



A NEW TWIST ON TONIC

By Alia Akkam

Shaking up quality cocktails is undoubtedly one of the biggest—and most exciting—trends we’ve seen in mixology over the past several years. These days, the emphasis is on premium liquors and precisely crafted drinks instead of thoughtless, pre-made concoctions. It seems bizarre then, that while bar chefs are hard at work blending their purees made with local fruit and experimenting with exotic infusions, they’ve had such limited options when it comes to the tonic water to mix their ingenious libations with. Now that we’re in the thick of breezy gin and vodka tonic season, it’s also refreshing to see how the tonic water market is finally making way for the artisanal and inventive brands brilliant cocktails deserve.



While newfangled cocktails may be catchy, the truth is classic gin & tonics and vodka & tonics are reliable and refreshing, among the most popular libations ordered at a bar. This means, tonic waters aren’t just the simple mixer some might think. Via a premium tonic water, one can attract a broader base of customers and continue gin and vodka’s steady growth. Mixologists may be getting more creative by the day, but there’s a reason unfussy gin and vodka tonics are so well-loved; raising the bar on tonic waters can only help sustain that trend.

At The Bank Restaurant & Wine Bar in Spring Green, WI, executive chef and GM James Jens likes introducing his customers to bottles of Fever-Tree tonic water, a British import. “I’m a gin and tonic

JETSET TONIC

Like most product categories, there's room in the tonic market for niche brands. Jetset might be a tonic water, but it's also an energy drink, featuring guarana, ginseng, taurine and caffeine. An alternative to Red Bull, it's designed to capture the 21-30 demographic, those who are more likely to need their energy to pack in a few extra hours celebrating.

"Jetset offers options that other energy drinks don't," says founder Jeff Silver. "With Jetset you can have the mixed drink of your choice without having to rely on Red Bull to give you a pick-up in the middle of the night. Jetset is its own little niche within the energy drink industry."

To build awareness of the brand, Jetset has been



A "Jetset Girl" making appearances at special events



partnering with mixologists from Southern Wine & Spirits to create energy drink menus using the full spectrum of Jetset's mixers, including original, diet original, club soda and ginger ale. "At several of our bars and nightclubs in San Francisco, "Jetset Girls" are

on hand, dressed as sexy flight attendants serving Jetset energy mixers at the tables," notes Silver. "We want the image of a more sophisticated premium energy drink. Jetset is more geared towards high-end bottle service as opposed to something to chug before playing sports."



drinker and it's the first tonic I like as much as, or more than, some gins," he says. "It makes good gins even better." Jens thinks using a tonic water like Fever-Tree adds a classy element to The Bank. "Will it attract customers to the restaurant? Hopefully. But, it's going to get people to remember. They're just amazed we're pushing tonic."

Jonny Raglin, bar manager at San Francisco's Absinthe Brasserie & Bar is also excited about this new development in cocktail culture. "Great ingredients make great cocktails, so it's also great tonic water has come along for the ride," he says. Raglin removed the bar's soda guns a while back and turned to Schweppes' Indian tonic water imported from Europe as an alternative. When that proved too difficult to source regularly, he discovered Fever-Tree, available in the U.S.

"When you compare it to other brands, you suddenly realize the difference," says Tim Warrillow, co-founder of Fever-Tree, which also includes a ginger ale made with fresh green ginger from Ecuador, bitter lemon and club soda mixers. "That was the very reason we started the company. Until we launched, no one had done more with tonic waters. Spirits had been on this resurgence, yet no one was even considering the mixers. That status quo suited the big brands."



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Warrillow, who has a background in food marketing and advertising, launched Fever-Tree in 2005 with Charles Rolls, who was responsible for resuscitating the Plymouth gin brand. After spending months researching quinine, the anti-malarial agent that is tonic water's defining ingredient, Warrillow and Rolls settled on Cinchona bark from the Rwanda-Congo border. "We've looked at

every aspect of it in terms of ingredients. I wanted a tonic water that allowed you to taste the spirit through it, not dominate. We've made a light, complex flavor by leaving out ingredients like fructose syrups," Warrillow explains.

Brooklyn, NY-based Jordan Silbert is another artisanal tonic pioneer. The inspiration for Silbert's Q Tonic stems from his own desire to sip a cocktail mixed

with something a little more dynamic than the usual grocery store selections. After drinking a gin and tonic with "pretty good gin and pretty bad tonic," leaving his teeth feeling sticky, he decided to change the market; he left his job as the director of rebuilding initiatives at New York City's Downtown Alliance and launched Q Tonic a little over a year ago. His product is differentiated by using qui-

MODERN RECIPE



As thrilled as restaurants and bars are to see a crop of new tonic waters on the market, for some ambitious mixologists, only homemade tonic water will do.

