'm using it or imitating it." Verified vino or a worthy impersonator, I'm game to sip whatever she's pouring. ●

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