

# What You Need to Know About Being a Bar Chef



## Artistry Abounds

Jay Hernandez, executive chef at *O'Rourke's Steakhouse* in Houston, admits to relying heavily on inspiration. "I may be making something in the kitchen and think, 'hey, this would be great used in a Martini and married with that kind of cocktail. I then go out to the bar and start tinkering."

One such occasion lead him to combine cold mango and cucumber soup with chilled vodka. The brilliantly flavored Martini soon became a successful specialty of the house. Another time he took a bourbon sauce that he was working with and drizzled it along with some caramel sauce into cocktail glasses, which were then placed in the freezer. They would later be used to present a signature vodka Martini. As the glasses gradually warm the thawing sauces bleed into the cocktail. Hernandez says the results were divine.

Sean Ludford thinks food and spirit pairings have real sizzle. "I'm a committed 'gastronaut,' so I'm always seeking the kind of tremendous flavors and aromas that discovering a great new pairing can deliver. For example, Islay malt whiskies taste delicious paired with sushi. The peaty seaside notes marry beautifully with the oils in the raw fish. A classically prepared Margarita paired with ceviche is sublime!"

Laguna's *Sorrento Grill* is a popular haunt, one renown for its bar as well as contemporary bill of fare. "The easiest food and spirit pairing to sell people is a New York strip with a classic Manhattan," says manager Siracusa. "The robust and slightly sweet cocktail stands up nicely to the rich flavors of the steak. Another popular pairing is blackened Mahi-Mahi served with a citrus Niscoise relish and our signature drink, the Bellini Martini, which we make with Stoli Ohranj Vodka, peach liqueur and chilled champagne."

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Jeff Mitchell is the resident bar chef at *Café Lurcat*. The Naples eatery wows its guests with new age comfort food that's kicked up a notch. "We've been successful pairing spicy cuisines—Cajun, Creole and Caribbean, for example—with light, refreshing cocktails like the Mojito, Margarita, or classic Daiquiri. These citrus-based cocktails allow the guest to 'palate down' from the spice."

Mitchell likes to commingle ingredients between food dishes and his drinks. "Our Manhattan Chicken is made with a sauce that contains rye whiskey and sweet vermouth. We obviously pair that dish with a traditionally prepared Manhattan. The combination of flavors is really outstanding."

*Two Chefs* is an elegant landmark restaurant located in the heart of South Miami. Chef/Owner Jan Jorgensen is a bona fide spirits aficionado, a passion that is lead him to stock over 400 different spirits at his bar. Not surprisingly he is passionate about complementing the cocktail experience with an equally engaging cuisine.

"I think it is important that a guest eats while enjoying a drink or cocktail, which are traditionally consumed pre-meal and paired with pretzels and nuts. What would be wrong with a gin martini while biting into a Gorgonzola pizza or smoked duck?"

According to Jorgensen, "Common sense and a mix of known guidelines of complementing wine and food is my tactic. Vodka is open to salty and fresh flavors, whereas gin comes at you with a floral nose and palette that should stay away from sweet foods and flavors. Whiskies contain smoky, sweet and dry flavors that go best with spicy and more robust flavors.

Of late, Jorgensen has been pairing ice-cold vodka Martinis with caviar, pickled quail eggs, goat cheese pizza, Gorgonzola cheese beignets and tartars. He reports that gin works best when served with smoked duck vol auvent, cured fish, prosciutto, oysters and tartars and that whiskies complement lamb spareribs, chicken wings, salted nuts and spicy foods quite well.

At *Backstreet Café* and *Hugo's* sommelier turned avid bar chef Sean Beck delights in tempting his guests with inspired pairings. "Our dedication to using only fresh ingredients has kept us progressive, inventive and made for a very successful cocktail pairing program."

Examples of Beck's handiwork include pairing

Braised Long Island Duck over butternut squash puree with the Texas Trolley, a signature cocktail made with bourbon, Grand Marnier, and tangerine and lime juice, and Pomegranate Margaritas coupled with Chiles en Nogada, a poblano pepper stuffed with pork, fruit and spices.

"You create a cocktail pairing one of two ways—by either creating a cocktail and look to match it with food, or you start with a dish and develop a cocktail to go with it," says Beck. "It is usually easier if you start with the dish, because you know what flavors are present and what ingredients are being used. This gives you a guide or at least narrows down what spirit and flavors you can use."

## *Pursuing Franchise Players*

The hunt for increasingly more tantalizing food and spirits pairing has led the nation's bar chefs to expand their repertoire of flavors, especially when creating signature cocktails.

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"All of South Florida's tropical fruit are perfect ingredients in any drink. My favorite fruit components include mango, lychee nut, pineapple, guava and strawberries. In addition, ginger, horseradish, mint, vanilla, cinnamon and coffee are all ingredients in our top-selling drinks.

These days Sean Ludford is working more with exotic fruit. "The Tamarind is an unusual fruit that I think is greatly under utilized behind American bars, so I put it to good use in cocktails. Tamarind is wonderfully tart and complex, and it plays well orange liqueurs, rum and fresh fruit juice. Passion fruit also works marvelously with a wide range of spirits and liqueurs."

His favorite hot ingredient though is coconut. "You just machete the top off and fill it with the spirit of your choice. It's like taking a quick jaunt off to the islands without ever leaving your neighborhood."

Nick Siracusa believes that creative garnishes

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are more than mere embellishments, that they are an integral part of a well-devised cocktail. “The olive still reigns supreme at our locale. We’ve stuffed them with just about everything we can get our hands on and often our guests forget about what they’re drinking and focus on the fruit. My favorite is grilled green onion-stuffed olives served in a tequila Martini.”

For Siracusa and the *Sorrento Grill*, working food into the beverage program has helped them create a lively dinner trade and become a destination venue. “The result is that I get a full bar

of active and energetic people who don’t shorten their stay by skipping a table. The bottom line is that our check averages are skyrocketing.”

Tony Abou-Ganim sums it up best. He believes that creativity is only limited by your inspiration. “I’m always going into the kitchen walk-in to see what interesting fruits and vegetables are available to jump-start my creative juices. I have to taste everything to have an understanding of flavors and which ingredients work well together. Like my mom always taught me, “Tony, never trust a skinny chef.”

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*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).

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