

# Beverage Journal

JUNE 2024

## THE COCKTAIL ISSUE

COMBATING COCKTAIL  
PRICE HIKES

BARTENDERS' FAVORITE  
NEW INGREDIENTS







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Photograph by Giada Paoloni

**TAP INTO SUMMER: MARKETING STRATEGIES TO HEAT UP PROFITS**

As the temperature rises and summer vibes permeate the air, bars, restaurants, and liquor stores in Maryland and Washington, DC have a prime opportunity to boost their profits during the month of June. With people eager to socialize and indulge in refreshing beverages and delicious food, here are some effective marketing strategies to help establishments make the most of the season.

**Create Summer-Themed Promotions:**

Embrace the spirit of summer by offering enticing promotions that resonate with your audience. Whether it's happy hour specials featuring fruity cocktails, outdoor dining deals, or themed events like BBQ nights or beach parties, give customers a reason to choose your establishment for their summer gatherings.

**Utilize Social Media:**

Leverage the power of social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook to reach a wider audience. Share mouthwatering images of your signature dishes and drinks, promote upcoming events, and engage with your followers by running contests or polls related to summer activities.

**Partner with Local Events:**

June is often filled with festivals, concerts, and outdoor events. Collaborate with organizers to sponsor or participate in these gatherings. Set up a booth to showcase your offerings, distribute coupons or samples, and network with potential customers who are already in a celebratory mood.

**Host Special Events:**

Organize special events throughout the month to keep customers coming back for more. Consider hosting themed parties, live music performances, or tasting events featuring a selection of wines,



beers, or spirits. These unique experiences can generate buzz and attract both regulars and newcomers eager to join in the fun.

**Summer Sampling Events:** Host tasting events in your liquor store featuring a variety of summer-themed beverages. Offer samples of refreshing cocktails, chilled wines, and craft beers that are perfect for outdoor gatherings and BBQs. Partner with local distilleries, wineries, and breweries to showcase their products and educate customers about different flavor profiles. By providing an interactive and enjoyable experience, you can entice customers to purchase their favorite libations for their summer celebrations.

**Cross-Promotions with Local Businesses:**

Off premise establishments can successfully collaborate with neighboring businesses. Nearby gourmet food shops, picnic supply stores, or outdoor equipment retailers, are opportunities to create cross-promotional campaigns. Offer discounts or special promotions for customers who make purchases at both your liquor store and the partner establishment. For example, customers who buy a bottle of wine from your store could receive a coupon for a discount on picnic supplies or a free appetizer at a nearby restaurant. This not only incentivizes customers to visit your store but also strengthens ties within the local community and drives foot traffic to participating businesses.

By implementing a specialized marketing strategy, you can capitalize on the excitement of summer. There are plenty of opportunities to attract customers and keep them coming back for more. Cheers to a successful kick-off of the summer season. ■

**STEPHEN PATTEN PUBLISHER**

Maryland • Washington, DC

**Beverage Journal**

Published Monthly by  
**The Beverage Journal, Inc.**  
(USPS# PE 783300)

Over 80 Years of Continuous Publication

**BEVERAGE JOURNAL, INC.**

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Send address changes to  
**THE BEVERAGE JOURNAL, INC.**  
**PO Box 2062, Williamsport, PA 17703**

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**Periodicals postage paid at Baltimore, MD** and additional mailing offices. Subscription rates: MD edition; 1 year \$49.00 plus tax, 2 years \$79.00 plus tax, 3 years \$109.00 plus tax, FedEx Ground delivery \$85.00 plus tax per year per edition, single copies \$10.00 plus tax. DC edition; 1 year \$36.00 plus tax, 2 years \$60.00 plus tax, 3 years \$83.00 plus tax, FedEx Ground delivery \$85.00 plus tax per year per edition, single copies \$5.00 plus tax.

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# THE HOUSE OF SUNTORY

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## 1. MICTER'S

Louisville distillery Michter's has released the 2024 edition of its 10-year-old Kentucky straight bourbon. Master distiller Dan McKee and master of maturation Andrea Wilson presided over the 94.4-proof whiskey, which was aged in fire-charred, new American white oak casks and tastes of dark toffee, caramel, maple syrup, and vanilla.

**\$** SRP: \$185 per 750-ml bottle  
**🌐** michters.com

## 2. GIFFARD

Historic French company Giffard Liqueurs & Syrups has ramped up its range of flavors with cocktail-friendly Giffard Café du Honduras and Giffard Mangue liqueurs. The former, inspired by the cold brew technique, is born from single origin Arabica beans sourced through organic cooperatives in mountainous Honduras and then roasted in France by Café Bonnac; the latter illuminates South American Kent mangoes briefly macerated in neutral alcohol to preserve the fruit's natural flavor and color.

**\$** SRP: \$34.99 to \$39.99 per 750-ml bottle  
**🌐** giffardusa.com

## 3. APLÓS

Non-alcoholic beverage brand Aplós has ventured into the ready-to-drink realm with two 30-calorie canned cocktails. Subtly tart Ume Spritz stars the broad spectrum hemp-infused Calme, one of Aplós's signature functional spirits, bolstered with ume plum, oroblanco grapefruit, white tea, and sea buckthorn, while Chili Margarita showcases Arise, a proprietary blend of adaptogens including ginseng and vitamin B3 alongside mandarin, Persian lime, orange habanero, and sea salt.

