

# Boozhooz

## The Thoughtful Drink Menu

*Thinking strategically about your drink list, wine list and beer selection*

BY IAN FOSTER,  
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➔ **How** is it possible that the two best bottles of wine I have had in the past year were ordered at an Indian restaurant?

➔ **How** does a small restaurant chain generate phenomenal bar sales for two decades primarily on the strength of one or two unique drinks that have become synonymous with their brand?

➔ **A great** little San Diego bistro sells my favorite beer, and one I can only seem to find at their restaurant. Thus, I find myself eating there more than expected!

These three examples highlight the value of a strategically planned bar menu.

### BAR MENUS AND THE DECISION CORRIDOR IN YOUR BAR

Research by Diageo, the world's largest liquor company, has found that more than 60% of bar customers don't know what they will drink until seconds before they place their orders. Thus, Diageo describes the bar area as the Decision Corridor.

Think about that for a minute. What an astounding opportunity for you to sell your customers some-

thing different from their usual "rum and coke" or "Bud Light" – something that they will enjoy; something that differentiates you from all the other bars in your neighborhood; something that is profitable.

But most bars blow this opportunity because they don't have a strategic plan for the Decision Corridor.

Such a strategy starts with a drink menu. I can't believe how many bars don't even have one. In research for *Cheers Magazine*, Mike Ginley's company, Next Level Marketing, found 71% of spirits drinkers are influenced by bar menus, promotions and staff recommendations. Ginley asserts that "bar menus are a marketing necessity."

But a drink menu is not enough; driving incremental sales requires an *effective* drink menu. A drink



Two of the Cactus Club Café's signature Bellinis set up and ready to wow their customers.

menu with dozens of drink choices is worthless. Most customers won't bother reading it if it requires more than about a minute's concentration. Worse, a lengthy list doesn't nudge your customer to those drink creations that are exceptionally good – and unique to your bar.

"Less is more", says Sam Zavari, Bar Operations Manager for the Cactus Club Cafe chain in western Canada. "The perfect bar menu says 'if you order one of these five drinks, you'll be blown away.'"

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**“What an astounding opportunity for you to sell your customers something...that differentiates you from all the other bars in your neighborhood; something that is profitable.”**

The pinnacle of this approach is the signature drink – a cocktail so enjoyable that it becomes almost synonymous with your establishment. Signature drinks don’t get any better than the Cactus Club’s Bellini. For almost two decades their Bellini has driven bar sales.

The Bellini is our brand,” says Zavari. “The Bellini practically sells itself. Everyone loves slushy drinks, I think that goes back to drinking Slurpees in our youth. And not only do we have the best Bellini anywhere, but when our guests see the colorful drinks going by in a beautiful martini glass, they want to try one.”

Taking full advantage of the Decision Corridor requires training your bartenders in the art of sug-

gestive selling. Renowned bar guru, Tony Abou-Ganim says, “A moment of indecision is the perfect opportunity for bartenders to step in and introduce their customers to something new...your goal should be to guide your clientele toward a one-of-a-kind experience. Give them a reason to come back to your bar...suggest a world-class drink.”

A world-class drink – hopefully, that describes the five drinks on your concise, intriguing drink list; preferably drinks that your customers can’t get anywhere else.

#### **DIFFERENT STRATEGIES REQUIRED FOR DRAFT AND BOTTLED BEER**

I have never understood why most bars offer the same brand of beer in bottles and draft. Bars only have limited cold storage, so why offer Coors Light on tap and Coors Light by the bottle?

That’s a lot of cooler space devoted to duplication, without the benefit of adding incremental sales. And since beer is a perishable product, unnecessary duplication results in beer that is not being served at its freshest.

A strategic beer list would promote both incremental beer sales and turnover. Offering the same brand in bottles and draft does neither.

A well-conceived beer selection would incorporate different strategies for bottles and draft. Draft beer is more suited to high-volume brands because a keg holds more volume

in less space than the equivalent number of bottles – an important consideration when cooler space is limited. Bill Main, founder of Bill Main & Associates, suggests that a high-volume bar have a tap for every 5-10 seats.

Another idea I really like is to have a rotating guest tap. Each month the guest brand changes. By offering unusual beers for a limited time, you give any draft beer enthusiasts a compelling reason to visit more often. And occasionally the guest brand will prove to be hugely popular, in which case you switch it to a permanent tap while moving your lowest selling draft to the guest tap.

I would devote most of my beer bottle selection to niche brands – especially those that can’t be found in my competitors’ bar. Bottles are perfectly suited to premium brands that don’t sell fast enough to warrant buying in kegs.

My favorite little bistro, Café Chloe in San Diego, has done exactly that with their beer bottle selection. They offer a dozen bottled beers, all of which are interesting and a perfect match for their concept. On my first visit, one brand in particular caught my eye: a coriander-flavored beer from Scotland. I liked it so much that I spent a week phoning liquor stores to find out where I could buy it – unsuccessfully. So, guess what, I find myself eating at Café Chloe more often because they hooked me on this weird little beer.

