

# *What You Need To Know About Being A Bar Chef*



The term “bar chef” has entered our lexicon. Not limited to just chefs, the term is best applied to those who venture behind the bar bringing the flavors of the kitchen and melding them with the creative output of the bar. In other instances cases, these resourceful souls find glory pairing specific cocktails with particular foods.

Whereas many of us might be somewhat intimidated about recommending to guests what foods they try with which cocktails, bar chefs have no such fear. They work in a field where they are required to combining complementary and occasionally disparate ingredients into a delectable *mélange*. Extending that pursuit to the bar is seen as a natural progression.

“My goal is to have my guests experience spirits in ways that they can appreciate them, in ways that they would never have thought of by pairing them with complementary food dishes,”

says Andrew Featherstone, executive chef at *Winchester’s*, a popular, high-end restaurant in Canton, Georgia. “In return, this gives the guest a new level of experience that could not have been achieved by drinking these spirits or cocktails alone.”

Nick Siracusa, manager of trendy *Sorrento Grill* in Laguna Beach, California, worked his way through the ranks of the grand French restaurants of New Orleans, where wine rules supreme. “I learned a great deal about pairing wine with food during my formative years and I now try to put those skills to good use in creating appealing pairing of contemporary cocktails with great food. Ten or fifteen years ago it would have been laughable in finer establishments to pair spirits with anything more than bar nuts. These days I feel encouraged to do so throughout the entire dining experience.”

Send us your comments at [amo@barmedia.com](mailto:amo@barmedia.com)

There is a growing cadre of bar chefs who aren't chefs at all, but rather experienced sommeliers. It's not surprising in as much as sommeliers are classically trained at pairing wine with complementary dishes.

Jeff Mitchell is the wine steward at *Café Lurcat* in Naples, Florida. A graduate of the Culinary Institute of America and French trained chef, Mitchell delights in working with spirits. "The array of flavors present in spirits is a natural complement to those found in many foods. While it's somewhat more challenging to pairing spirits or cocktails with food dishes than it is with wine, the results are frequently spectacular."

"I think the art of spirit creation can definitely enhance a guest's experience," says Sean Beck, sommelier at Houston's *Hugo's* and *Backstreet Café*. "Because of my background, my first thoughts naturally drift to wine when it comes to creating the perfect pairing. I've learned, however, to relish in combining spirits with food. While I still believe wine is the perfect beverage to complement food, tequila and other spirits can prove very compelling."

Beck also believes spirit and food pairing enhances the interaction between the guest and the wait staff by creating interest in the process. Promoting guest exploration and curiosity affords your staff a chance to connect with the guests and provide information and suggestions that improves the entire experience. In addition, it helps keep your chef, sommelier and staff on their toes and creative.

Another reason to pursue pairing food with spirits is that spirit's popularity is surging. Last year liquor consumption grew for the seventh consecutive year, increasing 165 million 9-liter cases over 2003, a jump of 4.1%. The largest rate of growth is in the top-end of the spirit categories. Where once the mantra in the industry was "Americans are drinking less, but better," today the chant is "Americans are drinking more often and they're choosing the good stuff."

## *Where To Start*

Most of the experts polled admitted to preferring the trail and error method. One of the country's leading authorities on creative mixology, Tony Abou-Ganim is an avid devotee of pairing

spirits and food. Despite years of hands-on experience, Abou-Ganim adopts an artisan approach and relies heavily on trial and error. He contends that often things that you think would never complement one another actually work together beautifully.

"I like to have a theme to work and I always work closely with the chef. It's easier for me to pair my cocktails with the chef's food as opposed to creating the cocktails first. I tie in ingredients in both the food and the drink. I also look for natural matches, like blueberry compote worked into a cocktail and pairing it with a rich chocolate dessert with cinnamon ice cream. I add a little cinnamon-infused simple syrup into my cocktail. It's a slice of heaven."

Industry veteran and founder of spirits experts.com Sean Ludford also employs the same methodology, largely because "it's much more fun and you get an opportunity to sample many cocktails, which is never discouraged in my company." But he also contends that the pairing process relies more on one's senses than intellectualizing.

When Ludford first started working with food and wine pairings he was given an important piece of advice. "Sometimes the best wine for the dish is beer. It taught me three important things, namely to keep my mind open, look for natural flavor affinities between the wine or spirit and the food and keep the pairing uncomplicated."

But Ludford says that there's a rationale to the pairing process "Tequila obviously is a natural companion to Mexican cuisine. Seems a bit too simple, but the best approach often is. Campari and soda with prosciutto ham and melon is amazingly delicious. An aperitif is typically best matched with hors d'oeuvres from the same region."

Siracusa recommends pairing spirits with foods that won't overwhelm them. "One of my favorite examples is pairing a Stoli Vanil Martini with prosciutto wrapped scallops served on butternut squash risotto. The light vanilla vodka is a marvelous complement to the flavor of the risotto."

Chef Featherstone thinks that the so-called trail and error method greatly facilitates one's learning process. "It helps a great deal to have firsthand knowledge of the flavors of many different foods

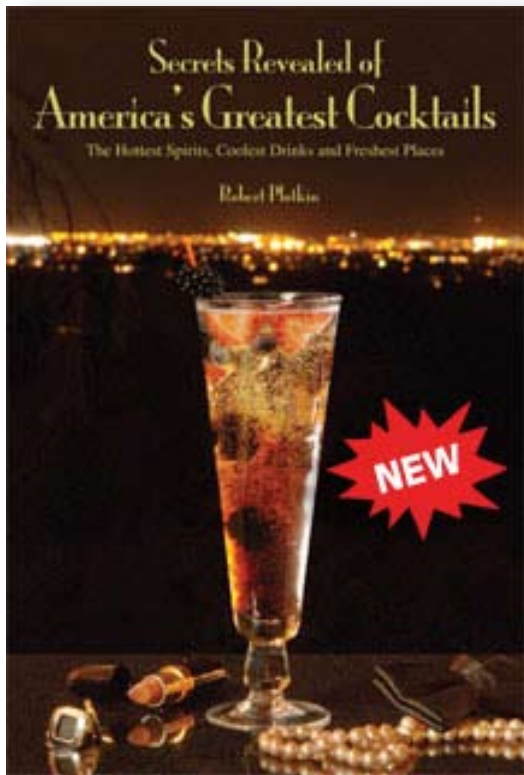
Send us your comments at [amo@barmedia.com](mailto:amo@barmedia.com)

and spirits. For example, you cannot distinguish the smell or flavor of juniper berries or coriander from the gin itself. Once these aromas and flavors are experienced it becomes much easier to pair them with food or cook with them.”

---

*Robert Plotkin* is a judge at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition and the author of numerous books including *Secrets Revealed of America's Greatest Cocktails*. 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).

---



## St Patrick's Day is just around the corner...

And when it comes to making great drinks you don't need the luck of the Irish when you have all the secrets...

Visit [BarMedia.com](http://BarMedia.com) to get this sensational cocktail guide at a new lower price

Was: ~~\$24.95~~, Now: **\$19.95**

And make your friends green with envy.