

where's your holiday menu?

by tony abou-ganim



Tony Abou-Ganim is the proprietor of the Modern Mixologist, a beverage consulting firm that specializes in bar staff training, product education, and cocktail development. He and his recipes have been featured in a variety of magazines and books and on television and radio shows. He is presently at work on his first book, *The Modern Mixologist*.

I first put together a specialty holiday menu in 1995 when I was at Harry Denton's Starlight Room in San Francisco. But I can't take credit for pioneering this practice. I acquired the wonderful custom of featuring the special drinks of the season from my cousin, Helen David, who has reigned behind the stick for the past 67 years at the Brass Rail Bar in Port Huron, Michigan. Every year as Thanksgiving approaches, Helen breaks out her three commercial mixers and whips up the classic cold-weather warmer: the Tom & Jerry. She keeps the mixers spinning until New Year's Day, and people come from all over the country to share some good cheer along with a couple of mugs of Helen's brew. Many say that it just wouldn't be the holidays without Tom & Jerry's at the Rail.

LOST LEGACY

Unfortunately, the ritual of featuring a specialty drink menu during the holidays has gone the way of seasonal drinks such as the Tom & Jerry. This lost tradition underscores a missed opportunity of huge proportions. At one time in this country, nearly every saloon would feature something special for their guests during the holidays. Be it hot buttered rum, egg nog, mulled wine, or glogg, a classic libation would surely warm you up and help put you in the holiday spirit. These distinctive drinks lend good cheer to your establishment and the guests who frequent it, and they also are a great source of revenue. I'd guess that Helen does more business during those three weeks than at any time during the rest of the year (except maybe Boat Night and my Uncle Charlie's birthday).

SEASONAL SPECIALS

But what about other holidays and special events? Take the Kentucky Derby, for example. I started serving the classic Mint Julep at the sports book inside the Bellagio in 1999, and business grew each year as more and more of our guests looked forward to returning for the race and enjoying a couple of juleps. It's hard to say for sure whether they

came back just to bet on the Derby or for my Mint Juleps, but I like to think that it was a little of both.

And don't overlook other horse-racing opportunities such as serving the Black-Eyed Susan when the Preakness is running at Pimlico or Max Allen Jr.'s Kentucky Longshot for the Breeders' Cup. How many people know that the Pimm's Cup is the official drink of Wimbledon? These are all another great opportunity to embrace a time-honored tradition that will enhance your guests' experience while also turning them on to a wonderful classic libation.

Does your establishment serve a great Irish coffee to celebrate Saint Patty's Day? Is your staff equipped with the right glassware, freshly brewed coffee, hand-whipped cream, and a selection of Irish whiskeys? Have you heard of the Beau Vista in San Francisco and have you researched the drink's history? This is a very simple way to acknowledge the holiday, improve your guests' experience, and generate additional revenue.

CREATIONS BUILD TRADITIONS

Here's another thought: As my friends Gary and Mardee Regan did with their St. Patrick's Day Dubliner, why not develop your own special cocktails to celebrate an occasion? This is a terrific opening to excite your bar staff and involve them in creating signature cocktails that will be featured on your specialty holiday menus.

Whether resurrecting a classic like hot buttered rum or creating your own classic like the Dubliner, generating enthusiasm among your staff to promote them and sparking an interest in your patrons to taste them takes energy and perseverance. Building a tradition does not happen overnight, but like anything good, it's well worth the time and effort.

Your holiday menu is an excellent chance to give your guests something else to look forward to each year. Who knows? In 67 years or so, you may be serving your current guests' grandchildren Tom & Jerries or your own creations as part of their holiday tradition.