Finally, I would recommend that bars have a printed beer list: either on paper or listed on a menu board (preferably both). I hate asking the bartender what they have on tap only to hear 20 beers recited in 20 seconds. My brain can never keep up – especially in a bar, for obvious reasons!

#### **WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM AN INDIAN RESTAURANT WITH A KILLER WINE LIST**

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The bartender pours wine for a customer at Vij's Indian restaurant in Vancouver.

the two most impressive wines I bought this year were from Vij's in Vancouver, Canada.

"Traditionally only beer is served at Indian restaurants," says Mike Bernardo, Vij's General Manager. "We realized that we rarely went out for dinner to any ethnic restaurants because we wanted to enjoy a nice bottle of wine with our meal. But we knew that if we could enjoy wine at home with Indian food, we could eventually get our diners to enjoy it at Vij's."

The underlying strategies behind Vij's terrific wine list can be applied to any restaurant:

➔ **"Less is more," says Bernardo** (where have we heard that before?). "A shorter wine list is more approachable for the guest than pages and pages of selections. Fewer wines also results in a smaller inventory."

Randy Caparoso, from Wine Listing Consulting Unlimited, concurs, "The majority of guests prefer a

less intimidating list and are more likely to return to a restaurant with small, personal touches and servers who can speak intelligently about their food and wines."

#### ➔ **A Georgia State**

**University study** shows that adding descriptions to a wine list will increase sales by thirty percent. But rather than adding wine tasting notes ("floral with a hint of vanilla"), which few customers can relate to, I would suggest appending more interesting information such as point scores from wine magazines. You see smart retailers, like Costco, doing this more and more often. Not only is the 100-point scale something familiar and

approachable for all your customers, but just knowing an "expert" gave a wine 90 points somehow makes it taste better.

Or add staff comments: "*I order our lamb shank just so I can order this 'big' wine – they go so well together*"—Linda, server for 3 years"

You can take this one step further and feature a "Staff Favorites" section on your wine list, just like they do at the local Blockbuster Video. Each month you might feature a different server's three favorite wines along with a little paragraph on why they like that wine. Your servers will love having their wine choices highlighted – especially when customers recognize them for it. And you will be taking one big step to de-mystifying the whole wine selection process.

These ideas emphasize the importance of having your staff sample the wines (and food, of course). Mike Bernardo says that is the reason that Vij's has always offered a free staff meal every night.

➔ **Perhaps the best thing** about a shorter wine list is that it allows you to guide your customer towards wines that go best with your food.

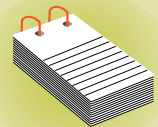
Caparoso again: "Do you honestly think a list of 50 Chardonnays, most of which taste pretty much the same, is more impressive to the contemporary consumer than just six or twelve which truly represent distinctive quality, value, affinity with food (your food, not that of the French or Chinese restaurant down the street)"

This is particularly important for Vij's given the challenge of pairing wine with the strong spices. A smaller wine list is the perfect vehicle to induce customers to enjoy a wine selection that will accentuate the food. At Vij's, the wines offered by-

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## INSIDE:

### THE THOUGHTFUL DRINK MENU

**“The perfect bar menu  
says if you order one  
of these five drinks,  
you’ll be blown away.”**

**IAN FOSTER** explains how careful massaging of your “liquid bill of fare” can increase the buzz your operation enjoys, as well as dramatically increasing your bottom line. And it’s not just about creating a list of what you sell, either!



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the-glass are all chosen to compliment the food.

Bernardo cautions against taking this too far. “When I first started, I was absolutely committed to *only* having wines that went well with the food [no chardonnays, for example]. But one thing I learned is not to force the customer. People like what they like. My job is to make them happy.”

➔ **Unless you only have inexperienced staff**, try not to include wines everyone knows from the grocery store. The problem is that too many people believe that restaurant wine pricing is a rip-off. Your customers don’t know or care about storage, spoilage, payroll taxes, Worker’s Comp, or other costs. All they know is that the supermarket can make a profit selling the bottle for \$11 so why are they getting charged \$27 in your restaurant?

➔ **A final thought:** many of your customers are reluctant to ask the server for a wine recommendation. One of the problems is that servers are often trained to ask the customer what s/he wants to spend on a bottle. This is a very intimidating question to ask when your customer is sitting in front of a business associate or a loved one. Your customer risks appearing cheap in front of their companion, on the one hand, or of spending too much and feeling annoyed later, on the other. I believe that this prevents a lot of customers from asking for recommendations in the first place. Gary Parker, from Wine Sellar & Brasserie in San Diego, teaches his servers to point at three or four wines on the wine list, without mentioning the price. The customer can then pick the wine with a price tag that they are comfortable with without the risk of appearing cheap. **BN**