**\$** SRP: \$24 per four-pack of 8.5-oz. cans  
**🌐** aplos.world

## 4. OLD POTRERO

In 1906, San Francisco suffered a devastating earthquake, but merchant A.P. Hotaling's whiskey warehouse astoundingly survived the disaster. To pay homage to the spirit of resilience that permeated the city in the aftermath, Old Potrero debuted a bottled-in-bond rye whiskey on the 100th anniversary that Hotaling & Co. has now reintroduced as an extremely limited release (there are only 432 bottles available). Pot-distilled from 100 percent malted rye and aged in once-used, charred American oak barrels for 16 years, the 100-proof rye opens with aromas of pepper, cinnamon, fruit, and honey.

**\$** SRP: \$199 per 700-ml bottle  
**🌐** oldpotrero.com

## 5. CHAMPAGNE AYALA

Chardonnay gets the spotlight in A/18, the first release in Champagne Ayala's new series focused on the grape variety's motley terroirs. Vintage-dated A/18, a jasmine- and grapefruit-scented apéritif that also pairs well with oysters, highlights six Grand and premier crus selected from the 2018 harvest that express both the Côte des Blancs and the Montagne de Reims. For future releases in this collection of blanc de blancs, cellar master Julian Gout will pull from Champagne Ayala's stash of reserve wines to orchestrate his 100 percent Chardonnay blends.

**\$** SRP: \$129.99 per 750-ml bottle  
**🌐** champagne-ayala.fr

## 6. SURFSIDE

Matt and Bryan Quigley and Clement and Zach Pappas, the brothers behind Stateside Vodka, dove into the ready-to-drink category with Surfside, canned concoctions (4.5% ABV) marrying vodka with iced tea and lemonade. Just in time for summer are five new breezy, 100-calorie flavors—Raspberry Tea + Vodka; Green Tea + Vodka; Raspberry Lemonade + Vodka; Strawberry Lemonade + Vodka; and Black Cherry Lemonade + Vodka—containing only two grams of sugar.

**\$** SRP: \$10.99 per four-pack of 12-oz. cans  
**🌐** drinksurfside.com



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### 7. LUNAZUL

Lunazul Tequila's Primero collection comprises three premium expressions produced by Heaven Hill Brands partner Tierra de Agaves and master tequilero Francisco Quijano. Primero-Cristalino is an aged añejo filtered eight times, and Primero-Humoso is a distinctive blanco that embraces both 100 percent Blue Weber and mesquite-smoked agaves. The limited-edition Extra Añejo was matured for 36 months in Elijah Craig Bourbon casks. All three feature Lunazul family packaging updates, like a label emblazoned with Quijano's signature.

**\$** SRP: \$37.99 to \$59.99 per 750-ml bottle

**🌐** [lunazultequila.com](http://lunazultequila.com)

### 8. HALTER RANCH

The 2023 vintage of Halter Ranch's Effervescent Rosé is one of the first releases from the Paso Robles winery since its designation as a CCOF Certified Organic Vineyard last year. Dominated by Grenache and rounded out with Picpoul Blanc and Mourvèdre, the refreshing bubbly is distinguished by notes of watermelon and raspberry that pair well with summery salads and fruity desserts.

**\$** SRP: \$50 per 750-ml bottle

**🌐** [halterranch.com](http://halterranch.com)

### 9. KAVALAN

Kavalan's Triple Sherry Cask single malt whisky has arrived stateside. For this 86-proof expression, the Taiwanese distillery matured new make spirit in individual oloroso, Pedro Ximénez, and Moscatel casks for the first time, and then combined the whiskies, mingling them to forge a lush texture and flavor profile defined by dried fruit, caramel, and honey.

**\$** SRP: \$99.99 per 750-ml bottle

**🌐** [kavalanwhisky.com](http://kavalanwhisky.com)

### 10. TIP TOP PROPER COCKTAILS

First hatched by Trader Vic in the 1940s, the tropical Mai Tai is the latest addition to the Tip Top Proper Cocktails roster. This not-too-sweet version is the ready-to-drink brand's 11th canned libation at 26% ABV. It comes courtesy of Atlanta bartender Miles Macquarrie, and brings together a signature blend of silver, Jamaican pot still, and barrel-aged rums, also used in Tip Top's Daiquiri and Jungle Bird, with fresh lime, orgeat, and Curaçao.

**\$** SRP: \$39.99 per eight-pack of 100-ml cans

**🌐** [tiptopcocktails.com](http://tiptopcocktails.com)

### 11. 2XO

South Carolina's Kiawah Island has long been a haven for Dixon Dedman, so for the fourth installment of 2XO Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey's Icon series, he dreamed up the 104-proof Kiawah Blend. Double barreled in new charred oak casks for nine months to a year, the prominent high-rye, 35 percent bourbon mash bill is balanced with a moderate rye 18 percent bourbon mash bill, garnering layers of clove, vanilla, and lemon.

**\$** SRP: \$99.99 per 750-ml bottle

**🌐** [2xowhiskey.com](http://2xowhiskey.com)

### 12. HATOZAKI

Hatozaki Whisky, produced at Kaikyō Distillery on the coast of Japan's Seto Inland Sea, explores its maritime terroir through the limited-edition Omakase series. New to the lineup is the 84-proof Rye Mizunara Cask Finish, a small-batch edition (there are fewer than 3,000 bottles) overseen by master distiller and blender Kimio Yonezawa. Made from at least 51 percent rye, the liquid is aged in new charred oak, then finished in Mizunara casks fashioned out of Japanese white oak from the Hokkaido and Tohoku forests.

