

New York's Low ABV Cocktails Trend: More Drinks, Fewer Headaches

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Have you noticed something peculiar about your cocktails lately? Perhaps that they seem a bit, less, well, alcohol-y? Don't chalk it up to the fact that you've finally developed an impressive tolerance, or that bars and restaurants are trying to deprive you of your well earned (and accordingly paid for) buzz. But rather, the rise of low ABV (or low proof, or session) libations, built around aperitifs and digestifs such as vermouth, sherry and amaro, as opposed to hard liquors—à la vodka, whiskey or gin.

"The renaissance of cocktail culture over the last 15 years really found its emphasis on very spirit-forward drinks. There is now a swing of the pendulum towards lighter drinks, which is cool because low ABV cocktails can really showcase a depth of flavor and finish," said Will Elliott, Bar Director of Maison Premiere and Sauvage. "What's helped them speak to a wider audience is the fact that they're more food friendly, as well as much more sustainable to drink; well suited to the way that European cultures tend to imbibe around the clock."

So while incorporating bonal, soju and palo cortado in cocktails has proved a clever maneuver for some NYC establishments for counteracting beer-and-wine only licenses, experts seem to agree that it's largely an effort to appropriate the laissez-faire spirit of Brits with their Pimms Cups, Frenchmen and their Lillet, Italians and their Aperol Spritzes, and Spaniards, for whom it's always "La Hora del Vermut" (too bad six-hour workdays and a month of paid vacation time doesn't come with it).

And to be sure, embracing low ABV seems a sensible system for summer, a great way to capapitate protracted day drinking and sun bathing without ending up hunched over a toilet at 3pm. "When you're enjoying a festive weekend afternoon, a lower alcohol option helps you maintain and pace without compromising on taste," said Brian Smith, Bar Manager of Gran Electrica and Colonie. "The Negroni Spagiato, for instance, is brilliant in this way. It has all the bold flavors of a regular Negroni, but subbing sparkling wine for gin gives the cocktail a light effervescence, and a reduced impact of alcohol."

And in lieu of a hangover, mixologists promise that you'll have a tremendous flavor payoff in return. "It can be easier to build a cocktail around an aperitif wine, sherry, vermouth etc., because they can be very layered and nuanced and contain so many botanicals," said Franky Marshall, Beverage Director of Le Boudoir. "Focusing on aperitifs inverts everything and makes it fun, because whiskey and other liquors become the modifiers; correcting a drink and fleshing it out, creating profiles that are wildly different," Elliott adds.

Smith also credits the rise of low proof cocktails with a rising affinity for bitterness—a prominent quality in vermouth and amaro, including that bartender favorite, Fernet. "Whereas those kinds of spirits have been traditionally used as modifiers in cocktails, we're finding that the public loves them on their own and so we can drive a pronounced bittersweet profile and keep the alcohol lower to focus on the subtleties and intricacies of the flavors," he said.

"I'm always amazed when a guest can sit in a bar and consume upwards of five or more boozy cocktails and still enjoy it and or function after that. To me, that's just drinking for the sake of drinking, rather than for the flavor and sensory experience," muses Kate Stipe, Head Bartender at Pig Beach. "Not that I think that gin and whiskey will ever fall on the wayside, but I encourage the placement of lower ABV cocktails on menus, highlighting all the beautiful vermouths, sherries, and craft beers we have being made locally and internationally."

"I don't foresee it being just a trend, as it already has a place in our cocktail history," she adds. "But I do hope that the current awareness is a sign of consumer education and being conscious of what we not only eat but also drink."

Maison Premiere: 298 Bedford Avenue, Williamsburg (High Chicago, Maison Sherry Cobbler)

Sauvage: 905 Lorimer Street, Greenpoint (Pastis Cobbler, Riding Tigers)

Colonie: 127 Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn Heights (Bolivian Rose)

Gran Electrica: 5 Front Street, DUMBO (Sangria Rojo, Mi Michelada)

Pig Beach: 480 Union Street, Gowanus (Pimms Cup, Shandy)

Image by Kelsey Mitchell