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Classic cocktails are making a comeback

Whether it's a Sidecar, a Sazerac, a Manhattan or a Monkey Gland, classic cocktails are back in style

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Written by Jolene Ketzenberger

Whether it's a Sidecar, a Sazerac, a Manhattan or a Monkey Gland, classic cocktails have made a comeback.

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And by cocktails, we don't mean a rum and Coke -- unless you add lime juice, a dash of bitters and call it a Cuba Libre, a drink said to have been invented in Cuba around 1900.

That pre-Prohibition era -- before 1920 when the 18th Amendment began prohibiting the manufacture and sale of alcohol -- has provided plenty of inspiration for today's bartenders, or "mixologists," in creating new drinks or adapting old ones.

And it's those old ones that are causing a stir, as cocktail fans cast aside their cosmos and appletinis in favor of new-again classics.

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According to Nation's Restaurant News, spirit sales were expected to be up slightly this year, particularly in such categories as high-end gins and bourbons and in what the trade journal called "retro cocktails."

Local bar owner Zach Wilks of Ball and Biscuit, 331 Massachusetts Ave., said

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today's growing interest in food has prompted increased interest in cocktails.

While he is inspired by such world-class cocktail bars as the Zig Zag Cafe in Seattle, Employees Only in New York City and The Violet Hour in Chicago, he credits local chefs for the interest in Indianapolis.

"I've drawn a lot of influence from them," said Wilks.

And just as chefs combine flavors on a plate, today's bartenders do the same in a glass.

Erin Edds, founder and co-owner of Hoosier Momma Bloody Mary Maker, attended Tales of the Cocktail, an industry event this summer in New Orleans, where layering in cocktails was the big trend.

"As we are experiencing in our own city, chef-inspired cocktails are huge right now," said Edds. "Layering flavors in cocktails is now as important as the layers of flavor in a composed dish."

Wilks, who also attended the Tales of the Cocktail event, noted the trend, too.

"That's exactly what we do," he said, adding that the bar makes its own syrups, grenadines, bitters, sour mixes and more. "We're completely scratch."

The Ball and Biscuit also ages some of its cocktails to add more flavors, said Wilks. His barrel-aged Negroni, a combination of gin, Campari and sweet vermouth, is ready now, he said. The night before Thanksgiving, aged Sazeracs and Old-Fashioneds will be available as well.

At Iozzo's Garden of Italy restaurant, 946 S. Meridian St., mixologist Phil Cummings will have a barrel-aged Negroni ready in about a month.

Barrel-aging "totally changes the complexity of the drink," said Cummings, and adds "hints of vanilla and cinnamon."

His Negroni, said Cummings, is less bitter than the traditional version made with Campari. Iozzo's uses Cocchi Americano, an Italian aperitivo.

"A lot of people don't get into the bitter cocktails a lot," said Cummings. "We were looking for something unique and different."

And that's just what you get with the revamped classics and new creations in such local bars as Wilks' Ball and Biscuit or chef Neal Brown's The Libertine, 38 E. Washington St.

Wilks is quick to note, however, that customers can still order that rum and Coke or gin and tonic -- or ask for advice on trying something new.

"We want to be very welcoming," he said. "If they don't know what they want, we help people figure it out."

A Sidecar, for example, made with cognac, Cointreau, fresh lemon



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juice and simple syrup, might appeal to a fan of citrus flavors. An Old-Fashioned -- made with rye whiskey, is a more "spirit forward" drink.

But whatever the ingredient, today's "culinary bartenders," said Edds, are showing off their creativity, and the public is taking notice.

Tim Laird, an entertaining expert with wine and spirits [company](#) Brown-Forman, said creativity is part of the retro cocktail trend. He was in town recently for The Science Behind the Cocktail, a program at the Eiteljorg Museum.

"Shows like 'Mad Men' show cocktails in a social, fun way," Laird said.

Cocktail culture has indeed taken a page out the past, says Robert Schnakenberg, author of "Old Man Drinks" (Quirk Books, \$14.95).

"Retro is in, and everything old is new again," says Schnakenberg in the 2010 book, "or at least new in the eyes of discriminating drinkers eager to take their style cues from 1960 advertising executives, hardboiled private eyes, Jazz-era nightclub denizens and other icons of our distant past."

Call Star reporter Jolene Ketzenberger at (317) 444-6755.

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