**\$** SRP: \$95 per 750-ml bottle

**🌐** [akashisakebrewery.com](http://akashisakebrewery.com)

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# LIQUID LIB'S

WHERE THERE'S A LOT TO WINE ABOUT

WRITTEN BY TEDDY DURGIN | IMAGES BY ASHLI MIX PHOTOGRAPHY

**L**iquid Lib's holds the distinction of being the first wine bar in Baltimore County. Since November 2013, the business has served the Timonium, Maryland community. Liquid Lib's has established itself among the best places to enjoy a glass or a bottle of Chardonnay, Merlot, Pinot Grigio, or Sauvignon Blanc.

Owner John Liberatore stated during a recent interview with the Beverage Journal, "We have 27 wines by the glass and over 100 wines by the bottle. We also have eight different draft beers and all kinds of bourbons, whiskeys, and ryes. Our menu is tapas-style, which means small portions that come out as soon as they are ready. We have a fireplace. And just last year, we opened an outdoor patio that is connected to Liquid Lib's. It's a pretty happening place with a bar top that lights up and changes colors, and our high-tops are made

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**John Liberatore**  
Owner  
Liquid Lib's

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out of actual wine barrels that came from Napa Valley.”

Liberatore recalled operating the adjacent restaurant, but always being a little bothered by the small vacant space next door. He and his staff were permitted to keep their extra tables and chairs in those empty digs. But Liberatore knew there could be much more to the space. He said,

“I eventually thought, ‘You know what would be great here that we don’t have? A wine bar that serves tapas. I decided to design something that I would enjoy. I love wine, and I love good food.’”

Thus, Liquid Lib’s was born. Liberatore is especially proud that the wine bar and eatery has been successful bearing his – or at least a portion of – his name, which makes

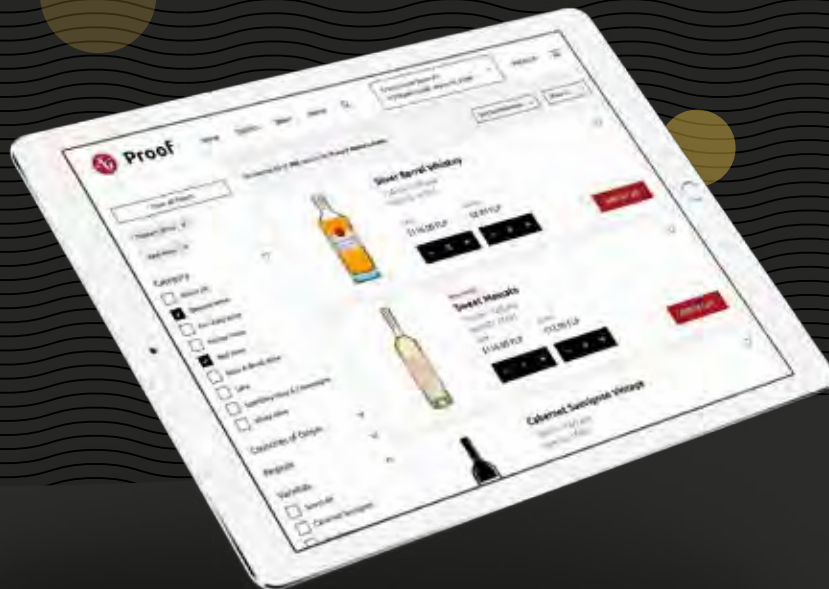
it a great place to profile in this ongoing series of bars, taverns, and restaurants named after their owners or family.

“My name is Liberatore,” he stated, “and it’s on the front door. And I’m proud of that. Of course, it doesn’t really matter what you call your business. You’re going to be proud of it regardless. But when your last name is on the sign, I think you take



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it more personally. You make even greater strides to maintain a good reputation, and we treat people right because my last name means a lot of me.”

The customers, in turn, have certainly appreciated this philosophy. “We have a great clientele,” Liberatore said. “They’re very sophisticated and knowledgeable about wine, and we do wine tastings for them frequently. As a matter of fact, we’ve had several winemakers come here personally – everyone from Michael Mondavi to Kim Crawford.”

He continued, “My favorite thing, to be honest with you, is just making people happy. I still get a thrill when somebody leaves the restaurant and says, ‘Thank you, John. We had a great dinner, and we loved everything!’ That brings me a lot of satisfaction. They are not our customers. They’re our guests. There’s nothing more satisfying to me than when I see a table enjoying a bottle of wine, laughing, and having a good time.”

Of course, operating a hospitality establishment is all about change and being able to adapt. Liberatore acknowledged the challenge of ‘keeping up with everything’: “Trends change, customers change, employees change. COVID certainly changed a lot of things, and we adapted. It’s like having a baby. There is always, always something going on that you have to keep your eye on. You can’t just sit back and think it’s all going to happen by itself.”

What has been the biggest change Liberatore has noticed post-pandemic? He was quick to answer: “What I really have noticed the most is that people tend to come out earlier now for drinks and for food. And I’ve also noticed that it slows down earlier. To me, that’s a positive. Our servers and our bartenders get a nice crowd early and they don’t have to stay until 2:00 in the morning anymore. Even on weekends, people start slacking off around midnight now. I remember back in the day before COVID, come 1:30 in the morning we would

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have to turn the lights on and off to get people out of here.”

