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The hottest drinks in Napa right now? Cocktails

By Chris Macias
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If you've imbibed in Napa over the past year, chances are you've sipped from a highball glass or a coupe along with the standard Riedel stemware. Napa has emerged as a hot spot for spirits with a rush of new [craft cocktail bars](#) opening since 2022.

They range from tropical tiki styles to cocktail programs focused specifically on gin or Mexican spirits. Others offer a Napa spin on the classics, with ingredients sourced from local farms and a culinary approach in their execution. Much of this cocktail activity blooms downtown, where a new Napa nightlife has emerged with foot traffic following concerts at the Uptown Theater, Blue Note Napa and Oxbow River Stage.

For Jose Mendez, a Napa native and fierce cocktail enthusiast (he converted his garage into a full-fledged tiki lounge), this spirits renaissance in Wine Country couldn't be more appreciated. He remembers when downtown was very much a dead zone, especially in terms of finding a quality cocktail.

Now, you'll find him posted up at new bars like Chispa. This downtown spot opened in August from co-owner Aubrey Bailey, a former French Laundry sommelier who also oversees Cadet Wine & Beer Bar down the block. But instead of single-vineyard Pinot Noir and tastings of Pliny the Younger, it's all about Tequila and Mezcal at Chispa.

"At the end of the day, you don't want more wine if you've been wine tasting all day," said Mendez, in between sips of a Mezcal-based Negroni. "The tannins build up. It's just nice to have a variety of things, like the cocktail I'm having now."

Cocktails are unlikely to become the new Cabernet Sauvignon as Napa's drink of choice. But are they already more in demand than Cabernet Franc?

That would seem to be the case on a recent Saturday night at the Fink, a cocktail bar adjacent to the Napa River Inn that opened in July. The bar is named after owner Judd Finkelstein, who was raised in Napa's wine industry and the namesake of Judd's Hill Winery, founded by his parents in the mid-1970s.

But it's all about cocktails for Finkelstein, a true Napa character in his chunky Buddy Holly-styled glasses and seersucker suits. Drop into the Fink and you'll find a refurbished boathouse that's packed with locals and tourists sipping cocktails like the Axolotl, a bright blend of blanco Tequila, elderflower, lime, celery juice and a splash of celery bitters.

"Napa isn't just drawing wine lovers now," said Finkelstein. "It's a destination unto itself. It's a beautiful place with great restaurants and a lot to do. I feel that everything is here (for Napa) to be known as a traveler's cocktail destination."

Napa's cocktail movement has been bubbling up for the better part of two decades. In 2003, Finkelstein founded the Friends of Ardent Mixology (FOAM), a cocktail appreciation society in Napa. They held regular tasting events and invited guests such as Martin Cate, the founder of rum bar Smuggler's Cove in San Francisco, to get schooled on cocktail history and techniques.

"I always enjoyed cooking and playing with ingredients," said Finkelstein. "I also had the appreciation of balance and complexity with my wine background. With cocktails, there's instant results. You could get creative and play around."

The local spirits scene was boosted with the opening of Napa Valley Distillery, which produced its first batch of spirits in 2009. Napa Valley Distillery is a longtime fixture of Oxbow Public Market with its bottled cocktails and bar accessories. The distillery itself, located in an industrial stretch of downtown Napa, is home to the Hollywood Room, which includes a bar and live music. In 2022, the team opened ArBaretum, a bustling downtown spot with spirits tasting and cocktails.

"I think Napa can become a California center of cocktails," said Arthur Hartunian, founder of Napa Valley Distillery. "Why not? It's all about food and wine here. I love martinis, but it's not just about that anymore. The mixologists and bar owners, they're going beyond a regular martini and really adding different flavors."

In a sense, Napa is finally staking its claim into a craft cocktail movement that's evolved since the late-1980s, with the Rainbow Room in New York among its pioneers. Spots like Bourbon & Branch in San Francisco and Manhattan's Death & Co. continued the momentum with an emphasis on artisanal ingredients, curated spirits and a deep reverence for cocktail history and its craftsmanship — often while pushing the envelope with chef-like techniques.

Napa was certainly well primed for its own renaissance. The region has already been awash with alcohol for a half-century as its modern wine industry was established. Meanwhile, the valley's culinary sensibilities play well with the crafty side of cocktails in terms of recipes and sourcing ingredients.

ZuZu takes an oenophile's approach to its gin-focused bar program that launched in late 2022. Earlier this year, owner Mick Salyer also opened the Bitter Bar inside Hank's Takeaway, which is located next door in the space that once housed the classic Napa dive bar Henry's.

But it's all about gin at ZuZu, with house-made tonics that rotate monthly and a gin menu that's divided between "juniper," "citrus," "botanical" and "earth and sea."

"Gin is terroir driven and this plays deep into what's going on in Napa," said Salyer. "Regionally, you can see all the gins popping up in California and they're interesting."

And the role of bartenders is increasingly similar to chefs, he added. "Our bar manager works with the chef and says, 'Hey what do you have coming in today?' We have all these micro-farmers that we as a restaurant get, so we re-purpose that into (the cocktail program)," Salyer said. "People are having a culinary experience with cocktails and there are some really serious bartenders in Napa right now."

One of those would be Kayla Mays, bar manager of Folklore, a hybrid bar and record shop on Third St. Beyond its wine program, which includes more than 250 bottles and has [one of Napa Valley's most exciting wine lists](#), it also features more than 20 classic cocktails.

Among the offerings are "Kayla's Concoctions," a trust-your-chef kind of drink that changes to Mays' liking. On a recent night, as the nearby streets were packed with a Dia de los Muertos festival, that concoction was her Ojos de Tigre: Patron reposado, Becherovka herbal liqueur, lemon, mole bitters, sugar and egg white.

"Napa is booming," said Mays, while surveying the foot traffic outside Folklore. "Places are opening up right and left. I'm like, where do I go first?"

Now, efforts are being made to better organize the key players in Napa's cocktail renaissance. There's talk of starting a "Napa Valley Cocktail Week" to spotlight establishments and bring in mixologists from around the world.

Hartunian thinks this new wave of cocktails is just the beginning, that Napa has the potential to be the "New Orleans of the North Coast."

"People come here to taste, touch and experience and experience new flavors and textures," said Hartunian. "We have an opportunity here if we do it right."