

# Beverage Trends — Experts Predict The Next Big Thing



Forecasting mega-trends before they hit is like knowing next month's stock quotes. It's an open invitation to financial success. The difficult thing about predicting social trends is the imperceptible pace at which they unfold. You might occasionally catch a whiff of change in the air or notice a telltale sign that something might be afoot, but more often than not it takes an aerial view to really see what's going on. A pity we're not all pilots.

Knowing what lies in wait for us just around the corner would certainly make our business less precarious. What spirits are on the rise and which are cooling off? Are drink prices and portion sizes going to continue rising or has the mega-size trend peaked? With our crystal ball out for repair, we posed these questions to some of the country's leading beverage authorities. Fortunately for us they answered their phones.

Admittedly you don't need a functioning crystal ball to divine that vodka remains America's spirit of choice; accounting for more than 27% of all liquor sold in the United States, up an impressive 6.7% from 2006. Rum and tequila also continue their winning ways. According to Beverage Information Group, sales of rum last year increased 5.1%, making it now the second largest category of spirits in the country. Tequila grew a vigorous 9.4%, with much of the increases being within the super- and ultra-premium segments, both of which grew at double-digit rates.

The question on the minds of many is how much longer will America's fascination with vodka last? Were vodka to lose its hold on consumers, what spirit category would be the biggest beneficiary? And what about the avalanche of flavored vodkas? When is enough enough?

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## What's Next For Cocktails?

"I think America is far from finished with its fascination with vodka; in fact, it's what people drink when they don't want to think about what to drink, when they don't want to be challenged," contends New Yorker Toby Cecchini, author, wine/spirits journalist, and owner of the recently-defunct bar, Passerby. "There's a compelling dichotomy regarding the perception of vodka between the cognoscenti, who now dismiss it as an overly simplistic spirit, and the general public, who just want to drink something non-threatening and can't purchase it fast enough."

"However, were a spirit category to cut into vodka's lead, I'd put my money on gin. It is, after all, just vodka redistilled with botanicals. With the new small batch and upper tier gins coming out, I think it's a bankable trend."

Robert Hess, founder of [DrinkBoy.com](http://DrinkBoy.com), and the host/executive producer of "The Cocktail Spirit" on [SmallScreenNetwork.com](http://SmallScreenNetwork.com), agrees that vodka's reign is far from over, and that gin is on the sidelines just waiting for the right time to make its mark.

"Mixed in a cocktail is where gin really shines. I frequently serve gin-based drinks to people who claim they loathe the spirit. Invariably it turns out that they really enjoy gin's wonderful combination of spices and aromatics, and that it was the liquor's taste when sampled neat they weren't fond of."

However, several of the experts interviewed believe that vodka's best days are behind it. "The category isn't on life support, but its expansion has already slowed," says Ted Haigh, drinks author and a curator at New Orleans' Museum of the American Cocktail. "I'm seeing traditional Polish and Russian herbal-flavored vodkas—such as *Jarzebiak* and *Zubrówka*—attracting consumer interest and growing demand. I think they're a bankable trend."

Spirits judge and internationally renowned mixologist Jacques Bezuidenhout also thinks that the vodka craze has peaked. "Backbar space is an invaluable commodity and none of the bar managers or beverage operators I know are willing to commit any more space to marketing vodkas and flavored vodkas. That marks the beginning of the end of the trend."

Drinking patterns are interesting things. In the 1980s, time-compressed and over-committed Americans slammed shooters of every imaginable color in a rush to relax. While still time-compressed and over-committed, we as a society have acclimated by allowing ourselves small indulgences, such as springing for a few high-end Martinis now and then and thus the return of the cocktail culture.

Mixologists have met rising consumer demand with increasingly more engaging libations, a mega-trend turned incandescent by last century's tour de force, the Cosmopolitan. Curious, we asked our experts whether it's still possible for a drink to spark the same kind of widespread frenzy as the Cosmo? And if so, what cocktail might that be.

Seattle-based drinks authority Robert Hess believes the Cosmopolitan was a once in a lifetime lightning strike. "I want to think that the next drink trend is one of 'historical rediscovery,' in which venerable cocktails such as the **Last Word**, **Bijou**, and **Japanese** make a return to the mainstream. **The Aviation** is the first 'lost' classic to make the rounds across the country. There are scores of forgotten cocktails out there which are worth rediscovery."

Who better to ask about the Cosmopolitan than the guy who invented it? Author of *Cosmopolitan, A Bartender's Life*, Toby Cecchini is convinced another cocktail phenom is poised for immortality. Topping his list of candidates is the **Bramble**, a classy British import he insists is as much of a liquid staple in England as the Cosmopolitan here. Created by famed mixologist Dick Bradsell, the cocktail is made with gin, fresh lemon sour, and crème de mûre (blackberry liqueur). Adds Cecchini, "The drink is deceptively delicious and quickly became a hugely popular call at our bar."

After several trips to the London Bar Show, Cecchini now believes England is where to look for evolving trends. He cites as an example Tiki bars, which have been dominating the London scene for several years and are now spreading through New York.

