

Seasonal cocktails inspire what's on the plate

By Melissa Clark, New York Times

Drinking seasonal cocktails used to mean manhattans in the winter and gin and tonics in the summer.

Then a decade ago, mixologists started infusing the likes of lemon verbena and butternut squash into spirits, taking the notion of seasonal cocktails to a more literal level. Now, you're just as likely to encounter an heirloom tomato in the glass as on the plate.

And some restaurants have been creating tasting menus with cocktail pairings that highlight the season's best, from the aperitif through dessert, seasonal dining from coupe to nuts.

These pairings work really well at home, too. I spent the past weeks letting seasonal cocktails inspire the snacks that I served with them.

I found that the rules for matching cocktails with food are a lot more lax than with wine. Really, anything goes, though the more complicated and layered the ingredients are in the glass, the more involved your accompanying hors d'oeuvres can be, and vice versa. For simpler cocktails, simple foods work best.

To greet our first warm night, my husband and I sipped Emperor's Gardens, rhubarb and gin cocktails spiked with Thai basil and seasoned rice vinegar (a condiment used to make sushi rice, flavored with sugar and salt).

Alongside, I echoed the vinegar and basil in a quick shrimp salad garnished with roasted peanuts for crunch. We ate the shrimp on cucumber rounds, but mounding them on crisp lettuce leaves would have been a slightly fancier presentation.

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