



Life in colour

Despite playing a critical cocktail role in the bar and at home, liqueur knowledge often flies under the radar.

But is the lack of consumer understanding an opportunity rather than a hindrance? **Kristiane Sherry** gets the perspective from brands and bartenders



It turns out that 'Quarantini Hour' did more than just lubricate us through the depths of lockdown. The term rose to popularity at the start of the pandemic. With bars closed and video calls the only way to socialise, we became creative with our drinking. "The cocktail did indeed make a grand entrance into homes throughout lockdown, so much so that cocktail knowledge has exploded," Fanny Chtromberg, international director at Cointreau, tells me. Quarantini Hour introduced at-home mixing to millions.

Cue a spike in online searches for 'cocktail recipes'. Nielsen CGA found that an enormous 40% of US drinks consumers were looking for cocktail kits. And yes, there was a tremendous jump in knowledge for the 'average' imbiber. "While fear of the shaker is an enduring reality, it has diminished incredibly over the past few years," Chtromberg acknowledges.

Yet there's an enduring sense that while many have embraced at-home mixing since 2020, many, many more still lack a basic

understanding of serves, recipes, and the component spirit and liqueur parts that make them. Are we assuming too much knowledge from our audiences?

IGNORANCE CAN BE BLISS

Study after study has found that, especially post-lockdown, drinkers want to know more about liqueurs, spirits, and their role in cocktails. So I put it to the test. I asked my 'civilian', non-drinks industry friends to tell me about Margaritas, Summer Cups and Porn Star Martinis. Three big serves made with big-name bottles, each with a strong following. There were a lot of blank faces.

George Armstrong, co-owner and operations director at London and Edinburgh ball-pit bars Ballie Ballerson, is used to serving an audience that love mixed drinks. But they typically don't know much about them. Cocktails account for 70% of his drinks sales. The demographic skews young, with typical customers aged from 20 to 30 years; 75% are women. "A lot of them are inexperienced when it comes to drinking

classic cocktails," he says. "If you say the words 'classic cocktail'... they'll shy away."

Does he see this as a challenge? "Actually, I think it's the opposite," he reckons. "It's really enjoyable. That's probably one of the most fun parts of hospitality – to be able to educate someone."

Cointreau's Chtromberg is equally optimistic. "Democratising the cocktail, and illustrating its simplicity and conviviality is part of our communication." She sees it as a marketing opportunity. And it has not deterred her from pursuing cocktail-first messaging. "The brand has gone all-in on the Margarita since 2019, and is now reaping the rewards." Cointreau smashed both its volume and its value records in 2021/2022. The brand achieved 29.9% sales growth in the first nine months of 2022, according to its parent firm Rémy Cointreau. Anyone for at-home Margs?

THE VIEW FROM THE BAR

It's a similar scene in east London. Newly appointed head bartender at Stratford's Allegra restaurant – and Scarfes Bar alumnus



Liqueurs



Ice work: there is still a lot of education to be done about liqueurs

– Carlos Del Barrio reckons that while knowledge here is better than in mainland Europe, there are still challenges. “A lot of it often comes down to the big in-market trends,” he says, and whether or not a city is home to adventurous palates. “In bars in Madrid, where I’m from, beer and wine still dominate, but in the UK the consumer is far more open-minded about trying new drinks.”

While his guests often know what type of cocktails they like, it’s unusual for them to understand the recipe. “Spirits are a little different, and there is much stronger understanding there, but with liqueurs generally, there is still a ton of education to be done.” But, along with Armstrong and Chtromberg, he feels this isn’t inherently a bad thing. “If they don’t have knowledge of an ingredient or how the flavour combination might work together, they always ask.”

CAPTIVE AUDIENCE

The biggest opportunity for liqueur brands in this space is simply to start the conversation. Engaged yet under-educated consumers offer tremendous potential. They are captive, receptive – and thirsty.

For Audrey Bruisson, marketing director at Spiribam, a drinks company that owns brands including Rhum Clément and its sibling liqueur expression, it’s about fostering

inclusivity. “We always keep in mind to remain welcoming in our drinks strategy,” she says. One side of the approach is to directly engage bartenders; the other side with consumers. “It’s offering very easy tips to create cocktails. Two to three ingredients max, no bartending tools, simple techniques.” And where better to share a recipe than on the back of the bottle itself?

