

SPIRITS TAKE ON A CLASSICAL TWIST

The trend for spirits in the on-trade seems to have slowed. But with many classic favourites making a comeback, a definite move towards superior quality and plenty of new arrivals hitting the shelves, there is still plenty for the trade to get excited about. *Catherine Quinn* reports

Remember Cosmopolitans, Jack Daniel's with Coke, and vodka with more or less everything? If you've been into a fashionable bar in the last year or so, you might have realised there's been something of a quiet revolution on the spirits front. Not only has the humble Mojito become the most popular cocktail of choice, but rum is moving in on bourbon territory, and vodka's stranglehold has been eased by a renewed taste for gin.

You might have also noticed that cocktails and spirit preferences are heading in a decidedly classic direction, with single malt whiskies, aged rums, and even gin's long lost cousin, genever, making their way back onto the bar scene.

The New World is making its presence felt too. Previously lowly spirits such as tequila and cachaça rise to impressive heights of quality. While retro cocktails – Daiquiris, Margaritas, Pink Ladies and Caipirinhas – have become the mode to showcase the old-fashioned flavours.

On the surface, this nod towards the classics of yesteryear would seem to hail a more sophisticated and adult spirit market than the vodka-based consumption of previous years. But, in fact, the thirst for classic spirits may well be a by-product of a market tightening its belt and opting for the austere, rather than ostentations.

According to Mintel's latest report, the on-trade spirits market slowed slightly in 2007 as the popularity of take-home increased. "Vodka, the largest product sector, is driving market growth, while sales of white rum stagnated in 2006 and gin experienced a slight decline," explains Mintel's spokesperson. "Sales of other spirits are experiencing modest growth."

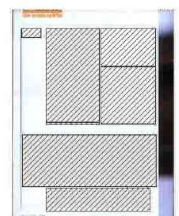
The report, however, urges these findings to be viewed in context – namely that the proportion of adults consuming alcohol is in decline.

Mintel's findings also hit on a trend that bartenders

everywhere have known for years – premiumisation. For the on-trade, this has led to the quality of certain spirits going sky high. This year, we have seen the launch of super-premium tequilas in the UK such as Patron's Platinum and Partida's Elegante. New gins such as Right Gin have arrived, high-end cachaça brands such as Sagatiba have made their presence felt, and even vodka has seen premium-flavoured arrivals eclipse standard flavoured products.

Slower it might be, but with hot new products continuing to hit the shelves, and an unswerving move towards supreme quality, the on-trade spirits market still has plenty to excite an enthusiastic clientele.

Harpers spoke to members of the bar scene to find out what's stirring up the spirits world.



DANNY WALKER, BARTENDER, SQUARE ONE, BRISTOL

Rum must be the fastest growing category at the moment. Whereas before, Bacardi, Havana and Appleton, to a certain extent, had more or less a monopoly. Suddenly all of these interesting new brands are coming onto the market.

There are fantastic rum products all over the world and all it takes is for big distribution companies such as Diageo or Inspirit to get involved and suddenly they're popular over here.

Diageo has released Pampero Especial, a Venezuelan golden rum, and Guatemala's Zacapa Reserve, while Inspirit has just launched its Eldorado Rum, which, in my opinion, is one of the finest rums in the world. Flor de Caña has recently been shipped in, too. These products are not new releases, but they have only just become available in the UK – and it's about time.

In terms of how people are drinking them, it tends to be with mixers and in cocktails, rather than straight. In the high-end, in particular, rum and ginger beer or rum with a mixer has more or less taken over from Jack Daniel's → and Coke. I have also noticed a slight shift from vodka drinking to gin, which is a relief. For a while there were just too many boutique vodkas and it was about perfume bottles, rather than quality products.

Hot tip: Eldorado rum

JAKE BURGER, OWNER, JAKES BAR AND GRILL, PORTOBELLO ROAD

For years tequila has been backed as the next big thing, and I think this year it's finally made it. You can get a huge range of high-quality tequilas now, and people are getting more used to seeing and asking for different brands behind the bar.

Previously, you might have had one bottle for shooting, but now you have several and people do buy them for sipping. Admittedly, the main trend is still to shoot them, but those who ask for them by brand know what they are drinking and will have them served in a stem glass.

We stock Ocho, Partida and Arette behind the bar – the Partida is popular and the Ocho does well for us. My favourite is the Tapatío tequila – it's like a cult product for bartenders. It has some earthy vegetal notes.

We have also found that Margaritas made with good tequila and agave syrup, instead of Cointreau, are flying out the door. Cosmopolitans have transcended their era and have become a classic now, and they still sell well.

Mojitos have become incredibly popular, too. I remember in the 1980s, when it was all Sea Breezes and Long Island Ice Teas, so it seems to me we're in quite a luxurious position if Mojito is the drink of the moment.

Hot Tip: Tapatío Tequila

JO McCANTA, MIXOLOGIST, SAE BAR, SHOREDITCH

There is a definite trend towards gin, rather than vodka, and with that new preference I have seen a real shift to-

wards the classics when it comes to cocktails.

That is partially to do with organic. Prior to the 1970s you couldn't get spirits that were made with pesticides, so the movement to drinks of the 1920s and 1930s reflects that. There's more of a purity to those drinks.