It helps that Liberatore grew up in the restaurant business. Early on, he worked as a dishwasher, a busboy, a waiter, and even a cook. “I started from the bottom up,” he said. “Over the years, I have learned to treat people the way you want to be treated. People will see it, and they will respect and support you. In taking care of people, sometimes you will do things you wouldn’t ordinarily do. But you do it because that’s the hospitality business. That’s what we

do. The successful ones in this business go above and beyond.”

For anyone reading this who is currently a dishwasher, busboy, waiter, or cook but dreams of opening his/her own place, Liberatore had some pointed words of advice. “Start small!” he urged. “Don’t think you have to go big in order to make the money. Do something that you can handle and that you love. Do it slowly. You shouldn’t rush into this business, thinking you’re going to make money overnight. It takes a long time, and it takes a lot of hours. The first



restaurant my brother and I opened up, we worked seven days a week with no days off for over a year! And I’m talking about coming in at 9 o’clock in the morning and leaving at 2 o’clock in the morning. People think, ‘Oh, the restaurant business is so fun. You come in, you chat with people, you have a glass of wine.’ But there is so much more to it. Also, train your staff right! They are your motor. Without them, you won’t go anywhere.”

Looking ahead to the second half of 2024, Liberatore said he is optimistic about where the business is headed. He concluded, “I’ll always think positive and try and make the best out of whatever comes our way. We can’t predict the future, but we can certainly adjust to it as much as we can.” ■





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**SEEING ORANGE**

Napa Valley brand **The Vice** has expanded its orange wine portfolio with five new varieties. Along with the rose- and lychee-laden Orange of Gewurztraminer 'Brooklynites 5.0' Los Carneros 2022, and the unfiltered and unrefined Orange of Viognier 'Pickleball' Oak Knoll District 2022, there is the funky Orange of Sauvignon Blanc 'Sierra' Los Carneros 2023, the floral Orange of Albariño 'Sevilla' California 2023, and nutty Orange of Chardonnay 'Las Amigas' Los Carneros 2023.

**SRP: \$35 to \$65 per 750-ml bottle**



**UNCONVENTIONAL  
APPROACH**

Unlike its effervescent siblings Prosecco DOC and Prosecco DOC Rosé, **VOGA Italia's** Prosecco Still is crafted in the relatively unknown Tranquillo style. This non-sparkling take on the traditionally bubbly wine from Enovation Brands emphasizes the zesty Glera grape's layers of green apple, pear, and peach and can be woven into non-fizzy riffs on spritzes and negronis.

**SRP: \$14.99 per 750-ml bottle**



**SLEEK UPDATE**



**CAvit** rosé has a new look. The eco-friendly wine, made in northern Italy from a blend of native Trentino red grapes, has refreshed its packaging, swapping a hot pink capsule for an understated rose gold-colored version paired with a monochromatic foil-embellished label. An ideal companion for seafood dishes, the rosé's strawberry aromas pave the way to raspberry, cherry, and watermelon on the palate.

**SRP: \$11.99 per 750-ml bottle**



**PICNIC SEASON**

First came Sandy Giovese Vino Rosso, then Rosie Giovese Vino Rosato. Now **Giovese Family Wines** has unveiled Bianca Giovese Vino Bianco, its latest boxed wine creation housing the equivalent of four 750-ml bottles. Juicy Bianca, rife with tangerine and nectarine flavors, comprises 55 percent Grechetto, 30 percent Trebbiano, and 15 percent Sauvignon Blanc grapes organically farmed at Conti degli Azzoni, a family-owned winery in the Marche region of Italy pursuing B-Corp certification.

**SRP: \$34 per 3-liter box**



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Each vividly hued can of **Lovvo**, from The Restless Dreamers Beverage Company, contains semi-sparkling Lambrusco wine produced at the sustainable Cantina di Carpi e Sorbara winery in Italy's Emilia-Romagna region. The trio of single-serve offerings—white (11% ABV), and red and rosé (8.5% ABV)—is gradually rolling out in key markets after a California kick-off.

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# THE ERA OF COCKTAIL INFLATION

**IN THE CHANGED ECONOMIC LANDSCAPE, WHAT CAN BARS  
DO TO KEEP COCKTAIL PRICE INCREASES TO A MINIMUM?**

BY PAMELA VACHON

**T**hese financially challenging years have delivered a trail of alarming headlines related to inflation, and one oft-named disproportionate expense remains going out for cocktails. Even as inflation has fallen from its zenith in 2021 and 2022, there is a lingering perception amongst consumers that drinking in bars is extravagantly expensive.

Cocktail prices increased on average by \$1 between 2021 and 2022, according to a CGA by NIQ report. A \$14 drink grew to \$15, a rise of seven percent, consistent with inflation rates at that time, but for more expensive cocktails, the increase of a single dollar represents a smaller percentage increase in price. Whether or not the price of cocktails inflated disproportionately, prices have gone up for a variety of reasons, a spike in the cost of booze and labor amongst them, and regardless, the perception alone has an impact on consumer behavior.

“I think the issue is people are so aware of [inflation,] it’s part of the zeitgeist,” says

OPPOSITE PAGE: A lineup of cocktails from Union Square Hospitality Group. BELOW: Laura Unterberg, The Fox Bar and Country Club.



OPPOSITE PAGE PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF UNION SQUARE HOSPITALITY GROUP / GIADA PAOLONI // CHRISTINA MONTOYA

**“We can charge \$20 for a cocktail, but if someone buys a \$20 cocktail, are they going to be less open to buying that second cocktail? Or is it better to keep them at \$17, and then they might get two?”**

—Sara Gabriele, Gabi James

Laura Unterberg, the beverage director of The Fox Bar and Country Club in Nashville, Tennessee. “People assume things are too expensive without even looking.”