If there’s ever a case study for how effective simply engaging can be, look to Lord William Seymour (the Earl of Yarmouth). From tasting different serves, learning the history behind drinks and focusing on a less-by-better approach for making cocktails for friends,

‘In bars in Madrid, where I’m from, beer and wine still dominate, but in the UK the consumer is far more open-minded about trying new drinks’

An ABV lesson from the label

Moth Drinks – an abbreviation for Mix of Total Happiness – is a pre-mixed drinks brand, and a case study in how cocktail education can be made easy. On the outside of each can is a breakdown of ingredients (down to brand level), all served at bar strength. Variants include a Margarita and an Espresso Martini, with new expressions about to be released. “The level of understanding is getting better quicker and quicker,” says Moth founder Rob Wallis. But the education element of the pack design was a happy accident. “It was actually about differentiation,” he says. He adds that although it’s a labelling requirement, the ABVs of the serves have perhaps been the biggest learning curve for drinkers. “People are uneducated about just how strong mixed drinks are in a bar.” If we’re going to meaningfully educate consumers about liqueurs and cocktails, it needs to extend to the ABV as well.”

he’s gone full-circle and founded his own brand. St Maur is an elderflower liqueur made in Warwickshire, UK.

“I only had a passing knowledge of cocktails and what the well-known ones are,” he admits. “It’s been a fascinating journey. When we created St Maur we made sure it was a really versatile drink, and we will always suggest many accessible, simple recipes to try out. For me the pleasure in mixology is when the person you make the drink for puts it to their lips and goes ‘wow!’ Our educational content in our marketing is about how to get to that point.”

We could be converting drinkers not just to be confident mixing, but to becoming liqueur entrepreneurs, too.

THE ROLE OF DIGITAL

One of the biggest developments in education, regardless of setting or sector has been the role of digital – and this is very much the case with liqueurs and cocktails, too. Remember those Quarantinis? Covid-19 accelerated our collective relationship with tech in many ways – and no place was this felt more than through the humble QR code.

Ballie Ballerson’s Armstrong is exploring video via a QR company, with a strong educational spin. Just sit down, zap the menu and you’re away. “Rather than just having a



Liqueurs



St Maur: built-in versatility

photo of a Martini, you'll see a bartender making the drink, and the ingredients going into it," he explains.

Cointreau is also capitalising on our collective QR code acceptance. And it makes sense: close to 90% of the brand's website traffic is from mobile. 'Connected' bottles integrate a QR code into the design, giving access to its 'Find Your Cocktail' platform, brimming with more than 350 recipes. "They're accessible according to criteria adapted to the needs of the consumer – for example, do I have a shaker?" Chtromberg explains. It's international, too.

"There are 13 versions in nine languages; it is a great online school that we feed into daily with tips and tutorials," she adds. Latest analytics show the number of users has soared by 55% year on year, and by a remarkable 301% over four years.

BUILDING A COMMUNITY

It might feel a bit old hat now, but when education is so in demand, brands should never overlook social media. Cointreau uses Instagram to build a community (2022's greatest social currency) and share cocktail recipes. Rhum Clément is utilising the Highlights functionality to create a 'digital cocktail book'.

And don't forget Instagram Guides. Curate content to create a seamless blog-like experience for your followers.



Talking my language: Cointreau

Perhaps the final word should go to Becky Davies, head of commercial at distributor Ten Locks. She highlights the continued necessity for brands to communicate their purpose – it will aid the education piece. This could be a sustainability message, provenance, heritage, family links, or meaningfully profiling a marginalised group. "Brands that do this are paving the way for a better future, but they're also what consumers want and are willing to pay more for," she says.

Consumers have a thirst for all kinds of education – and it's the brands that are reaching out with useful resources and purposeful stories that are winning. sb

'It might feel a bit old hat now, but when education is so in demand, brands should never overlook social media'

Which trends will be key to the liqueur category's success in 2023?

Georgia Dina Konstantopoulos – communication manager, Creamy Creation

"Premiumisation is still on the rise in the spirits space, and the liqueur category is no exception. There is plenty of opportunity for brands to create products that feature unique ingredients and flavours, which can also work really well in nostalgic cocktails. In the cream liqueur space specifically, these ingredients could range from real oats in an oats liqueur or real coconut cream in a vegan creamy liqueur.

"Liqueurs are the perfect platform for featuring trending botanical and citrus ingredients, such as elderflower, yuzu, grapefruit, or mandarin, which we now see more in cocktail applications."

Helena Zakmane – global commercial director, Tobago Gold

"Being a rum-based liqueur means that our product puts itself on the border between flavoured rums and cream liqueurs. This is a great opportunity not only to create innovative products in the liqueur category, but also position those as unique, allowing for lifestyle-type branding and communication. This also means disrupting the traditional consumption patterns, occasions and attracting new consumers. An all-year-round product, neat or mixed, loved by consumers – Tobago Gold aims at that and the feedback we are getting from the markets supports the idea."

Godelief van Erve – global marketing director, De Kuyper Royal Distillers

"We notice an interesting trend towards coloured cocktails, driven by the 'Instagrammability' of the cocktail, especially pink ones with, for instance, raspberry liqueur. In addition, the no/low trend remains unbroken, also in terms of low calories and low-sugar content. And RTDs continue to grow, which makes it possible for new consumers to easily enter the cocktail category: they're easy to serve, and to try out."