

805

LIVING



The Drinks Issue

TRENDS IN COCKTAIL LAND

Discover the latest creations and innovations from Central Coast distillers, bar owners, and mixologists

BY JAIME LEWIS



Until fairly recently, cocktail options in the 805 consisted of the usual suspects: martinis, margaritas, Manhattans, etc. No artisan ice programs. No crafty garnishes. No boundary-pushing shrubs, infusions, or surprise ingredients.

With the rise of local distilleries, farm-fresh pickings, and skilled mixologists, all of that's changed. Today, they're not just cocktails—they're *craft cocktails*, and they rival wine and beer for their complexity, gravity, and devoted following. Even in wine country, the gin joints are jumpin'.

Ready to start sipping something new? Here, you'll find the latest in spirits, mixers, accompaniments, and signature concoctions from the some of the experts behind the Central Coast booze revolution.

SPIRIT OF THE TIMES

Gin, that exuberantly potent potable, has its hot spots and fans in the 805.

DIY G+T

The herbaceous vibrance of gin attracts all manner of flavor-seekers, including Maggie Cameron and Eric Connolly of **Della's** (dellaspasorobles.com) in Paso Robles. Whereas their next-door restaurant The Hatch (hatchpasorobles.com) features Southern-inflected comfort food and whiskey, Della's serves wood-fired pizza and cocktails from a California-centric library of gins.

These include four signature gin and tonics (named "Beauty," "Brains," "Brawn," and "Bewitchery"), but guests can build their own G and T according to their preference, too. The procedure: pick one gin, pick the Fever-Tree tonic of your choice, then select one of four aromatic garnishes—fresh herbs, edible flowers, smoke, or seasonal fruit.

A New Mediterranean Classic

The Spanish cuisine at **Loquita** (loquitasb.com) in Santa Barbara meets its perfect match in a cocktail menu devoted exclusively to *gin tonics*, or Spanish-style gin and tonics. How different is a Spanish G and T from its English-speaking counterpart? Vastly.

Gin tonics up the game considerably with the highest quality tonic water, craft gins from across the globe, wide-hipped, stemless wine glasses, and specialty ice. Most important, Loquita *gin tonics* include more than a simple lime wedge as garnish; each glass maximizes freshness with a bouquet of produce, from plums, yuzu, and lavender to blood oranges and elderflower.

Mix and match ingredients to create a personalized gin and tonic at Della's (opposite) in Paso Robles. The La Reina *gin tonica* (right) at Loquita in Santa Barbara is made with Empress 1908 gin, manzanilla sherry, lavender, and tonic.





High Seas Mead uses locally sourced fruits, like Meyer lemon and watermelon (above), to create its four sparkling flavors. At Paso Robles' new Cane Tiki Room (right), a devilish vessel delivers punch for two to four imbibers, complete with a fiery presentation.

BAR WISE

Room for Mead

This month, **High Seas Mead** (highseasmead.com) in Santa Barbara opens its new taproom to introduce mead to the Funk Zone. Made of just honey, water, and yeast, mead is the oldest known fermentable beverage, predating beer and wine. At the taproom, High Seas carbonates and flavors its mead with fresh-pressed juices for a crisp, crushable drink that's low in alcohol and gluten-free.

Secret(ish) Cocktail Collaborations

Watch social media for cues about clandestine menu collaborations, like those that occasionally transpire between **Oak & Iron** (oakandiron.com) in Thousand Oaks and **Paul Martin's American Grill** (paulmartinsamericangrill.com) in Westlake Village. If you pay attention to their Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram feeds, you might get to try one of their mixologists' limited-time-only drinks.

Packing a Punch

The **Cane Tiki Room** (cantikiroom.com) opened in Paso Robles last February, offering vintage vacation glamour and a staggering selection of 150 rums from across the globe. In addition to the menu of picture-worthy individual tropical drinks, don't miss the bar's three tiki punches, available for up to four or eight people to sip. All drinks can be paired with shareable Polynesian small bites like Spam Musubi, Firecracker Shrimp, and Mongolian Beef.

