



EXCLUSIVE ELIXIRS Bartender Matthew Geronimo spends a lot of time in front of the juicer; this winning bar goes through more than 400 pounds of citrus fruit every week. Where does he work? Read on...

Mixed-up drinks

Specialty cocktails can be found at every L.A. watering hole. Some are good; one is great.

By carly milne - Thurs., Sept. 1, 2005

This was the summer of the cocktail. And sometimes, that wasn't a good thing.

What began with the relatively simple Cosmopolitan has grown, kudzu-like, into a barrage of increasingly bizarre and cloying mixes, with colors not found in nature and taste profiles that compare favorably to Robitussin and Lemon Pledge.

"It's like Dairy Queen in here now," says Lee Dawson, a bartender at the Universal-adjacent Minibar. "I've got 52 flavors and it's driving me nuts. I can't remember the last time I poured a Jack and Coke."

Minibar's not alone. Every restaurant and bar in Los Angeles worth its margarita salt has felt obliged to develop a menu of specialty cocktails that end with an "-ini," "-ita" or a single word that evokes sex, wealth or dessert. Even the venerable Campanile is working on its cocktail lineup.

Many of these cocktails promise joy and deliver misery, but we had a feeling it didn't have to be that way.

A team of V Life Weekend guinea pigs set out on a quest to find the best summer drinks -- vodka-Red Bulls need not apply. After sipping (sometimes slurping, sometimes choking on) more than four dozen cocktails, all rated as their bartenders' or patrons' favorites, from across the city, we found a winner.

Nice work if you can get it, but it wasn't always pleasant. (Case in point: Casa del Mar's "Go-Gogh Martini," a mix of Van Gogh espresso vodka, crème de cacao, Starbucks coffee liquor and whipped cream.)

However, considering who our winner turned out to be, with drinks definitively better than all others, we could have saved a lot of time if we'd heeded the words of [Dale DeGroff, the King of Cocktails](#).

"Fresh fruit," says DeGroff, author of "[The Craft of the Cocktail](#)." "It's how the business began."

According to DeGroff, mixed drinks date back to the 19th century, which didn't know from sweet-and-sour mix.

"In those days, they were more than just bartenders," he says. "They were chemists. They had to make everything from scratch. We lost our way after Prohibition. There wasn't a lot of skilled labor around and they were presenting insurance policies in the form of these mixes where you could just add the liquor and you'd have an instant drink. So this is just a return to those initial values."

DeGroff is not such a purist that he doesn't allow the Alizes, X-Rateds and other prefab concoctions.

"I make lots of cocktails using those mixes -- even Hypnotiq," DeGroff says. "They're the kind of products that are difficult to use in drinks, but they can work if you mix them with fresh juices. But that's up to the skill of the bartender. If you give someone who has talent some flavors that are good and some that are not so good, they can make something out of it."

However, nothing can replace old-fashioned invention. The cocktails at Cliff's Edge in Silver Lake didn't appeal to our tester, so the bartender invented one that did: fresh lime and orange juices, more than a splash of vodka, Triple Sec and cranberry juice. Served in a chilled martini glass, it was like a cosmopolitan, but tarter.

"What do you call it?" we asked.

And so it came to be that the V Life was born. Order it from Roxie before summer's over.

What we learned:

- DeGroff is right. There's no substitute for fresh fruit.
- Simple syrup is simply better. Sugar dissolved in equal parts water beats any flavored rum or mixer.
- The best drinks make your hands hurt. Citrus squeezers, martini shakers and muddlers - you can't make a great cocktail without them.

The best cocktail in Los Angeles:

World Café

2820 Main St., Santa Monica

Cartel (\$7) Cacique guaro (Costa Rican sugar cane liquor) and Agwa de Bolivia (a liquor made from 34 herbs, including Bolivian coca leaf), freshly squeezed lemon and lime juices, 7-Up and something the bartender wouldn't reveal. Served in a tall glass, the result is light and refreshing, like a grown-up 7-Up. However, it doesn't act like soda pop: Our taster

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was sloshed within 20 minutes.