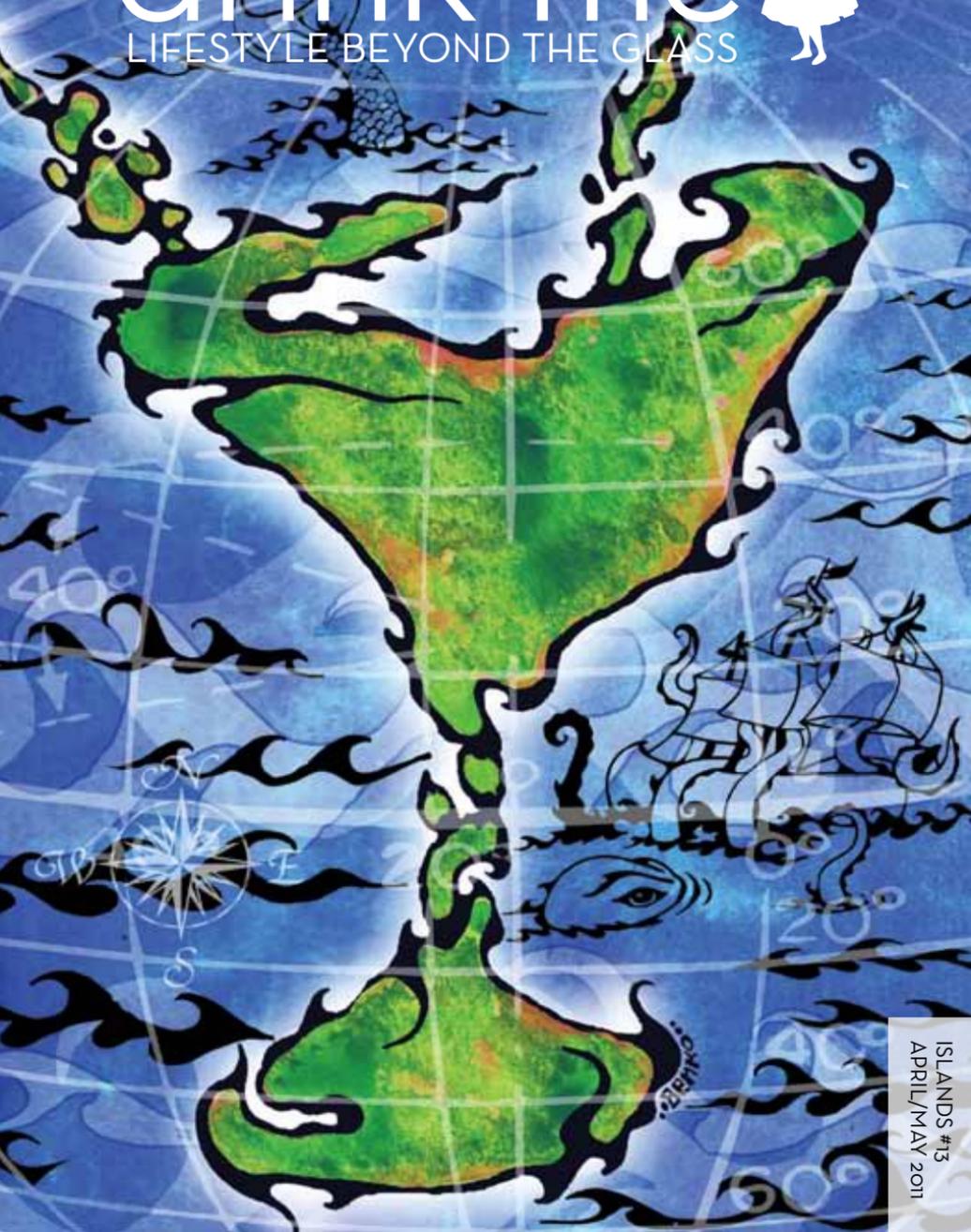


drink me

LIFESTYLE BEYOND THE GLASS



ISLANDS #13
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Making It I

Cocktail Trends of the Island





Bartending is one of the most tightly networked industries in the country, so it's often hard to distinguish between local and national trends when bartenders appropriate each other's ideas so quickly. But the Big Appletini has always been a groundbreaker in the world of libation innovation.

By M. Quinn Sweeney

I rang in the New Year with friends at Death and Company (433 E. 6th St., East Village) and was so inspired, for the next two weeks I poured my heart and soul into the arduous task of surveying the liquid landscape for signs of what's to come.

