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At Mandarin Oriental New York, Spring Cocktails Go Way Beyond Sake

by Winnie McCroy
EDGE Editor
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Spring cocktails at the Mandarin Oriental, New York. (Source:Melissa Murphy)

As the seasons change, so does the cocktail menu at Mandarin Oriental, New York. Located near Columbus Circle and overlooking Central Park, the luxury hotel's 35th floor **MObar** is a hotbed of international guests who want a taste of all the Big Apple has to offer.

Sommelier Julie Van Zant is ready to give it to them. She came to the hotel with a wealth of experience working in restaurants and bars, and for the past two years has been the sommelier and beverage manager for the hotel.

"Even though the guests may come from Hong Kong, we want to show them a sense of place," said Van Zant. "So the drinks have an Asian sensibility, but they're also very New York City-inspired."

Take the Hong Kong Sour, a twist on the popular New York Sour. It's made with what is by now a fairly well known potable,

Bulleit Bourbon. But instead of lemon, Van Zant uses Asian yuzu juice, and blends it with simple syrup and a local Malbec for a beautiful balance between East and West.

"In New York things are very fresh and new, with lots of interesting local spirits hitting the market," said Van Zant, who takes inspiration from these small-batch artisanal liquors. "I get to be one-on-one with the creator and distiller."

An example is the gin she sources for her seasonal cocktail the Lychee Rose - a mix of Greenhook Gin, lychee, rose, strawberry and Prosecco.

"Greenhook Gin is made in Brooklyn and is so aromatic," said Van Zant. "They use New York-grown grains, and embrace local growers. When you combine that with the gourmet, hand-crafted Lady Lychee Juice, strawberry and rose, it's excellent."

Ditto for the Ginger Mojito, made with Owney's Rum (also distilled in Brooklyn), mint, lime, candied ginger and club soda. Bridget Firtle was a 20-something with a successful career in finance when she decided to start her own business. At her Brooklyn facility, the Noble Experiment, she decided that her first product would be Owney's Rum. Namesake Owen Madden was reputedly a rumrunner during Prohibition, part of the Hell's Kitchen Gopher Gang, who were smugglers. The provenance was too good to resist.

"Owney's was an American spirit, the first rum that local people really embraced," said Van Zant. "And Bridget is an artisan and an artist. She does everything, from distillation and bottling to labeling. There's not a formula for something like this. You have to trust your own choices."

These artisanal cocktails are not just the domain of small distilleries. For example, a spirit from international distiller Patrón makes its way onto the spring cocktail list, via the Rock the Boat.

Patrón Roca Reposado lends its aged agave profile to the drink, along with pineapple, sage, agave and ginger beer. It's got a kick, but one you'll recognize.



Julie Van Zant (Source: Winnie McCroy)

Thinking Outside the Bottle

Van Zant said her background in dance and the arts has opened her up to appreciate and understand things for what they are. This willingness to be creative allows her to think outside the bottle, and blend items from all kinds of distributors.


"I start with a conceptual idea, or with one spirit I'd like to use. A team member is from culinary school, so they help flesh it out," said Van Zant. "Then I present it to the bartenders, and everyone learns the same technique to make it."

The Mandarin Oriental offers more than just the seasonal cocktails, which Van Zant changes up five times a year (one extra set of offerings for the holidays). They have a 42-page wine list, complete with 3,000 wines, sakes, cocktails and other spirits. Van Zant spends her days tasting new products, and building strong relationships with the wine community.

"A huge part of the job is networking," she said. "You can't sit at home and read things to become a master sommelier. You have to taste. When people come here from all over the world, they want to see what New York and the U.S. has to offer. We're new to the wine scene in the U.S., but it's great to expose people to sparkling Long Island wines, Rieslings from the Finger Lakes, and cabaret sauvignons from the Napa Valley, Oregon and Washington."

For Van Zant, it's all about introducing artisanal products to her guests. Whether that's by recommending a vintage wine like Sparkling Pointe, which makes Champagne from pinot noir grapes, or hand selling a drink poured with Brooklyn gin, she's on tap to make your visit to the Mandarin Oriental a world-class experience.

For more information, visit: www.mandarinoriental.com/newyork.



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Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York,


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degrees and sunny. EDGE has scoured the country for a preview of our favorite sun-inspired cocktails.

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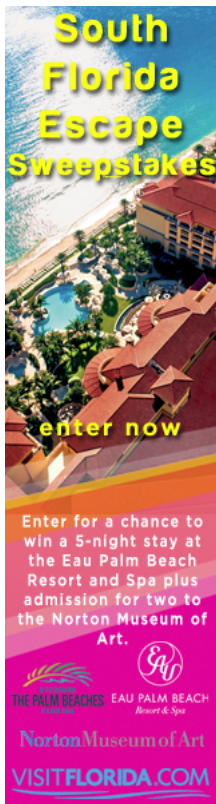
It's no secret that old-fashioned cocktails as well as modern alternatives are having a moment, and bartenders across Fairmont hotels and resorts are shaking and stirring beloved staples and interesting concoctions for guests' sipping pleasure.



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