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Warm cocktails add to the spirit of the season

Bartenders are putting their twist on warm winter cocktails.

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Winter cocktails are like comfort food — hearty, satisfying flavors that fortify you against the chill.

Think that means cloying? Christmas-y? Cliché? Think again.

Kansas City's bartenders are putting their own twists on the season, creating drinks both savory and sweet, traditional and not. Sure, there's cinnamon and nutmeg, right alongside ginger, walnuts, coffee, apples, agave nectar, cherries and all manner of citrus.

Whiskey and rum, yes, but also mezcal, gin and cachaça. Hot drinks, of course, as well as those shaken and stirred.

"There are just so many flavors that fit this time of year," said Berto Santoro, bar manager at Extra Virgin in the Crossroads Arts District.

Santoro uses liqueurs, syrups and bitters to add weight to drinks like the Impossible, made with Rhum Barbancourt's Reserve Special eight-year-old, walnut liqueur, lemon juice, two kinds of bitters (including a house-made walnut version), Serrano pepper-rhum-honey syrup and apple cider.

His EV Cranberry Cobbler gets a boost from cherry syrup, but not just any cherry syrup. Santoro drains the sweet liquid from Italian Amarena cherries and then adds gomme (simple syrup thickened with gum Arabic) and falernum, a spiced liqueur. That's shaken with vodka, Clear Creek cranberry liqueur and lemon juice.

And the cherries?

They're soaked in brandy and then used to garnish cocktails like Santoro's barrel-aged Manhattans.

Whiskey also suits the season, said Arturo Vera-Felicie, bar manager at the Farmhouse in the River Market. His current list features Dale's Sazerac, a recipe from cocktail authority Dale DeGroff, made with rye whiskey and cognac, and the Farmhouse Old Fashioned, made Prohibition-style. That means no muddled fruit, just rye whiskey or bourbon (your call), seasonal syrup (recently it was apple pie-honey) and Angostura bitters.

Prefer gin?

Try the Farmers Market Sour, made with Hayman's Old Tom gin, lemon juice, gomme and egg whites.

Craving coffee? There's the Café Mexicana, with Del Maguey Crème de Mezcal and vodka infused with Broadway Roastery coffee.

Vera-Felicie's favorite, though, just might be his coquito. It's a Puerto Rican version of eggnog, made with evaporated milk, cream of coconut, rum, eggs and spices.

"It's my mom's recipe," Vera-Felicie said. "It's not really on the menu, but I like bringing it out for people."

So where do bartenders find their inspiration?

For Scott Beskow, bar manager at Grunauer in the Freight House District, it all starts in the kitchen.

"I'm always in conversation with (the staff)," Beskow said. "Most good ideas are collaborations."

Take one of the bar's most popular cocktails, the flüssigkeit strudel. Grunaüer braises apples with cinnamon, allspice, nutmeg and schnapps to make its Viennese apple strudel dessert. The process results in a lot of extra syrup, syrup that Beskow combines with dark rum, bitters, lemon juice and egg whites to create a rich yet balanced drink.

Bartender Mark Church liked the house-pickled mushrooms served with the smoked and cured meat appetizer so much that he created a drink called the apfelessig shrub just so he could use them as a garnish. Church started with a shrub, a vinegar-based syrup made, in this case, with equal parts sugar, water and apple cider vinegar. That's mixed with Beefeater gin and garnished with those mushrooms.

Beskow infused cachaça with pumpkin seed oil, a traditional Austrian ingredient, for a lemony caipirinha variant called the kurbirinha. Church is making bitters from Buddha's hand, a type of citron, and working with the kitchen to source other unique citrus varieties.

Still, there are times when you just want something warm. And when it comes to hot drinks, the toddy is the granddaddy of them all.

Toddies date to at least the mid-18th century, according to David Wondrich's "Imbibe" (Penguin Group, 2007). Whiskey usually went in with the sugar and water, but rum, brandy, applejack and genever also have a historical claim to the drink. Nutmeg was the favorite garnish, and lemon eventually found its way into the recipe.

Whiskey remains the preferred spirit, and, with so few other ingredients, this is no place to skimp on quality. Indeed, Wondrich writes the "one sure secret to success" is using pot-distilled spirits, or spirits distilled by the batch in a copper still.

Wondrich likes Redbreast Irish whiskey and Woodford Reserve bourbon, although single malt Scotch is clearly his favorite.

"A hot toddy — particularly one constructed upon a foundation of good Highland malt whisky — is one of the clearest signs I know that there is a providential plan to the universe," Wondrich writes.

That said, there's plenty of room for creativity. Extra Virgin's toddy starts with Samogon, a grape-based Russian spirit, that has been infused with apples, cinnamon, nutmeg, vanilla, coffee beans and allspice and mixed with agave nectar, lemon and hot water.

The hot ginger toddy at 715 in Lawrence combines Glenlivet 12-year-old, Domain de Canton ginger liqueur, lemon and honey. And, back at the Farmhouse, you can build your own any way you like. Pick your spirit, and a bartender will match it to a sweetener and spices and heat it up with water or tea.

Snow & Co., near the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts, gives a nod to the hot toddy's cohort, the hot buttered rum, with its apple butter whiskey.

Butter was added to hot beer or ale drinks as far back as Henry VIII's time, according to Wondrich. Rum probably replaced beer sometime in the 1700s, turning it into a spirituous drink.

Its popularity had faded by the 19th century, but the recipe still made it into bartending legend Jerry Thomas' 1862 collection: 1 teaspoon sugar, 2 ounces Jamaican rum, 1 teaspoon allspice and cloves and a piece of butter "as large as half a chestnut," which comes out to about half a tablespoon.

Bartenders at Snow & Co. mix butter, brown sugar and spices beforehand, adding a scoop to equal parts Midnight Moon Apple Pie Moonshine and Cabin Fever Maple Whiskey before topping a mug up with hot water.

It may not be what Jerry Thomas was drinking, but it will keep you cozy on a cold Kansas City night.

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