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TEA TIME: COCKTAILS WITH TEA TAKE OFF

BY LAURA HOLMES HADDAD

With tea sales soaring—according to the Tea Association, a trade group, Americans consumed over 50 billion servings of tea in 2005—tea has moved from the teapot to the cocktail glass. Green tea, Earl Grey, and Oolong teas are taking their place among juices, liqueurs, and other mixers in bars from New York City to Los Angeles.

In addition to more specialty tea leaves and ready-to-drink teas, tea-infused products made specifically for the bar are hitting the market. Kirk Spahn is co-founder of Tyku, a new sake-based liqueur that launched in November 2006 that lists Oolong tea as a main ingredient. "Tea, like sake, has crossed over into the non-Asian themes, so we're looking to move into steakhouses and non-Asian restaurants," he says. Spahn also mentions the familiarity factor in introducing tea-based products. "Most people know green tea, but most people don't know about Oolong tea," says Spahn. Because of its mixability, Spahn predicts that tea is here to stay. "Tea adds a base to the liqueur that counters the acidity," he says.

Three other tea-based liqueurs are also hoping to capture mixologists' attention. ZEN Green Tea Liqueur was originally launched by Allied Domecq in April 2005, but it was caught in transition due to the sale of the company. SKYY Spirits took over the brand in January 2006. Peter Gyimesi, group brand director at SKYY, sees tea as part of an overall health trend. "Just like the low-carb trend resulted in people adopting a healthier lifestyle, the same thing is happening with green tea," he says. Tea can pose challenges to bartenders in terms of flavor pairings; this is one reason why

Gyimesi's group is creating cocktail recipes using ZEN. "I think there will be an education process," notes Gyimesi. "To the average bartender and consumer it's not intuitive how to mix green tea." But he has no doubt that overall tea—and green tea in particular—is firmly entrenched in consumers' minds. "The visibility of green tea has been raised to the point where it will continue," says Gyimesi. "All the major tea companies and major on-premise beverage accounts have invested in this so I think it's here to stay."

Charbay, a distillery in Napa, California, launched their tea-infused Green Tea Vodka in summer 2005, while Qi Spirits of San Francisco, California, released a new tea liqueur called Qi to the California and New York markets in March 2006. Qi is made from Lapsang Souchong tea (a Chinese tea), fruits, spices, and brandy. An orange and white tea version called Qi White will launch in early 2007.

Bartenders and mixologists are taking advantage of the new products and creating cocktails to celebrate the ingredient. Peter Greerty, sommelier at Bong Su Restaurant & Lounge in San Francisco, has incorporated Earl Grey tea into the Earl Grey Boxcar, infusing Bacardi rum with Earl Grey tea leaves. Greerty points to the restaurant's high-end Vietnamese cuisine as inspiration for the drink.

"We were looking for an Asian ingredient and tea is one of the most popular Asian ingredients," says



Greerty. He is also exploring recipes made with Charbay's Green Tea Vodka. "I think tea will become a more trendy ingredient in cocktails if vodka and liquor companies make more tea-infused products," he says.

At Taj Lounge in New York City, the Indian Rose is a big hit with customers, a blend of rosebud tea gin, rose syrup, lemon, and Champagne. On the West Coast, Angelene Parr, bar manager at Junnoon restaurant in Palo Alto, California, has created the Drunken Darjeeling, named after the famous tea. Parr says her next inspiration will come from Qi.

Mixologist Duggan McDonnell has experimented with several types of tea, including green tea, chamomile, hibiscus, and peach-ginger as well as ZEN and Qi



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liqueurs. "Teas are a natural choice for mixologists when creating new cocktails," says McDonnell. "Plus, because there is such a huge range of tea flavors out there, using tea opens a whole new realm of creative possibilities for mixologists. Tea is a liquid, just like gin or juice or puree or any flavored syrup." The one aspect of tea that is important to pay attention to, says McDonnell, is the chance of oversteeping, which leads to bitterness.

"The idea of tea does seem to attract people, but only the ones who don't really like sweet fruity cocktails to begin with," says Genevieve Robertson of Falstaff restaurant in San Francisco, another mixologist experimenting with teas. Over the past two years the restaurant has offered tea-based cocktails such as a Pear Green Tea Martini, made from vodka, chilled brewed green tea, and pear puree, and the Frais du Bois Martini, made from vodka infused with wild strawberry green tea and strawberry syrup. Robertson has used both tea liqueurs and herbal teas but finds the tannins in herbal teas more challenging to work with. Regardless, it's an ingredient that will stay behind her bar. "I don't really see tea as a trend so much, but instead as the gourmet cocktail," says Robertson. "I plan to continue to play with it, especially as we go into the colder months. Tea flavors work really well with winter spices and fruits and with hot drinks too." ■

Goodnight Ginger

Recipe courtesy of
Numi Organic Tea



2 oz. Square One Organic Vodka
infused with Numi Chamomile
Lemon Myrtle Teasans
2 oz. Trader Joe's Ginger Lemonade
Juice of 1/2 lemon
1/8 tsp. Fresh Grated Ginger
1/2oz. Madhava Organic
Agave Nectar
Splash of Vya Extra-Dry Vermouth

Put all ingredients in a cocktail shaker with crushed ice. Shake vigorously for 15 seconds. Strain into a martini glass and garnish with a lemon twist.



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