We've seen a lot of great new gins enter the market and they're not necessarily from the usual places. So, we have a gin from the US this year, and I think the way the market is moving we might well see genever become a more popular choice. There are some classic cocktails that you couldn't make a few years ago because it was more or less impossible to get the genever to make them, but that has changed.

The bar world is also becoming more influenced by gastronomy and we are seeing gastro cocktails as a result – drinks that are experimenting with innovative techniques to get flavours. This is good news for bartenders, because it's always great to introduce someone to something new.

Hot tip: Bols Genever

STEPHEN McBRIDE, OPERATIONS MANAGER, ORAN MOR, GLASGOW

We have seen a big increase in popularity of malt whiskies. A few years ago blended whisky was popular, but now it's the single malts, and we're seeing more women drink the single malts, whereas previously they would have chosen blended.

People are also asking for them not only by name, but by year, as well. So, rather than ask for a Glenkinchie, customers will ask for a Glenkinchie 12 year old. They realise that there is a big difference in flavours between not only the single malts by distiller, but by the year they were laid down. We now keep, for example, 15 different expressions of the Bowmore, because people want that choice. It's such a trend that there are now a few more shortages and we're seeing years where not quite enough was laid down go onto allocation.

The other change has been new blended malts such as Monkey Shoulder. These are not the same as blended whiskies, and there is some debate in the industry as to whether they should be named "vatted malts" to avoid confusion. The boutique blended malts such as Compass Box are still a bit unknown, but Monkey Shoulder is popular served on its own – it's a lovely dram.

Hot tip: Monkey Shoulder Whisky

PRAKASH SHEDDY, SENIOR BARMAN, CINNAMON CLUB

We are currently focusing on liqueurs – new liqueurs. As we have the restaurant element, they are popular as after-dinner drinks, but we are also looking at new flavours for the cocktail side of things.

There are new liqueurs on the market made from all kinds of interesting things – from premium fruit to various spices. I've come across one recently made with pimentos and chillies.

We have also started selling a high-end Morrison Bowmore whisky, which is extremely rare. There were only 10

cases made, which is why it's expensive. It cost us £1,000 a bottle and we sell the whisky for £400 to £700 a shot. At the moment, it's hard to sell because not many people have heard of it but, with word of mouth, we're hoping it will become more popular.

With the whiskies, we also have our own blend of The Glenlivet whisky, which was made especially for us - The Glenlivet 1975. That is popular and we've sold more than 40 bottles this year.

I think customers are more willing now to look at buying a high-quality whisky. For us, the drinks such as Cognac are steady sellers, but whisky is where we find the premium market.

Hot tip: Cantron Poire William

JON DYER, MANAGER, POPOLO, NEWCASTLE

We are still into rum and there seems to be a growing interest from customers for dark and premium rums, so we have increased our range by about 50% in the past year.

The great thing about rum is its regional diversity, which adds so much character to each brand. We're also still in the grip of the Mojito trend, and while we keep our classics strictly Cuban, the wide range of rums available give us a chance to take it a bit further with the likes of orange rums, spiced rums, vanilla infused and premium-aged rums. We're also getting excited about the Havana Club Barrel Proof, which will make an interesting addition to the arsenal.

In terms of what's new in the cocktail world, it's really a question of old favourites coming back, with classic cocktails now generating new interest. Customers want to go back to the original recipes for things like Mai Tai, Daiquiri, Tom Collins and Gin Fizzes that have stood the test of time.

People seem to be more interested in unfussy drinks that accentuate the particular character of their component spirits, especially when using premium spirits.

With this in mind, we are putting out more gin martinis with brands such as Martin Miller's Westbourne strength and Tanqueray 10. Let's face it, if you want a drink with one of those, you don't want anything else interfering with it.

Hot tip: Havana Club Barrel Proof

GUSTAVO BERTOLUCCI, MIXOLOGIST, THE PEARL, HOLBORN

We have a lot of tequilas coming out, but cachaça is also making its way into the market in quite a big way. People

didn't know what this was before, but now they know enough to ask for it, and brands such as Sagatiba are becoming known to people.

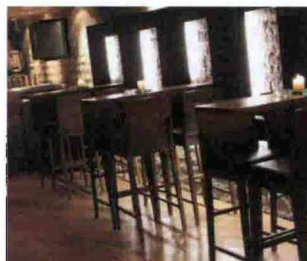
However, we're not quite at the stage where people would have it neat, although some do. I'll serve it most popularly in Caipirinha, or variations of Caipirinha. I think the cachaça market is probably where the tequila market was two years ago - it's starting to be recognised and we'll soon see a lot more products coming out and recognition of quality.

The other big thing is flavoured vodka. There are lots of new high-quality ones now in good flavours. Unlike some of the other spirits, we often serve the flavoured vodkas just as they are in a cocktail glass. We've seen some amazing products from companies such as Hanger One, which produce a Buddha's Hand Citrus vodka, but you can also make your own. There's no need to pay high prices for premium either - they might be slightly better, but you can make your own or get perfectly acceptable versions for less money.

Hot Tip: Sagatiba Cachaça



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Left to right: Jo McCanta, mixologist, SAF bar; Gustavo Bertolucci, mixologist, The Pearl; Prakash Shetty, senior barman, Cinnamon Club; Jon Dyer, manager, Popolo; and Jake Burger, owner, Jake's Bar & Grill

Below: Cinnamon Club plans to focus on new liqueurs, while Jake's Bar And Grill (far right) is tipping tequila as the next big thing

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