

Summer libations keep the season lively

By Kathryn Reed

Relaxing poolside, lakeside, on a patio or on a friends' deck – summer cocktails make the occasion even more festive.

To pretend winter wasn't taking over spring, a few of us started ordering what could be considered summer drinks even when hot cocoa may have been better to take off the chill from the outdoors.

In the process of trying so many different concoctions, as well old standbys, we learned a bit. Just like beer and wine, which I have more knowledge of, no two vodkas or tequilas are alike. Perhaps this is obvious to others, but some of us are still learning things.



Sue Wood and her pitcher of mojitos at Brooks Bar & Deck.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

Besides doing a taste test to tell the difference, many bars and restaurants are listing on the menu the specific brand of alcohol that is used in drinks.

While flavor is the ultimate decider if a drink will ever be ordered again, the size of glass and quantity of alcohol play a roll in deciding if the price was worth it.

My favorite drinks in this three-month process were at Brenda's house – creative, flavorful and free. She graciously is allowing her creations to be published. (See below.)

But for those who are not invited to Brenda's, I recommend Voodoo on Your Woody at Riva Grill in South Lake Tahoe; Sue says order the mojito at Brooks Bar & Deck at Stateline; Brenda wants another Fleur D'lis from the Chart House in Stateline; Linda says the Picon Punch is a must-have at Louis' Basque Corner in Reno.

The tastings begin

It's a warm afternoon in April and we're on the deck at Riva Grill at Ski Run Marina. No prices on the drink menu. I still have a problem with any bar that does that. The impression it gives is a fluctuating price scale.

At first I thought the drinks were overpriced at \$11.75 each. Then I kept drinking and seeing what other places had to offer. Size does matter, and that Woody stands up to all the other libations I ingested.

Riva Grill is known for its Wet Woody. I had the Voodoo on Your Woody and Sue had the Malibu Beach Wet Woody. We both say get the Voodoo.

The original Wet Woody is \$10.25, with the price dropping to \$5.25 on Wednesdays.

It's Easter weekend – I'm at SolBar in Calistoga with my three sisters and mom. We decide to share three cocktails between the five of us – all are unique to this restaurant on the northern edge of the Silverado Trail. We would order each one again.

The mixologist at SolBar knows what he is doing.

“All are really good, with good complex flavors,” Jann said.

“They are all very refreshing,” Tami said.

We all agreed the flavors came through instead of a heavy alcohol taste.

They are pricy, but so fun and different that forking over \$13 or \$14 per drink seemed like a reasonable thing to do. And a girls' weekend is about not worrying about the credit card bill that's a month away.

We recommend the Le Djinn du Vin en Orange (g'vine nouaison gin, house-made vin d'orange, ginger-honey syrup, lemon, house-made fennel bitters, grains of paradise and egg whites), Pink Slip (Plymouth gin, house-made ginger-rhubarb cordial, lime juice and rose water), and Terra Nostra (distillery 209 gin, house-made vin d'orange, fusion N.V. verjus, citrus blossom honey syrup, tincture of Solage lavender, citrus foam, foraged herbs).

The next girls' weekend had us in San Francisco for Bay to Breakers in May. We figured a cocktail with our dinner at Perbacco the night before the race would make us walk faster. Jann, Pam and mom had the Fragolino (Prosecco, strawberry puree and aperol). Sue had the Mandarino (Absolut mandarin vodka, pomegranate, cointreau and lime.) I had the Perbacco (Ketel One Citron, Amaretto di Saronno, Meyer lemon).

All the cocktails on the menu are \$10 – and worth it.

Of them all, I liked the one I ordered the best. Refreshing is the word that kept coming to mind. Sue liked it so much she had it as her second drink. The Fragolino came with good reviews from Pam and mom – saying it was a nice change from straight Prosecco, while Jann thought the puree was too heavy for the sparkling wine

Circling the South Shore

While the Rum Runner at the Beacon at Camp Rich has long been one of my favorite summer drinks, things have gone down hill in the last couple years. To confirm my opinion, I brought Sue and Brenda to the bar. We all agreed – don't need to order that again.

The flavor just isn't what is used to be. The color is not the vibrant orange of days gone by. It tastes more icy than slushy. And by the time it sat in the glass a while the flavor was horrible. The aftertaste is nasty.

We wonder with the restaurant now selling the concoction in bottles if the recipe had to change. It would be nice if is changed back to what it was, because what it is is not worth a fraction of the \$8 they charge.

Letting the bartender pick out a fun drink for the night turned out to be the right decision at McDuff's Public House on Fremont Street in South Lake Tahoe. While the Rum Punch was not exceptional, the price (\$6) and quantity made up for the flavor.

And had I not been in between school board meetings, I probably would have appreciated that the drink had more rum than fruit juice. It was just one of those nights where less alcohol would have been more appropriate.

But Sue and I would go back again. We liked that there were two kinds of rum, fresh OJ, cranberry and pineapple juice in the drink.

In a previous lifetime (my first stint in South Lake Tahoe in my 20s) I had three bars I frequented regularly, getting a different drink at each one and where the bartender knew what to bring without my asking.

The Cantina was one of them. At the time it was a blended

strawberry-banana margarita. (I could walk to my apartment on 13th Street from there.)

On this particular night I order the French Margarita. While it's made with Cuervo Gold, it's really the Grand Marnier that matters. It's almost \$9, but hit the spot that night.

Sue had the \$8 Tahoe Tropics, their version of the Blue Hawaiian.

"I forgot how sweet they are," she said, indicating perhaps she's outgrown this drink.

Sue's favorite drink is across the state line at Edgewood Golf Course – at the sports bar. The original mojito is what she wants. It's the bar's specialty drink.

Check out this video of bartender Jimmy Kelso making one at Brooks Bar & Deck.

