

Cocktails evolving into more than just a mixed drink

By Kathryn Reed

Drinking isn't just about quenching one's thirst. These days it can be a meal unto itself based on some of the ingredients.

Mixologists have come into their own. They are much more than a bartender. They are chefs behind the bar – creating cocktails that are anything but ordinary. While using locally grown ingredients, much like chefs are doing these days, they are also creating drinks that are seasonal in nature.

“We are bringing the kitchen to the cocktail,” is how Camber Lay, with Parallel 37 at the Ritz in San Francisco, described how mixologists approach drink making.



Glasses are ready to be filled with A Wild Rose from the West Shore Cafe, one of the winning drinks at the Mix It Up event at the Ritz-Carlton, Lake Tahoe. Photos/Kathryn Reed

Two events in September tested regional drink creators'

ability to invent an original drink for the public, while competing against their peers. Wild Turkey was the spirit those at the Ritz-Carlton, Lake Tahoe had to use, while vodka was the liquor in the drinks at the Barton Foundation gathering.

Both events collected money for charities. The one at the Ritz at Northstar raised funds for Project MANA, which is a hunger relief organization serving the North and West shores of Lake Tahoe and Truckee. This event was part of the larger annual Autumn Food & Wine Festival. Barton's Signature Cocktail event at Riva Grill in South Lake Tahoe was a fundraiser for the Barton Foundation.

The South Shore event grossed \$5,900. Each bartender donated his or her tips, which raised more than \$500 of that amount.

Gail Oversteg from Manzanita restaurant at the Ritz picked some lemon verbena from the property for her Mela Melange, which she described as a deconstructed Manhattan.

Nicole Barker of Cin Cin at the Eldorado casino in Reno has a pear tree at her house. She boiled some down for six hours to use as the base for her drink.



Camber Lay likes using

local, seasonal items in her cocktails at Parallel 37 in San Francisco.

“We do everything fresh, from scratch. There are no low end liquors,” Barker said of her bar.

Kelley Luchs from the West Shore Café in Homewood came up with A Wild Rose. He said he wanted to play with something not often used – so rose water was his special ingredient.

The public picked the winning drinks at the Ritz, with Luchs and Barker tying.



Muddled jalapenos were an ingredient in two drinks at the Barton event.

On the South Shore, with the winning drink eventually winding up on the menu at the Barton Gala in December as part of the Festival of Trees and Lights, winter was a central theme for the creators.

Two cocktails at this event used fresh jalapenos. Jimmy Kelso from the Edgewood came up with the Caliente Christmas Martini. Vodka, pomegranate and muddled jalapeno were the major ingredients. It was served with a candied jalapeno.

James Kent Meiers of the Cantina devised the Cukacabra. Vodka, orange agave liqueur, with muddled cucumber and jalapeno were the winning combination. That drink will be served at the gala

in two months.

“I was mixing flavors to complement Cantina’s food,” Meiers said of how he came up with the drink.