With that in mind, many bars and restaurants have sought strategies to keep cocktail prices consistent or price increases to a minimum, while maintaining workable profit margins in these difficult economic conditions. *SevenFifty Daily* spoke to bar professionals and industry analysts about the state of the cocktail economy today.

### A CHANGED FINANCIAL LANDSCAPE

According to a Coresight Research study conducted in February 2024 and authored by analyst Sujeet Naik, while inflation overall has finally moderated, inflation for bars and restaurants is still considerably higher than other related industries, particularly food and beverage retail, or the “food-at-home” (FAH) sector. “Food-away-from-home (FAFH) inflation remains notably higher, at 5.1 percent year-over-year growth in January 2024, compared to 1.2 percent at grocery stores,” the report states. “With this unfavorable pricing gap, restaurants need to be careful of increasing menu prices, as this increases the risk of outsized traffic declines with more consumers choosing FAH.”



ABOVE: Sara Gabriele, Gabi James.

Whereas other sectors have been able to bounce back, restaurants and bars have faced a bigger challenge when it comes to pricing. “Most [on-premise businesses] wanted to preserve their profit margin because of the loss they experienced during the pandemic,” says Naik, noting that cocktails are frequently one of the most profitable menu items, and therefore most subject to pricing scrutiny among operators. For those that were forced to raise prices consistent with inflation rates, “they were a bit reluctant to decrease those prices for consumers [as inflation cooled], even when prices [in other industries] were going down.”

The double-edged sword for the restaurant and bar industry is that inflated prices are partially driven by consumer willingness to spend money—to a point, according to Naik. In this post-inflation moment, beverage and bar directors are tasked with finding the sweet spot of pricing cocktails to encourage rather than dissuade consumers from partaking, yet neither limiting their potential profit or incurring a loss. “We can charge \$20 for



## THE ERA OF COCKTAIL INFLATION

a cocktail,” says Sara Gabriele, the owner of Gabi James in Redondo Beach, California, whose cocktail menu prices typically range between \$13 and \$16. “But if someone buys a \$20 cocktail, are they going to be less open to buying that second cocktail? Or is it better to keep them at \$17, and then they might get two?”

### COCKTAIL INFLATION IS A NUANCED CHALLENGE

Each state, region, or even city has its own factors when it comes to cocktail pricing in any economic landscape. Across the country, however, drastic cocktail price increases are as often a factor of increased labor rather than supply costs, which are typically higher for restaurants than retail outlets. Labor costs are also subject to frequent legislative changes. In Denver, for example, required incremental wage increases exacerbated the problem of inflation for bar managers, like Chad Michael George, a bar consultant and the founder of Denver’s Proof Productions. “Our labor costs are going up anywhere from eight to 10 percent a year just based on minimum wage,” he says. Minimum wage has doubled since 2018 in Denver, and is still on the rise. This has made a noticeable

BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT: Chad Michael George, Proof Productions; Karl Góranowski, Bata; and Patrick Smith, Union Square Hospitality Group.



ABOVE: Cocktails at Tough Luck Club, where Karl Góranowski is also beverage director.

impact on cocktail prices for the area. “I can think of multiple spots that, in 2019, were serving \$12 to \$14 cocktails, and now they’re \$16 to \$18.”

Markets with an established cocktail culture can buffer higher prices to a degree, whereas emerging markets can be less tolerant of price increases, creating challenges for beverage directors in those areas. “Considering median household income, when people are going out in New York, the difference between \$22 and \$24 isn’t much,” says Karl Góranowski, the beverage director for Bata and its associated bar and restaurant projects in Tucson, Arizona, “whereas here, the difference between \$11 and \$13 is a major shift.”

Category shifts also influence cocktail prices, such as the massive surge in de-

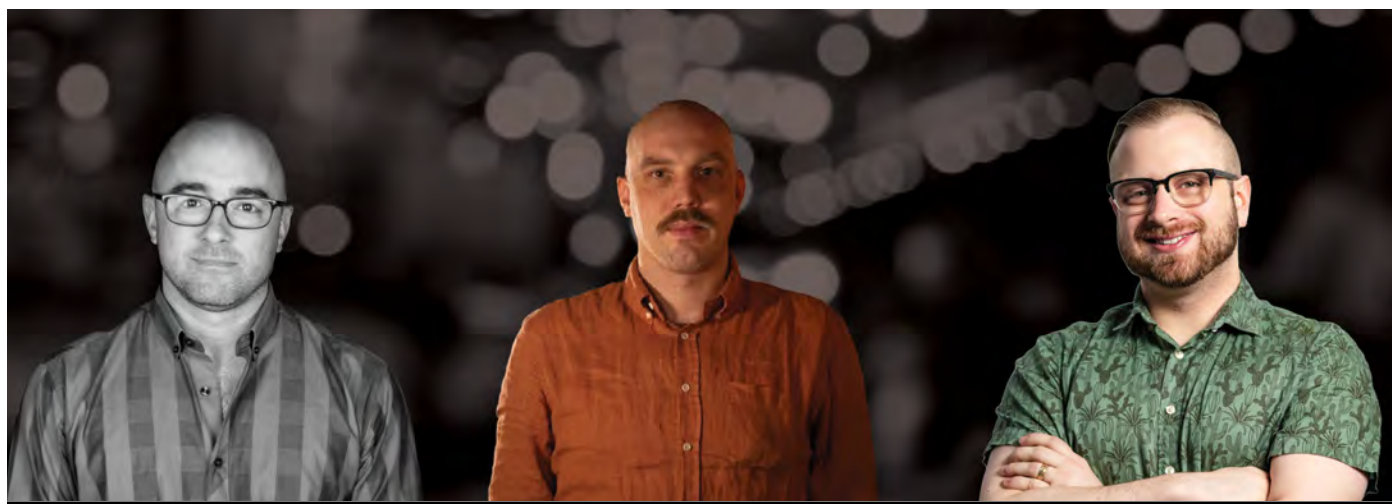
**“I almost view a price increase as the easy way out. Instead I'm leveraging my expertise, my skill set, and my time in the industry to try to find every saving and pass those savings on to the guest.”**

