

Dining Florida's Finest Bars *by Chris Sherman*

In the best bars around Florida, drinking has matured. The trend in liquor is artisan and a bit retro: The herbal punch of gin (*think Hendrick's, Broker's and Plymouth*) has gained fans; small-batch craft bourbons (*Booker Noe*) get respect once reserved for Scotch; and age-old rye is on the comeback. The list of rare rums and tequilas gets longer, and the vodkas become more artisanal, with fewer candy store flavors.

The finest bars insist on mixing with fresh ingredients. Sure, drinks are \$10 and up, but that's cheaper than some appetizers, and for recessionary wallets, small-plate dining and gourmet drinking at the bar are a potent economic strategy.

Here's a caseload of classy bars to try:

» **O Lounge** at *Yolo, Fort Lauderdale*. A Las Olas spot with hot deejays and decor still gets cool behind the bar, where all the fruit and juice is fresh, from pineapple to red jalapeño to strawberries. Vodka is perked up with balsamic vinegar and cracked black pepper.

» **Esca**, *Sarasota*. This three-decker spot has music and quite a view of bay and skyline, along with a crowd of slick young downtowners. Yet it's more than buzz; drinks are as sophisticated as the small bites of artichoke cobbler or espresso-glazed ribs. The career bartenders like to custom blend from a long shelf of juices and syrups — all made in house.

» **600 South**, *Pensacola*. This doubles as a classy meet-market and the cozy bar of the New World Landings boutique hotel. Drinks are clever enough to match edible luxuries like crawfish beignets and duck egg rolls.

» **Blu Sushi**, *Fort Myers, Naples and Estero*. Drinks are as clever and deftly crafted as a makimono hand roll at the home-grown chainlet. The classics are here, some with a new twist (fresh ginger muddled in the cosmo), but the best is new-fashioned savory — crisp gin with cucumber and mint.

» **Club 50** at *Viceroy, Miami*. Penthouse cocktails are as sharp as Philippe Starck's decor. Credit Liquid Relations, bar gurus from Portland, Ore., who've reinvented hotel drinking at Skybar and Sunset Lounge too. Here they pressed, pureed and muddled blood orange, sage, honeydew and cucumber into zingers for celeb chef Michael Psilakis.

» **Park Plaza Gardens**, *Winter Park*. Park Avenue's sidewalk scene is lively, abetted by chef-driven eating and drinking. Outdoors or inside the patio garden, the margarita is all natural — from agave nectar to fresh-squeezed lime juice and aged Partida tequila.

» **Morimoto**, *Boca Raton*. Iron chef Masaharu Morimoto puts the bar back in sushi bar; actually it's stocked with his own aged sakes, punchy shochu liquor and soba beers, luxuries that cost up to \$65 a glass. For iron cocktails, there's orange vodka and elderflower liqueur with pureed lychee and cranberry juice. The new bar is a blast of futuristic Japan in the 1926 pink palace of Mizner Mediterranean, which has many bars, decks and cozies for guests.

» **Bosendorfer Lounge** at the *Grand Bohemian, Orlando*. The rare imperial grand piano (one of two in the world) that is the namesake, remarkable sketches by Gustav Klimt and a kaleidoscope of contemporary art are lure enough. Downtown's artiest hotel mixes power locals and visiting celebs with a long list of martinis, wines, cognacs, single malts and beers. Most tempting are champagne cocktails like the grand Crescendo, bubbly and fresh O.J. crowned with Grand Marnier.

Restaurant BT, Tampa. B.T. Nguyen had a sleek bar when she opened and has reinvented cocktails and bar snacks at warp speed ever since. The bar's dirty martini just got dirtier with aged balsamic and bleu cheese. A new drink blends three jasmine teas and chrysanthemum flower.

» **Bistro Aix**, *Jacksonville*. Chef Tom Gray brought the bar chef concept to town and installed new cocktail fun in the sleek, all-white Onyx. He's partial to a mojito with blood orange juice when it's in season and in perfect sweet-sour balance. Barflies can dig into Aix's French appetizers and local cheeses too.

» **La Marea** at *The Tides, Miami Beach*. In its renewed glory, this old Deco hotel thrills foodies with Mediterranean fish and house-made pasta. Drinkies, however, are thrilled by the fruit "popsicles" swirling in cocktails. There's a mint one in Beaches Peaches.



Urbane RESTAURANT & BAR

» **Urbane**, *Tallahassee*. The bar changes its drink menu as seasonally as the kitchen does its menus in this city-hip restaurant with country flavors. In spring, that means local blueberries from the Saturday farmers market for vodka martinis. "They've been wonderful," says co-owner Pam Pollett. Summer's likely to be sweet on watermelon juice.

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