The most noticeable change is that the preciousness of cocktail bars is fading, giving way to more casual environments, featuring sturdy classics and other simple, straightforward offerings. The vogue has returned to customer experience, renewed attention to service, and a move away from deference to the bartender as infallible, mixological artist. Not once in a fortnight did I hear the old standard, "We don't serve that here," spoken through a clenched sneer. That's not to say that Red Bull and Ocean Spray have been added to any craft cocktail menus, but I did hear only apologies and humbly suggested alternatives when Vodka-Crans or Jäger Bombs were requested.

n NYC

Photo by Chris Gold



Photo by Philip Anema

That being said, culinary concocting continues, and Brooklyn is pioneering some of the most inventive drinks in the city. I had the pleasure of spending a couple evenings belled up to the bar across from Damon Boelte at Prime Meats (465 Court St., Carroll Gardens) and I became enchanted by a drink he's calling Clement's Shrub, made from cider vinegar, bourbon, cinnamon, lemon, fig preserves, and black pepper. Boelte told me, "Lately I have been working on lots of cocktails involving vinegar. The acidity and savory bite really make certain flavors and ingredients pop."

Four miles away, Dram (177 S. 4th St., Williamsburg) has pulled in an all-star staff from some of the most renowned cocktail bars in the east, to unleash the creative beasts within. Most of the staff works at Dram one or two nights a week, embracing the freedom that they may not have in their regular jobs, in what felt to me like a laid-back neighborhood bar, devoid of pretension (to some, a word that generally defines Williamsburg). This philosophy of

bringing in the best and brightest — and setting them loose — extends beyond the regular staff to feature frequent "guest bartenders" from all over the world for a one-night-stand behind the stick.

Guest bartending is a trend that has taken hold of the whole city, with many bars inviting visiting colleagues to fill a shift as "guest-tender" while in New York. Some locals are also choosing to spend their off nights at someone else's bar, where they can demonstrate the skills not given prominence at their usual gigs. Other venues are welcoming local celebrities and social media luminaries to step behind the bar, often to raise money for charity and to draw a crowd on what would otherwise be a slow Tuesday night. Fatty Johnson's (50 Carmine St., West Village), while preparing their upcoming relaunch, has had a nightly rotating cast of local and visiting bartenders, who design their own drink menu for the evening.

Another craze that seems likely to spread is draft cocktails. A few MacGyvers of mixology have voided the warranties on

their soda guns and converted them to dispense fully mixed, carbonated cocktails like a fountain soda. At El Cobre (95 Ave. A, Alphabet City), where they are all about rum, the menu includes a “Dark And Stormy On Tap” with Gosling’s Black Seal rum, lime, and CO2.

Now, rum bars may not be uncommon, and whiskey bars are ubiquitous the world over, but New York has seen several similarly single-minded spirit bars emerge on the scene. Mayahuel (304 E. 6th St., East Village) led the charge, winning “World’s Best New Cocktail Bar” at the 2010 Spirited Awards, for their broad array of agave spirits, focusing on tequila-and mezcal-based drinks. Even obscure spirits like genever, the Dutch-style gin, are stealing the spotlight. The bar at Vandaag (103 2nd Ave., East Village) offers a wide selection of genever cocktails. And with recently-legal absinthe being all the rage, Maison Premiere (298 Bedford Ave., Williamsburg) just opened to much fanfare.

Latin spirits are also continuing to gain more recognition and respect. Mezcal and rum are being featured in high-end cocktail bars, no longer relegated to budget spring break excursions, while more exotic spirits like cachaca and pisco continue to climb from obscurity, showing up at bars where they were unheard of a year ago.

Similarly rescued from oblivion, tiki bars and punch bowls have both made a resurgence. With three high-profile tiki bars opening in the last year and reinvigorating tiki tradition, Painkiller (49 Essex St., Lower East Side), Lani Kai (525 Broome St., South Village) and The Hurricane Club (360 Park Ave. S, Flatiron) are all thriving on rum, falernum and swizzle sticks. And they are crowded with an unexpectedly young

and stylish crowd, lacking the middle-aged paunch and tacky attire commonly associated to tiki.

Punch cups have also started edging martini glasses off the shelf at a number of bars, and punch bowls have become programmatic centerpieces for a few. Most recently opened, nautically themed The Drink (228 Manhattan Ave., East Williamsburg) provides a daily hot punch and cold punch by the glass, as well as several selections of full-bowl punches, combining enough spirits, mixers, and fruit for ten drinks around a big block of ice.

By the way, if you ever want an informative earful from a career bartender, suggest that all ice was created equal. Kold Draft machines make crystal clear cubes at bars all over the country, but some bars in New York are taking their ice production to new heights, like the crew at Weather Up (159 Duane St., Tribeca), who installed a \$6,000 ice machine in the basement. Originally intended for ice sculptors, it produces 300-pound, crystal-clear blocks, which are then broken down by chainsaw and shared with their two sister bars (Dutch Kills and Weather Up Brooklyn), where bartenders break them down by hand into ice for shaking cocktails as well as rocks, spears, and cracked ice.

Like cheap ice in a Mai Tai, most cocktail trends don’t last that long, or they get diluted by unskilled copycats, so stumble out there and support your urban barkeep. Before sugary drinks ending in -tini return to fashion, or your favorite bartender starts calling himself an astromixologist, serving only cocktails tuned to your star sign, and before fungal infusions become flavor of the month, make a staggering sortie to explore the New York cocktail scene before the best trends pass you by.