Greg Best, bartender at Atlanta's **RESTAURANT EUGENE** and **HOLEMAN** and **FINCH PUBLIC HOUSE**, where he's also operating partner, makes his own tonic water, despite the challenges of obtaining quinine. "Making tonic has become a cult; it's fun to make your own," Best says. "For the first six months, people wouldn't even try it, and they would ask, 'where's the real tonic?'" he adds with a laugh. Now, Best says they're raving about his creation that doesn't feature the usual high fructose corn syrups. "People are just

much more green and sustainable-minded," he points out.

At **CUSTOM HOUSE**, the latest venture from Chicago's Spring Restaurant Group, consultant Tim Lacey developed his own tonic water, the only one used at the restaurant. Instead of just offering wine flights, Custom House offers gin and tonic flights. Flavor profiles are all different, progressing from lighter and more angular to fuller and rounder. The House G&T is North Shore#11 with house tonic; the Sage G&T combines Martin Miller's gin with tonic shaken with fresh sage; and the Falernum, with North Shore#6, uses tonic flavored with almonds, cloves and Rhum Clement.

Daniel Shoemaker, co-owner of Portland, OR's **TEARDROP LOUNGE**, where every mixer is crafted in-house, makes his own tonic with powdered Peruvian Cinchona bark to ideally pair with London dry gin. Interestingly, he also adds Champagne yeast, and serves it in a distinctive brewer's bottle. His customers love his dryer, more pronounced version so much, the commercial tonic water he once



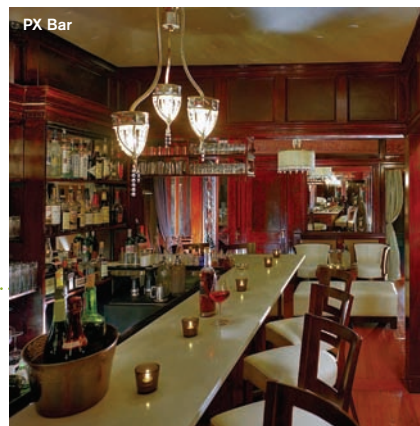
Restaurant Eugene

bought is now just "gathering dust."

Back in 2004, before artisanal brands hit the market, Alexandria, VA-based Todd Thrasher, GM, sommelier and drink maker at **RESTAURANT EVE**; partner and "liquid savant" at **PX**; and partner and drink maker at **THE MAJESTIC**, started making his own tonic and even tonic ice cubes. Made with three types of citrus, he deems the citrus bite his tonic's best quality. "It's almost savory," he points out. "If you can do it yourself, why not make it?"



Custom House



PX Bar



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nine derived from Peruvian bark—the result of constant experimentation in his home kitchen. “It’s where quinine comes from,” Silbert points out. “Officers would mix it with gin and sit on the veranda with it.” Q also differs from other tonic waters in that it shuns cane sugar for natural organic agave sweetening instead. Silbert believes his clean-tasting tonic truly showcases the spirit. “It enables you to differentiate between say, Hendrick’s, Plymouth and Junipero gins,” he points out.

At L’Impero, an elegant Italian restaurant in New York’s Tudor City, sommelier Levi Dalton uses Q as the house tonic for vodka and gin tonics. Although he likes using a product from a local company, he also appreciates Q’s complexity. “It actually tastes good. It’s something I would drink on its own,” he notes. “The gin and tonics taste much better.”

Downtown, at the trendy Bobo in the West Village, Q even makes its way into cocktails more creative than standard gin and tonics. The Garden Tonic features Q alongside Plymouth gin, maraschino liqueur, celery bitters and cucumber and lime.

“I like its effervescence,” says bar manager Jerry Solomon. “People are still on the gun, but I’m a believer of individual bottles to keep the product consistent.”

Another brand of tonic water on the market is the one from Stirrings, which first started shipping their product in 2006 and is made with Cinchona bar extract, cane sugar and triple-filtered water. “We produce the soda in a way that gives it what we call “Champagne-like” carbonation, a finer bubble that better complements spirits and finishes cleaner,” says Mauro Pennella, chief marketing officer.

Pennella believes that introducing Stirrings to bartenders is a pivotal way of attracting consumers.



“We have grown our presence at bars and restaurants primarily through trial. Once they see that the taste and quality are there, the restaurant managers can get excited about the increased efficiency, consistency and value that Stirrings provides. It’s an easy sell once the bartender tries it, and a cost effective way to upgrade their consumers’ experience,” he says.

According to Pennella, another appealing aspect of Stirrings, whose cocktail soda line-up also includes bitter lemon, tart cranberry, pink grapefruit, club soda and ginger ale, is that the bottle means table service is one option. Consumers can mix in the amount in they prefer.

With a fairly significant cost of entry, Pennella says he isn’t worried about competition: “We look to find what’s emerging in terms of consumer taste and a way to bottle it, deliciously. We also look at what the staples behind the bar are now—like tonic, bitters or grenadine—and find room for improvement. In the end, it’s all about providing people with better ingredients, to empower them to make better cocktails in a very intuitive, simple, but in the end, magical way.” ■

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