—Patrick Smith,  
Union Square Hospitality Group

mand for agave spirits. “Anything that increases in popularity that quickly, takes a long time to catch up in terms of production,” says Unterberg. She, and everyone else profiled here, noted price increases of at least 25 percent for adequate, ideally additive-free tequilas of the price bracket that can support usage in cocktails.

### PRODUCT SWAPS AND MENU REVAMPS

Despite various challenges to keeping cocktail prices static, however, many bar and beverage managers consider price increases only as a last resort. “I almost view a price increase as the easy way out,” says Patrick Smith, the senior beverage man-





ager for New York's Union Square Hospitality Group. "Instead I'm leveraging my expertise, my skill set, and my time in the industry to try to find every saving and pass those savings on to the guest."

Ingredient substitutions are frequently necessary when spikes in specific product prices force the question of whether to raise a cocktail's price. The alternative is to look across the breadth of a cocktail menu for other potential savings, rather than at a specific cocktail and its ingredients. "We have had to have difficult conversations about the products that we're using," says Smith. "Is there a way we can use a premium ingredient in a certain cocktail and make adjustments to other cocktails?" This is one way he's succeeded in keeping Union Square Hospitality Group's cocktail prices mostly consistent across various restaurant concepts over the past several years, while still maintaining a favorable average profit margin across the entirety of the menu. "If it's a linchpin ingredient that is really definitional to what it means for your program to exist in a way that you're proud of, then you're gonna look everywhere else [for savings] first," he says.

Some product swaps are doable; when the price of Campari increased in 2022, many beverage directors looked to other bitter Italian liqueurs such as Contratto or Meletti for potential cost savings. However, more difficult considerations may involve dropping some cocktails outright, or overhauling the menu in a major way. "We had to reinvent or remove quite a few things about a year ago," says Gabriele. "Sazerac Company's whole catalog moved to a beer distributor in Los Angeles, and their price minimums made them cost-prohibitive." This change was compounded by labor shortages in the distribution sector, further hiking pricing. "We would have had to charge \$19 for certain cocktails," she says, which is untenable in a neighborhood where her experience has shown that price tolerance for cocktails tops out around \$16.

**"I try to do more tastings to see what else is out there, and what could be a better price that maybe I'm not aware of!"**

—Carolyn Kao, bar manager

Garnish and waste are also opportunities for scrutiny when repricing cocktails. For a lot of bartenders, garnishes aren't necessary for every cocktail and offer a cost-saving. "This trend of dehydrated citrus wheels over the past few years drives me nuts because I see it in a lot of programs that say they're zero waste," says George. He advises bar clients to rethink these choices; the cost of citrus is especially volatile, and dehydrated wheels are wasteful by definition, as they have no additional value for juicing or twists.

### RENEGOTIATING WITH SUPPLIERS AND BRANDS

Not every business has the ability to negotiate liquor prices, depending on state or local liquor laws, but relationships with distributors or suppliers are often instrumental in finding potential savings. "I try to do more tastings to see what else is out there, and what could be a better price that maybe I'm not aware of," says Carolyn Kao, a Bay Area bar manager whose bar traffic was seriously impacted by massive tech layoffs in recent years. In doing so she ended up switching from a more expensive, well-known brand to Casco Viejo tequila. Based on a taste test and recommendation from the distributor, she found it to be a quality choice for cocktails, and half of what she was previously paying for tequila, staving off unnecessary price increases for some of the top-selling cocktails.

Unterberg also relies on increased communication with her suppliers for her extensive cocktail list, which chang-



ABOVE: Carolyn Kao, a Bay Area bar manager.

es monthly. "I used to check in with our distributors once a year about price increases, and now I check in once a quarter," she says. It can be arduous to sort through, but, given the volatility of the market, it's worthwhile in order to avoid unexpected invoices and maintain competitive prices.

Whether or not to include spirit brand names in cocktail menu descriptions has different implications in different markets, but also represents a strategic factor that beverage directors consider when repricing a cocktail list. "We don't include any brand names whatsoever on any of our menus," says Góranowski. "So as long as we have good well [spirits] at a certain level, we can still use them and be value-focused when it comes to designing drinks." This strategy, while not applicable at every bar, also makes it easier to accommodate product changes when necessary. He characterizes Tucson as being price-conscious more than brand-conscious, which isn't necessarily the case in every market.

For Unterberg, including brand names on her menu, which has options between \$13 and \$24, she can appeal to the widest variety of budgets. "Our menu lists every single spirit ingredient by brand name," she says, "so you know you're getting what you paid for." ■

# SUMMER COCKTAILS



## BLUE TAP TAP

- ½ oz. Rhum Barbancourt Haitian Proof
- ½ oz. blue curaçao
- ½ oz. coconut cream
- 1 ½ oz. pineapple juice

**Method:** Mix all the ingredients with a cup of ice cubes in a high-speed electric mixer. Pour the contents into a tumbler.