A New Way to Whiskey

The husband-and-wife team behind **Barton Family Wines** (bartonfamilywines.com) in Paso Robles is set to open the new Grain+Vine Distillery on their West Highway 46 estate. Named to honor co-owner Jenny Barton's grain-farming father and co-owner Joe Barton's grape-farming father, Grain+Vine will offer "unconventional whiskeys and traditionally focused gin and vodka," say the Bartons. Don't miss the on-site outdoor cocktail lounge with views of rolling Paso Robles vineyards.



FROM TOP: COURTESY OF HIGH SEAS MEAD; PRETTY MEDIA CREATIONS 2022; OPPOSITE: GARY MOSS PHOTOGRAPHY



After losing his home to the 2018 Thomas Fire mudslides, Berkeley “Augie” Johnson (above, right) became interested in the fire-mitigating high moisture content of agave plants. Purchases of his latest product, Firebreak Tequila (above), support the planting of agave in fire-prone areas.

A SOLUTION WORTH SIPPING FOR

Berkeley “Augie” Johnson, owner of Augie’s Agave (augiesagave.com) in Santa Barbara, shares the ethos behind his tequila-style spirits brand and new tequila and mezcal bar on State Street in Santa Barbara.

What’s the story behind your new Firebreak Tequila?

The impetus was the Thomas Fire mudslides a few years ago. We lost our house and possessions. Later, I read a forest service article from the '70s about how to mitigate fires, and it said to grow cactus and agaves, which grow well in the hills here. I went to a fire council meeting and said that if anyone wanted to put agave in their defensible space, I'd fund it. I got thousands of plants growing through Montecito, Santa Barbara, and all the way up north in Buellton.

Once I learned about it, I got more and more into agave. I went to Oaxaca and Guadalajara, and thought I could make a spirit out of the agaves I helped plant in Santa Barbara. They take six to seven years to mature, so until those are available, I've been growing them out of Jalisco. The Firebreak brand celebrates the strength and resilience of our community and of our firefighters.

We hear you’re opening a tequila bar in downtown Santa Barbara.

Yes, in late July or early August. It’s called Augie’s. We’re hopefully going to have the largest selection of tequilas and mezcals on the West Coast. There will be a huge wall of every tequila I can possibly find, plus a spot just for local varieties of agave spirits. I think the first wave for California was wine. The second wave was beer. The third wave could be agave spirits, because it grows so well here.

How many types of tequila do you plan to offer at Augie’s?

Hundreds. It’s a very special liquor.



A vermouth-soaked dragon fruit ice cube chills the Alta California cocktail at La Paloma in Santa Barbara.

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: TOP: CARY MOSS PHOTOGRAPHY

THERE'S WHAT IN MY COCKTAIL?

Bizarre and beautiful, whimsical and weird, unexpected ingredients are turning up in all sorts of drinks.

Frozen Vermouth Oso d'oro-infused Dragon Fruit Cubes

At **La Paloma** (lapalomasb.com) in Santa Barbara, the Alta California cocktail riffs on the area's indigenous roots with dragon fruit, a plant native to the Americas. The fruit is soaked in Vermouth Oso d'Oro from T.W. Hollister (a heritage California brand), frozen into ice cubes, and placed in a stemless glass with Cutler's Gin.

Rainbow Sherbet

In San Luis Obispo, **Highwater** (highwaterslo.com) uses Thrifty Rainbow Sherbet in a punch called The Rumpus Room, based on a drink popular at 1980s birthday parties and baby showers.

Avocado and Agave

Behind the bar at **Oak & Iron** (oakandiron.com) in Thousand Oaks, mixologists use a reduction of avocado and agave for a sweet-savory cocktail syrup. This lean, green concoction lends texture and nuance when shaken with tequila and served in an up glass with a brûléed lime wheel garnish for a cocktail called "FOMO."

Chanterelle Vodka

At **Alchemists' Garden** (alchemistsgarden.com) in Paso Robles, the in-house alchemists have infused vodka with chanterelle mushrooms for a funky fresh take on the margarita. The chiller? A soy sauce ice cube.