The best deal is a pitcher (and these are the old-style large pitchers) for \$24. Individual glasses are \$8.

"It's the perfect blend of simple things," Sue said.

Sitting on the Timber Cove Pier enjoying summer in Tahoe – it's hard to beat Blue Water Bistro's location. And the Juicy Peach (\$10) is tasty, but comes in a super small martini glass. Same goes for the \$10 Pama Tini.

While the Chart House in Stateline is nowhere close to being right on the water, it does have one of the best views of Lake Tahoe. Sunsets from this mountain perch are spectacular.

Drink during happy hour to get the best deals. Although not all drinks are discounted, enough are to at least satisfy the three of us.

The overall favorite of the night was the Fleur D'Lis (Malibu coconut rum, Midori melon liqueur, with a splash of DeKuyper

peachtree schnapps, and orange and pineapple juice.)

“It just tastes like summer,” Brenda said.

I ordered the blueberry mojito. Don't need to do that again. It tasted like syrup and was way too sweet.

The second round had Sue getting the Tuaca Lemon Drop (Tuaca liqueur, Stolli citrus vodka, fresh squeezed lime juice). We all agreed the Tuaca ruined the drink. Save that for hot drinks.

The second round favorite was the Pomegranate Martini (Pearl Pomegranate vodka, DeKuyper pomegranate, splash cranberry juice) that Brenda ordered. But it didn't come close to the Fleur D'Lis.

I had the Agave Necta-Zita (Milagro Silver tequila, agave nectar). It was a good margarita, but nothing that wowed any of us.

Moving around and beyond the lake

Chart House's margarita couldn't compare to what I had had the day before at Caliente in Kings Beach, where margaritas are their specialty. They range in price from \$8-\$14, but are \$3.95 during happy hour.

Ted, Caliente's bartender, is that perfect mix of being helpful, conversing with guests, but leaving them alone. He talked a bit out how tequila is the fastest growing spirit – in terms of consumption. And how they all taste different based on soil, aged oak and other factors.

With Sue not drinking tequila, Ted was great with ideas about which margaritas on the menu would be good to substitute vodka. She started off with the Heart-on, which is basically a pomegranate margarita. I had the Strawberry-Basil Margarita.

Definitely liked mine better. The ice is crushed, which is a

nice change. It was super refreshing.

We shared the El Matador Margarita. The blood orange in this is a unique flavor that would be worth having again.

We had a taste of the Chupacubra – a combo of rum, peach schnapps, tequila and other stuff. The consistency is like a wet woody, which makes sense because Caliente and Riva Grill have the same owner. This was the best by far.

“The margaritas at Caliente are made with pure Agave Nectar and fresh lime juice along with 2 ounces of 100 percent blue Agave, Reposado tequila. Most places use sweet and sour and Mixto tequila. Mixto tequila is the tequila that gave tequila a bad name,” explains Scott Craig.

On a recent trip to Reno, Linda and Frank made a pilgrimage to one of their favorite watering holes (and dinner houses), Louis’ Basque Corner.

“Our favorite drink there is Picon Punch, of course, the national drink of the Basques. Although we’ve sampled Picon at most of the Basque restaurants throughout Nevada, where they’re a bar staple, we think Louis’ version is somehow more crisp and smooth,” Linda said. “Have more than a couple and you’ll know how punch became part of the name!”

The stemmed glass instead of a squat, old-fashion glass added to the experience.

According to Louis’ new owner, Brian Elcano, 28, who, with his partner Chris Shanks, 26, purchased the restaurant in March from Louis and Lorraine Erreguible, there are many variations of the recipe, but not all call for the grenadine. Picons make up 50 percent of their bar sales.

Here’s how to make Picon Punch a la Louis’:

- A splash of grenadine

- 1½ ounces of Torani Amer liqueur
- Soda water
- Stir, then float with brandy
- Finish with a twist of lemon

Topa! (That's cheers in Basque.)

I'm ready to go back to the River Ranch Patio at the entrance road to Alpine Meadows on the North Shore. The Tiki Torch (\$8) is Bacardi 7, Tiki rum, tropical juices, fresh squeezed lime and touch of blackberry brandy. It was so good and the setting along the Truckee River such a delight, I really wanted another. But I cut myself off because the car keys were in my pocket.

Sue had the CoCo Mai Tai (\$9) and would order it again.

Back in San Francisco for Fourth of July weekend, this time we are drinking at The View – the bar on the 18th floor of the Marriott on Fourth Street. While the view is worth checking out and drinks acceptable, the price (\$14 each) for a cosmo and a raspbatini made us stop for the night.

The Slanted Door inside the Ferry Building, though, was a different story. Each cocktail is \$11. Mine was so good I didn't want to share even a sip – though I did. I had the French 75 – Dudognon Reserve Cognac, and Prosecco, lemon; served on the rocks.

Sue's cocktail was yummy, too, just not quite as enticing. She had Ginger Limeade – Hangar One Kaffir Lime vodka, ginger, lime; served on the rocks.

What to make at home

The following drinks are ones Brenda Knox created in her Tahoe Paradise kitchen. I may be a little biased in liking the one

named after me, but it really is my favorite of the three.

Publisher's Punch

Served martini style with pineapple juice, orange-mango juice, a hint of lime, Ketel One vodka and a splash of Grand Marnier.

Sue's Magic Margarita

Served on the rocks after a vigorous shaking of Ketel One, margarita mix, lime and splash of Grand Marnier.

Creative Cosmo

A cold refreshing cosmos with Ketel One, cranberry juice, lime and two splashes of Grand Marnier. A touch of homemade pomegranate liqueur adds the exclamation point.

Susan Wood, Brenda Knox and Linda Fine Conaboy contributed.

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