## KLYR JITO

- 2 oz. Klyr Rum
- 6-12 mint leaves
- 2 tbsp. brown sugar
- 4 lime wedges
- Top with club soda

**Method:** Place the mint leaves and one lime wedge into a sturdy glass. Muddle to release mint oils and lime juice. Add the remaining lime wedges and sugar and muddle again. Do not strain the mixture but transfer to a collins glass and fill almost to the top with ice. Pour in Klyr Rum and top with club soda. Stir, and add sugar if desired to taste. Garnish with lime.



## WHISKEY STRAWBERRY LEMONADE

- 2 oz. Sagamore 93 Small Batch Rye
- 2 oz. fresh lemon juice
- 1 ½ oz. strawberry simple syrup\*

**Method:** Combine Sagamore 93 Small Batch Rye, lemon juice, and strawberry simple syrup in a shaker with ice. Shake to combine. Pour into highball glass. Garnish with a lemon wheel and strawberry, and serve.

\*Strawberry simple syrup: Mix equal parts water, sugar, and strawberries in a pot. Bring to a boil and reduce to a simmer for 10 minutes. Chill overnight and strain. One cup each of water, sugar, and sliced strawberries will yield approximately 10 ounces of syrup.



## STAR F\*\*KER

*Created by Nick Jackson, head bartender, The Rum House*

- 1 ½ oz. Plantation Dark Rum
- ¾ oz. Mr Black
- ½ oz. Giffard Apricot
- ¼ oz. grapefruit juice
- ¼ oz. demerara sugar
- 1 egg white

**Method:** Dry shake ingredients together. Then add three ice cubes and wet shake. Strain into a coupe glass and garnish with star anise.

## DISARONNO VELVET BATIDA

- 2 oz. Disaronno Velvet
- 2 oz. coconut water

**Method:** Add ingredients to a cocktail shaker with ice. Shake and strain into a rocks glass with crushed ice. Grate coconut on top as a garnish and serve with a straw.







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# BIDDING TO BE A BARTENDER FAVORITE

BARTENDERS SHARE THE QUALITIES OF A MUST-HAVE COCKTAIL MODIFIER AND SPECULATE ON WHICH ONES WILL REACH THE TOP SHELF

BY SUSANNAH SKIVER BARTON

**S**t-Germain: the liqueur that launched a thousand cocktails. The brand's success derives from many factors, including timing, appearance, flavor, and quality. It came along in 2007 as the cocktail renaissance was accelerating, packaged in a stylish Art Deco bottle that stood out on every backbar. St-Germain's bright elderflower flavor worked so well across the spirits spectrum and was deployed so widely that many referred to it as "bartender's ketchup." It sold over 150,000 cases in 2022, putting it among the top 10 best-selling liqueurs in the U.S., according to Impact Databank. It has cemented a place in the cocktail canon.

While St-Germain is not the only modifier to have trended far and wide, most of its companions, like orange curaçao, Campari, Luxardo, and Chartreuse, are centuries old. But as American cocktail tastes diversify and grow more sophisticated, there's room for others to join the ranks—and no shortage of contenders.

"Where liqueur is concerned, you're starting to see brands come up with products that are breaking somewhat from tradition, because the intention is that it is going to be the star in the cocktail or it's going to be pegged to a style of drink that every bar needs to have, therefore it will be in every bar," says Shannon Mustipher, a spirits educator, consultant, and author of *Tiki: Modern Tropical Cocktails*.

*Beverage Media* talked to several bartenders to find out which, if any, new liqueur or other non-vermouth modifier could achieve canonical status behind the bar.

## WHAT ARE THE KEY QUALITIES OF A SUCCESSFUL MODIFIER?

Bartenders agree that there are a few key factors in a brand's successful quest to become indispensable. "What we're looking for as bartenders is—and this is what St-Germain did—something that combines a familiar yet unique flavor and makes it palatable, yet strong enough to stand up in cocktails," says Abigail Gullo, the creative director and bar manager at *Loa* at the International Hotel in New Orleans.





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OPPOSITE PAGE: Little Ned at The Ned NoMad.  
 RIGHT: Nicolas Torres, True Laurel; the West Side  
 Southside cocktail from True Laurel.

Alongside distinct flavor, these products should be versatile. They must also meet the practical needs of a working bar, with sensible pricing and utility-minded packaging. Above all, a well-supported sales and marketing strategy is something that every brand should be building into its budget from day one.

“Flavor can always make a splash, but today, popularity probably revolves around marketing,” says Nicolas Torres, the bar director of San Francisco’s True Laurel. The marketing can focus on influencers or traditional sales—or, more likely, both. And robust distribution partnerships are non-negotiable.

**FLAVOR COMES FIRST**

Unlike base spirits such as gin or tequila, where one brand can easily stand in for another in a cocktail, an essential modifier should feature a singular flavor that’s not easily replicated. It has to be made from high-quality ingredients such as fruit, honey, and spices, rather than flavorings. And if there’s an authentic story that the bartender can share with guests, all the better to make it stand out.

“For me, modifiers are the most interesting part of the drink,” says Chris Moore, the head of bars at The Ned NoMad in New York City. “It’s like architecture versus design. You never walk into a house and say, ‘Wow, these foundations look great.’ You talk about the design. The design, for me, is the modifier.”