Soju, Yakult, and Popping Boba Pearls

The folks at **Secret Bao** (secretbaosb.com) in Santa Barbara offer a cocktail called Poppin Passion, made with the rice-based spirit soju, the Korean yogurt drink Yakult, and popping passion-fruit boba pearls. Chefs and owners Felicia Medina and Peter Lee work with front-of-house manager Mikee Erandio to create the flavor-popping drinks.

Beer Syrup

Brandon Ristaino, owner of **The Good Lion** (goodlioncocktails.com) in Santa Barbara, uses house-made beer syrups to add flavor and body to cocktails. To make the syrups, he emulsifies beer and sugar or honey to add an unexpected and complementary dimension to drinks like an Irish whiskey Old Fashioned sweetened with Guinness syrup instead of simple syrup.



At Secret Bao in Santa Barbara, the Poppin Passion cocktail (above) is made with soju, Yakult, and popping passion-fruit boba pearls. Scoops of Thrifty Rainbow Sherbet bob in The Rumpus Room (left), a spiked punch bowl for groups at Highwater in San Luis Obispo.





Oregon sour cherries are doused in Kentucky bourbon and bitters for a Yes Cocktail Co. garnish.

BOURBON-SOAKED SIDEKICKS

Bourbon is having an extended moment, but fresh produce soaked in bourbon is particularly au courant.

Boozy Cherries

Local cocktail supply group **Yes Cocktail Co.** (yescocktailco.com) in Paso Robles steeps Oregon sour cherries in Kentucky bourbon for its jarred Bordeaux-style boozy cherries. The syrup they're packed in is made with Kentucky bourbon as well, along with Yes Cocktail Co. bitters and cane sugar. Drop the cherries into an Old Fashioned or skewer them on a Manhattan and use the rich Bourbon syrup as a mixer and flavor accompaniment, too. Or, tackle another cocktail trend by mixing up a Dirty Shirley, a grownup and decidedly non-virgin take on the Shirley Temple.

Bourbon Pickled Carrots

Upgrade your Bloody Mary with a garnish of carrots pickled in Kentucky-aged bourbon, smoked salt, and maple syrup from **Last of Seven** (lastofseven.com) in Santa Barbara. Owner Elizabeth Osterman-Brown also suggests using the carrots as a garnish for chilled carrot juice, a bit of grated fresh ginger, and a splash of fresh-squeezed orange juice over ice.





NICHES FOR NIGHTCAPS

Stay for a nightcap? It might sound like an old-fashioned invitation, but in the 805, the nightcap is roaring back into fashion. Though it can be just about any drink you'd like to end the evening with, a nightcap is traditionally made with brown spirits meant to be sipped slowly.

Open until 11 p.m. on Friday and Saturday, **Nightcap at Granada Hotel and Bistro** (granadahotelandbistro.com) in San Luis Obispo offers a menu of classic and signature options, like the "Thyme Stone," made with Madeira, blackberry thyme cordial, bourbon, and lime. The bar also boasts an impressive list of nonalcoholic late-night sippers.

In Santa Barbara, the **Djinn Library Bar** at Hotel Californian (hotelcalifornian.com) hosts a late-night event coinciding with the full moon. Called Howl, it features tarot card readings, a live DJ, and nightcap concoctions by "mixological alchemist" Devon Espinosa.

At **The Tavern at Zaca Creek** (zaca-creek.com), the bar is open until midnight on Friday and Saturday, and every Thursday from 4 p.m. to 10 p.m., it hosts Flight Nights that feature distillery flights. As for nightcaps, sip a classic Sazerac or Manhattan or to keep the party going, order the "Bright Nights," made with bourbon, amaro, coffee liqueur, and chocolate-walnut bitters. After all, the night is young. ♦

Made with Russell's Rye, vermouth, and orange bitters, the Manhattan (left) at Tavern at Zaca Creek in Buellton is one way to cap off the day. The intimate candlelit atmosphere at the Granada Hotel and Bistro's Nightcap lounge (above) in San Luis Obispo is an apropos setting for an end-of-night toast. Mixologist Devon Espinosa shakes up late-night cocktails at Hotel Californian's Djinn Library Bar in Santa Barbara.

