

FOOD SPECIAL

HOT SAUCE?!

Taste jalapeño and amari in your swirl? Oh yes, you will!

BY KELLY A. MAGYARICS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY POWERS AND CREWE

A twist of the pepper mill renders mesclun with moxy and a dash of curry spices turns a stew into a vitrolon. But these days, flavor goes beyond the fork. DC's spiciest mix masters are raiding the spice racks and tilling alongside chefs as they create zesty concoctions that keep spice on the front burner—and in the cocktail shaker.

"Pepper as a spice and source of heat is now making a mark in cocktails," says spirits genius Gina Cherevart of Eatbar. Even black pepper gains A-list status when sipped smartly.

The wine world's version of black pepper-in-a-glass is a Northern Rhône Syrah—the motivation for one of Jill Zimonski's inventive creations at Café Atlantico. "Syrah's distinctive aromas and flavors might make for a tasty new drink, I imagined." Her Faux Syrah, Syrah is a wine cocktail—without the wine. Zimonski starts with Hangar One Vodka, a spirit distilled in part from Vigneter grapes, the same white varietal that brings a floral whiff to Rhône reds. Blackberry puree, a smoke-infused syrup and ground black pepper pull off the fakery, and the drink is rimmed with crushed candied violets (another Rhône stamp). Does this swirl appeal to everyone? Maybe or maybe not. But Zimonski says that's the point. "It's unique and inspired without forcing the concept," she says.

Pepper in other forms is finding a way into drinks. Cherevart sprinkles white pepper in her watermelon martini. She stirs a mango cocktail with her new favorite, red pepper flakes, leaving lips begging for mercy—or begging for more.

"Being from Texas, I love anything spicy," explains PS 7's Tiffany Short, who represents part of DC's Southwest cocktail contingent. She gravitates toward may cabinet concoctions. Her diabolical El Diablo blends spicy 1800 tequila, guajillo peppers, cilantro and muddled lime.

To advance herbs and spices from the pantry shelf to the bar, Restaurant Eve and PX cocktail guru Todd Thrasher advocates a little culinary thievery. "Look at what the chef is doing—and take his ideas" he says. Nag's ace mix man, Calen Johnson, also cites kitchen collaborations as fuel for libation inspirations. But why stop at the kitchen when you can plunder the garden? Oyamel's Will Earls applies the farmers market mantra. He buys seasonally, locally and organically to keep his lips hip.



Eatbar's BEC blends blood orange, tequila, Serrano, lime, and a pinch of amari.

white peach-based Hot Fuzz, rather than relying on one of the countless manufactured varieties. Over the counter just doesn't raise the bar.

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Earls's Old Fire Syrah.



PS 7's Peachy with amari and.



Café Atlantico's Faux Syrah.

"People are either skeptical or eager about spicy cocktails. The skeptical ones are converted quite easily."

—Calen Johnson, master mixologist at Nag's

Investive minds rarely rest, as this crew of hot cocktailologists prove. Oyamel's Earls spends his spare time testing the waters. The Lone Star State roots and Mexican journeys explain his penchant for piñatas, ancho and chipotles. One two-bulbion teaser sports fire-roasted jalapeños and bell peppers, piñata-infused V&B juice, pepper vodka and a pickled cactus pad tupper. "I use my friends as guinea pigs, because they won't lie," he says. This drink remains in the lab.

Toting her notebook, Cherevart is at the ready when inspiration strikes. Case in point: An improvising gathering led to her blue cheese and chocolate-flavored St. Peter's Dental. At Eatbar, she has cocktail carte blanche and loyal fans.

Cherevart's tricked-out take on the classic champagne cocktail catches a bitter-splashed sugar cube for a shower of candied horseradish and a dose of horseradish syrup. The kooky root adds an irresistible seamy element to the bubbles, and the drink makes Mimosas unrecognizable.

But some sips that hit the tumbler become stumblers. Zimonski has encountered some crazy stuff, like fennel and galangal concoctions. "Some week, some are scary," she says. Turmeric is a medicinal no-no to Cherevart, who is stamped by curry leaves but loves their nutty flavor and uses to plod on. Thrasher takes a bolder, all-inclusive approach and believes any spice can work—with the right drink.

How do gourmands react when mixologists piggy-back their palate with ingredients that have migrated from their entree to the glass? They clamor for more! Cherevart has a nam, cumin, pineapple and vanilla soda cooler in the works. Johnson will turn up the heat with a jalapeño and habanero infusion. Thrasher uses serrano chile in his PawPaw and cardamom in his Lou Brown.

Zimonski's new menu is in development, but she hints at farm-fresh herbal surprises. "I love the use of spices and herbs in cocktails," she says. So do we. At the boundary between kitchen and bar, evaporation like pepper smoke, it's time to savor the trend that rocks the sauce. ■

DRINK! CIRCLE UP! Frilly (1111 New Hampshire Ave., NW, www.frilly-dc.com) Nag's (1600 Rhode Island Ave., NW, www.nags-ht.com) PINNY QUARTER, Café Atlantico (405 9th St., NW, www.caféatlantico.com) Oyamel (401 7th St., NW, www.oyamel.com) PS 7 (1717 St., NW, www.ps7restaurant.com) ARIANACTUS Eatbar (2164 Washington Blvd., www.eat-bar.com) OLD TOWN ALEXANDRIA, Restaurant Eve (110 South Pitt St., www.restauranteve.com) PX (728 King St.)