Moore and others point to the passion fruit liqueur Chinola, Sorel, and Pierre Ferrand Yuzu as nailing the aspect of unique flavor. The hibiscus-forward Sorel is a particular standout for its authentic-

RIGHT: Dill Pickle cocktail from Little Ned; Chris Moore, The Ned NoMad.



ity, having been created by Jackie Summers, a Caribbean American who grew up drinking homemade sorrel, the non-alcoholic beverage on which the liqueur is based.

Pierre Ferrand Yuzu joined a traditional orange curaçao variant when it launched in 2023. “I’ve been saying for a few years now that yuzu is the future,” says Gullo. She notes the fruit’s bright citrus profile and astringency that are rounded out by creamy vanilla tones. Whereas yuzu was once the province of Asian restaurants, she adds, “you’re starting to see it cross over into the modern vernacular.”

**A COCKTAIL MODIFIER OFFERS VERSATILITY**

Singular flavor doesn’t mean single use, however. “It should be really clear on how it works in a drink,” says Mustipher. “There’s a liqueur I tasted recently, it’s delicious, but it really in theory only has three uses.”

One-trick ponies don’t work here: A successful bartender’s ketchup must go with every kind of spirit and flavor profile, even—perhaps especially—inspiring drinks that haven’t been invented yet. And it must taste good by itself. “When you taste it on its own, it should give you ideas,” says Gullo. “If it tastes like it would be good in this one thing, then you’re only going to use it for that one thing.”

Bergamot-flavored Italicus shines in this department, to such an extent that multiple bartenders call it an evolution of St-Germain. “It’s a very versatile ingredient, very adaptable,” says Moore. “It’s something that guests look for on the backbar and if they see it in a drink, it just seems to move well.”

Sorel also shows tremendous versatility. “It works across a spectrum of flavors,” says Mustipher. “Not just for rum or Caribbean drinks but for a whole swathe.”

On the other hand, Mr Black—though highly popular for its distinct cold-brew





flavor—seems to fall short on versatility, being employed primarily in the Espresso Martini. Mustipher thinks the brand's moment will last only until another trendy drink usurps the cocktail-du-jour's throne.

## STABILITY, COST, AND ERGONOMICS

More practical considerations are still paramount. Shelf stability has been a struggle for certain types of modifiers, especially fruit-based ones, but Chinola has figured out this part of the equation. "Liqueurs based on exotic tropical fruits are improving," says Mustipher. "At one point they used to be relegated strictly to tiki and tropical bars, but I'm seeing products out there that are applicable to just about any program." Passionfruit may be just the start of the trend: Chinola recently added a mango variant, and Giffard—a standby line of various well-regarded liqueurs—has also just launched a mango expression, both of which bartenders are eager to try.

"Cost is always a consideration," says Moore. "At the same time, there's intelligent ways to use those [expensive] ingredients where you don't have to eliminate them." He cites as an example the Man O'War, a cocktail that incorporates just a quarter-ounce of 20-year-old Madeira. "It still delivers because there's so much flavor," he adds.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF LITTLE NED / TRUE LAUREL

**"What we're looking for as bartenders is ... something that combines a familiar yet unique flavor and makes it palatable, yet strong enough to stand up in cocktails!"**

—Abigail Gullo,  
Loa at the International Hotel

Gullo notes the importance of packaging, which is something St-Germain nailed. "It has to be a bar-friendly package, which means it could fit in a well and it's easy to open," she says. "There's some ergonomic things that become essential if you're going to pick up a bottle a lot." On top of that, she says, an eye-catching bottle design benefits everyone, as bartenders can show it off and it's more memorable to consumers.

Chinola, Italicus, Sorel, Mr Black, and Pierre Ferrand Yuzu all fall into a retail price range of around \$30 to \$40, in line with St-Germain. And they have attractive bottles that are largely friendly to frequent pick-ups and pours.

## CAN THERE BE A NEXT BIG THING?

St-Germain achieved its peculiar success in a particular moment and set of circumstances, which may not be repeatable. "It opened up something," says Gullo, pointing to the novelty of elderflower flavor in the U.S. as a key factor in St-Germain's ubiquity. "When you look at the mainstream, they're still flavoring everything with apples, cinnamon, and peach," she adds. "If someone were to reinvent a really good apple or a really good peach [liqueur] then that might change the game." But

LEFT: Barbie Girl cocktail from True Laurel.



ABOVE: Abigail Gullo, Loa at the International Hotel.

such workaday flavors aren't enough to elevate a modifier to indispensable status.

The brands cited above excel in many areas, but fall short in others. Some aren't terribly versatile; others, while distinct and delicious, can clash in certain kinds of cocktails. Moreover, timing isn't in anyone's favor. St-Germain debuted as craft cocktails were being adopted more widely, and bartenders were looking for unique ingredients to give their offerings an edge. Nowadays, there are far more options in the modifier category, so that no single product may be able to ascend to the top.

And a quarter-century into the cocktail renaissance, with a mature market nationwide, what's trendy in one region or type of bar doesn't necessarily carry over elsewhere. "I don't think we are in the era of the next big liqueur," says Torres. "I think there will be trends that come and go. They come from marketing, media hypes, and social hypes." He points to the sharp spike in requests for the Negroni Sbagliato, after it was mentioned in a TikTok video by actor Emma D'Arcy, as an example, adding, "Somebody just needs to popularize the Rusty Nail." ■



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