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Cocktail Trends For Spring, With An Invitation To Improvise

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The craft of cocktails strikes me as similar to the craft of jazz: learn the rules, then improvise your heart away. You never know what will happen, but it's bound to be interesting.

The benefits of being able to improvise cocktails are, to my view, three fold:

The Weather's Turned Warmer

Finally! Sidewalk cafés beckon. Al fresco dining appeals. The spirit of improvisation is in the air. Cool cocktails from your own hand? Now's the time.

Recipes Use Ingredients You Already Have

You can replicate many cocktails with the help of ingredients you may already have in your kitchen, like citrus and herbs such as lemon, lime, orange, peppermint, and cinnamon. Tonic water, cranberry juice, and orange juice also come in handy, as do ice and boiling water.

You Can Learn From the Pros

Wine and spirits brands have taken to showcasing the characteristics of their products that lend themselves to mixed drinks. Which means that you can learn from the pros, whose own improvisation starts with a thorough understanding of the primary alcoholic ingredient. Observe what they do, learn from them until you feel comfortable with the repertoire, then start improvising for yourself.

Here are three cocktail trends, and three cocktail variations, with roots deeply dug into their primary ingredients: Port, Grappa, and Sauvignon Blanc.

Cent'anni della Famiglia Nonino

Port

Have you noticed the uptick in white Port on the shelves these days? Production is increasing, along with its quality and, therefore, the respect it's given. Incorporating white Port into your cocktail rotation can be as easy as swapping it with gin for a Port and Tonic (rather than Gin and Tonic, that is). Serving it as an aperitif marks a shift in thinking but it's a trend that's catching on, even in Portugal.

Or try adapting this recipe at home for a Sandeman Bliss, using ingredients from your pantry: pour tawny Port into a tall glass of ice; add orange slices, cinnamon, and orange zest; then top off with sparkling lemon water. Garnish with an orange wedge and cinnamon stick.

Even the simple act of adding ice to Port shifts ideas around a bit: ice doesn't make it a cocktail, of course, but it's a new, casual way – and a new occasion – to experience Port without replacing the conventional after-dinner specialty.

Grappa

The Nonino family has been producing grappa in Friuli since 1897, but “traditional” is not an adjective frequently used to describe them. Since Giannoli Nonino pioneered single-vineyard grappa production – largely by knocking on the back door of farmhouses in the region, persuading grape growers' wives to separate their estate's pomace – the family has been out in front of industry trends.

Which is why they enlisted mixologists, drink historians, and bartenders from all over the world — from Singapore to Italy to Las Vegas – to develop cocktail recipes with their range of grappas as the base. Some of those recipes are quirky or elaborate: the Nonino Sweet Sensation, for example, developed by Daniele Dalla Pola in Bologna, calls for centrifuged ginger, a Japanese ice ball, and “one dash of love.”

Other recipes, like Summertime by Jörg Krause of Munich, are more user-friendly and easily adaptable. Shake together strawberry syrup, lime juice and lemon juice with ice and two Nonino grappas (he recommends Amaro Nonino Quintessentia and Monovitigno Moscato). Strain into a chilled cocktail glass and garnish with a strawberry.

Sauvignon Blanc

Matua, New Zealand's first producer of Sauvignon Blanc, created a selection of cocktails in honor of their 40th anniversary. Each cocktail incorporates either their Sauvignon Blanc or their Single Vineyard Riesling, mixed with a range of bar standards like gin, Campari, and vodka.

The recipe for the Matua Martini, for example, is simple and direct and invites improvisation. To start, mix three parts vodka to one part Riesling, and add a dash of elderflower liqueur. Pour into a Boston glass filled with ice and stir until well diluted.

Those are the rules. How you improvise is up to you.