

SPIRITED AWAKENING

INFUSIONS ADD EXOTIC FLAVORS

By Melissa Bearns



To infuse. The very verb means to add something extra, something special. Soaking herbs and fruit in various spirits to give them an extra oomph is nothing new. Bartenders have been infusing alcohol for more than a decade. Now that it's become a hot trend, even major labels are getting on board, infusing vodkas with cherry, raspberry, citrus and other fruits.

But the difference between an infusion from a bottle and an infusion created on the spot is as noticeable as the difference between a microwaved TV dinner and a freshly cooked meal of fruits and vegetables that were bought that morning at Saturday Market.

Ring of Fire Restaurant and Lava Lounge was the first restaurant in Eugene to infuse alcohol and their spicy Chili Margarita has become a signature drink. On a busy weekday night, bartender Jake O'Brien uses a ladle to scoop out the infused tequila from a jar full of pineapples and jalapeños that sits prominently on the bar.

Next to the infused tequila is a bright mixture of pale green honeydew, orange cantaloupe and red watermelon balls marinating in vodka. The final jar, in which the vodka has turned a deep crimson, holds strawberries and blueberries.

"The best one isn't even up here," O'Brien says, whipping out a shot glass and filling it with a dark brown liquid. "Maker's Mark and mint."

True enough, the bourbon tastes strongly of fresh, crisp mint. "Normally we muddle the mint but this allows us to get the flavor without having little pieces of mint floating around in the drink," he says.

Over at Bel Ami Lounge, bartender Nicole Petro serves up the find of the evening—Sauza tequila infused with kumquats. The sweet liquid bears no resemblance whatsoever to tequila and

has a complex richness more like a brandy. It's best when sipped, neat or on the rocks.

She thinks that part of the reason infusions are so popular is because they're very accessible. "They taste really good, they look pretty, they're easy to make and they're easy to work with. The sky's the limit," she says.

And while fruit has been the most popular choice for infusions, Petro thinks the next trend will be infusions made with herbs. Pepper vodkas, such as Absolut Peppar, are already easy to find on the commercial market.

Sweet Basil Thai Cuisine bartender Jake Bliven thinks another trend will be infusing infusions. He infuses commercial vanilla vodka with lychee, a white Asian fruit, then uses it to make a special martini.

"And we're also going to see people infusing weird stuff, like cucumber-infused ice cubes or infused simple syrups," he says.

Make your own

Infusing alcohol is easy and a great way to add some extra verve to a party.

First, find a jar big enough to hold your fruit and as much alcohol as you want to infuse.

Buy enough of the fruit, vegetables or herbs you're using for your infusion to fill your jar about three-quarters of the way full.

Chop the fruits or vegetables into small pieces or creative shapes like triangles (good for pineapple). For herbs, leave the herb whole but remove large, woody stems. Smaller ones are OK. If you're infusing with pineapple, it's important to remove all of the outer skin because it goes bad and will ruin your infusion.

Put the fruit, vegetables or herbs into the jar and cover with the alcohol. Let sit for a few days. Fruits with skins like kumquats can take up to two weeks to properly infuse.