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In complete agreement about the return of Tiki bars and their trademark tropical drinks is Simon Ford, veteran London bar operator and brand relations manager for *Plymouth Gin*, *Cruzan Rums* and *LEVEL* by Absolut. “Tiki is the next great era to be rediscovered in the U.S. These bars are hip, lively and non-threatening, all of which are essential components for longevity. And as for Tiki drinks, they’re tall, fun and unpretentious. It’s a marvelously engaging concept whose time has come again.”

Ford also predicts a surge in demand for cocktails featuring low-carbon footprints; “green” drinks prepared using organic, locally sourced produce. He points to the increasing number of organic spirits on the market, and believes that seasonal bar menus and specialty cocktails loaded with fresh ingredients is another beverage trend with legs.

## Portion And Pricing Trends

It seems that increasingly more bars and lounges are scaling back the liquor portions in their drinks. Could it be that the widespread practice of serving Big Gulp Martinis will soon be a thing of the past? Might there again be a time when the cost of a well-crafted cocktail drops below the price of platinum?

Mixologist Jacques Bezuidenhout sees early indications of a downsizing trend. “And it’s about time too. What’s more ridiculous than 10-ounce Martinis? They’re bad for business and bad for our guests. I think all bars should start stocking smaller glassware, serve appropriately sized cocktails and charge accordingly. In the long run the bar will make more money.”

Cecchini thinks the public’s heightened social awareness may gradually bring about a reduction in drink sizes. “It’s apparent that people are assimilating the message about moderation, which hopefully will soon bring about the end of lukewarm, aquarium-size Martinis. That being said, I don’t think the price of a drink is bound to go down, ever.”

Disproportionately large drinks, like all-you-can-eat buffets, are wrong on so many levels, contends Robert Hess. In addition to being excessively potent, oversized cocktails lose their chill well before guests have a chance to finish

them. Regardless of how skillfully the cocktail were prepared, the last few swallows will be less than wonderful.

Hess advises operators hesitant to reduce the portion size of their drinks to consider the example being set by Julie Reiner, celebrated mixologist and owner of *Manhattan’s Flatiron Lounge*. “Among their most popular and successful promotions are ‘cocktail flights,’ which consist of three small, amazingly delicious cocktails that all fall within a certain theme. Presenting a sampling of right-sized cocktails has helped her guests shed their ‘bigger is better’ mentality. Hopefully when they return they will be comfortable ordering one of the featured cocktails, and happily appreciate it. I do think this is the direction the business is heading.”

## Last Call

Before allowing the aforementioned folks to get off the phone and continue on with their lives, it seemed fitting to ask for a final prediction, a last bit of bankable wisdom.

For Jacques Bezuidenhout, the keystone for future success is authenticity. “Consumers today are looking for bars and restaurants that exceed expectations, that live up to their own hype. I’ve been in many highly touted tequila bars that stocked nearly as many vodkas, and flavored vodkas as they do tequila. Commit to a concept, and execute down to the smallest detail. That’s what I mean by authenticity.”

Working on opening a new bar, Toby Cecchini has of late devoted considerable thought to what makes people want to frequent a joint. “For all the pomp and polish of the cocktail world, I’m a devotee of the dive bar. I’ve noticed that people gravitate to the most authentic thing they can, in whatever market they’re in. At the end of all the discussion, you go to a bar to let down your daily load for a few hours.”

The merging of food and beverage was on Robert Hess’ mind. “I’m bullish on restaurants pairing cocktails with their appetizers and light fare. The menu at *Licorous* here in Seattle features a selection of amouse buche-sized appetizers paired with complementary and equally tempting cocktails. It’s a thoroughly enjoyable experience with trend written all over it.”

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Spirits authority Simon Ford predicts we'll be soon be heralding the arrival of long-lost classic liqueurs, such as *Batavia Arrack*, *crème de violet* and *Allspice Dram*. A recent example is handcrafted *Plymouth Sloe Gin*. After decades of fervent requests from mixologists, Black Friars Distillery is re-launching their famous liqueur in the U.S. this summer.

"Liqueurs like these open up a whole new world for bartenders," says Ford. "There are many seasoned pros who've waited a long time for their first taste of these fine old elixirs. Imagine having the opportunity to sit back and enjoy a

cocktail that hasn't been made here in the States since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I think people will find it an intriguing experience."

The final trend prediction comes from the dean of American mixology himself, Gary Regan. Author of numerous books including the seminal work, *The Joy of Mixology*, Regan asserts he knows only one thing: say something often enough and people will start to believe you.

"I've been telling people for almost 2 years now that the next big thing in both spirits and cocktails is Pisco. It hasn't come true yet, but it will. Promise."

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Robert Plotkin is a judge at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition and the author of numerous books including the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of *The Bartender's Companion: The Original Guide to American Cocktails and Drinks*. To read more from Robert (and other members of BarMedia) visit his blog, [BarMedia.com/blog](http://BarMedia.com/blog). You can reach him at BarMedia— 1-800-421-7179 or [robert@barmedia.com](mailto:robert@barmedia.com).

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