

The New York Times

Bartenders Whip Up Fringe Cocktails

By ROBERT SIMONSON

AUGUST 6, 2015

Del Pedro, the managing partner of [Tooker Alley](#), a bar in Brooklyn, pours an ounce and a half of tequila into a glass. He follows that with some genever, the malty Dutch gin. Then it really gets weird.

He adds a half-ounce of Parfait Amour, a liqueur tasting of vanilla and flowers that even the most curious of mixologists have opted to politely ignore.

He's not done. Next comes a teaspoon of Martini bianco vermouth, with its strong note of oregano. Stirred over ice and strained into a coupe glass, the drink, which Mr. Pedro calls an Amethyst, is light lavender in color and tastes a bit like a violet candy.

It is not for everybody. Though the cocktail is ordered often, one out of every seven or eight is sent right back. And Mr. Pedro is fine with that.



Matt Grippo pouring the Yellow King cocktail at Blackbird in San Francisco.
PETER DASILVA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

It's conventional wisdom that there are a lot of odd potions calling themselves cocktails these days. What's less known is that there are drinks that are considered peculiar even by the bartenders who invented them.

Still, a few end up on the menu anyway because their creators believe in them and think they will find an audience.

Bartenders have various pet terms for these challenge drinks. Mr. Pedro calls the Amethyst a "10 percenter," meaning one-tenth of his customers will like it. Matt Grippo, a partner and the general manager at [Blackbird](#) in San Francisco, labels them "Easter egg cocktails," surprises that await patrons who give cocktail lists a close read. Matt Piacentini, owner of [the Up & Up](#) in Greenwich Village, uses the term "experimental tracks."

Mr. Piacentini sees them as a guard against complacency. “We have to put stuff out there that pushes the envelope in one way or another and see if people are going to like it,” he said. “Either way, it leads to a conversation.”

One of the Up & Up’s current outliers is Peat’s Dragon, a sort of Rob Roy with two types of Scotch and a black pepper tincture. Aggressively strong and spicy, it is spurned by some, embraced by others.

When one of his Amethysts boomerangs, Mr. Pedro said, he takes it almost as “a kind of validation.”

“We’re trying to create things that are palatable and good, of course,” he said. “But we can’t operate within the same bandwidth all the time or it becomes really repetitious or safe.”

“Think of music,” he added, invoking the Beatles. “You have ‘I Want to Hold Your Hand’ and then you have ‘Tomorrow Never Knows.’” Amethyst, he means, is a “Tomorrow Never Knows” type of drink: “It’s experimental and has a point all its own. It’s not something you’re going to walk around humming, but it moves things forward.”

Mr. Grippo of Blackbird admits to a certain amount of selfishness when he devotes a piece of menu real estate to something like the Yellow King, a bitter drink made of Aveze (a gentian liqueur), Cocchi Americano (an aperitif wine) and dry vermouth. “Those drinks are more for bartenders and enthusiasts, people who haven’t tried something with a particular ingredient,” he said.

Sometimes an outlier finds its target audience through the subtle signals of a menu description. At [Midnight Rambler](#), a new bar in Dallas, the Red Pegasus Redux contains Suze, a bitter liqueur, that has been infused with Texas cedar. “They’re going to be predisposed to liking it,” Chad Solomon, an owner, said of those adventurous souls who order it.

Nico de Soto, an owner of [Mace](#) in the East Village, is known for coloring outside the lines with almost every drink he creates. For him, there really is no other option but to send outliers up the flagpole and see if anyone salutes.

“When you do a cocktail list, you’re not going to please everyone,” he said. “You have to push. Otherwise, you’d just put raspberry and lychee in every cocktail.”

Recipe: [The Yellow King](#)