

# Why Your Bar Needs a Signature Drink...

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**T**he best operators have long recognized the tremendous profits that can be generated by putting all their marketing resources into promoting one unique product that they have developed.

At the Hyatt Regency Kauai, it is the Poipu Passion; at the Cactus Club in Vancouver, it's the Bellini; in downtown San Diego, the Bitter End has their Black Martini. And walk in to any large chain restaurant, from Applebee's to TGIFriday's, and you will see the staff pushing the restaurant's own blended frozen Margarita or other specialty.

The savvy operators of these establishments understand that there are three great reasons to develop a signature drink. First, these drinks are very profitable. Most of the examples cited above have a theoretical pour cost of under 10%. That means that every time one is sold, the operator sees his beverage cost go down and his profits go way up.

Second, the staff is trained to sell the signature drink. In fact, it sells so well that it is a large part of their sales mix. Generally, a well-accepted signature drink should make up 5% - 10% of a bar's alcohol sales. The combination of a high-volume item that also carries an exceptional profit margin can only have one result: exploding profits.

Third, a unique and delicious drink will build customer loyalty. If your customers love your signature and can't get it anywhere else, they will turn into your favorite type of customer: regulars.

There is, of course, a legendary example of this concept working to perfection. Victor Bergeron, proprietor of Trader Vic's restaurant in Oakland, developed the Mai Tai. In 1944, Bergeron served it to the first customer and, in his words, "Carrie took one sip and said, 'Mai Tai-Roa Ae.' In Tahitian this means 'Out of this world - The Best.' Well, that was that. I named the drink 'Mai Tai.'"



What did this specialty drink do for Trader Vic's? Well, the drink became so popular that the world's supply of 17-year old Jamaican rum soon ran out. Then all the world's 15-year old rum ran out. In the meantime, Trader Vic's reputation grew and grew, in large part because of the word of mouth about the restaurant's theme - and the Mai Tai. In the end, Trader Vic's grew to over 25 restaurants and the Mai Tai became one of the world's great cocktails.

## How can you make this work in your bar?

### 1 Have only ONE signature drink

If you try to promote too many "special" drinks then your marketing message gets diluted. Your staff will not pick up on the urgency and excitement of linking one unique product to your bar's public image. Moreover, your customers will be confused by the conflicting messages. Again, Trader Vic Bergeron originally developed ten exotic drinks but, as he says, "within 30 days everyone had forgotten the other nine."



### 2 Choose the right drink for your signature

Everything starts by choosing the right recipe for your signature. It should be something unique that will spark your customer's interests. Making a Long Island Iced Tea your signature drink won't work. Your customer has had it before and can get it anywhere.

Instead, you want something with a lot of pizzazz - something out of the ordinary. The Bitter End's Black Martini, for instance, is a vodka martini made with frozen espresso. It is jet black yet smooth and creamy. Having never seen it anywhere else, I ordered one simply because it looked cool and I was intrigued to see the bartenders making so many.

### 3 Price it right

It should be priced to produce profits! It should yield a theoretical pour cost of between 5% - 15%, obviously the lower the better. If your recipe is based on a well spirit this will be easy. We all know that a Margarita or a well vodka-based cocktail costs little and can easily produce an 8% -10% pour cost. If you want to use more exotic liqueurs, your cost will be higher and you have to price accordingly. The Poipu Passion in Hawaii, for example, retails for close to \$7. If the price is a concern, one strategy is to introduce it at a lower price and raise it after you have built up demand.

### 4 Market it effectively

The very best way to market a signature drink is by the way that it looks. A colorful or exotic drink served in a unique glass is guaranteed to generate a buzz in your bar. Your servers will be asked over and over again, "what did you just serve to that table?" The Cactus Club's signature frozen Bellini, for example, is bright orange and served heaping over a large Martini glass.

Another effective merchandising tool is to have a frozen slush drink as your signature. The sight of your bartenders pouring slush out of a colorful frozen drink machine is irresistible.

Finally, your signature must be prominently featured on your menu. Most effective is a sidebar that tells a story about your drink: how it was discovered, why it is so special, or an interesting story about the ingredients.

#### Three great reasons to develop a signature drink:

- One: Signature Drinks are profitable
- Two: Staff are trained to sell
- Three: Increased Customer Loyalty

### 5 Make sure your staff wants to sell it

If your staff doesn't promote it - enthusiastically and continuously - your signature will be a failure. As owner, you have to ask your staff to share your vision of a great drink that you make your very own. Tell them how it will build customer loyalty and bring in new patrons who want to try it for themselves. But most importantly, get your staff to understand that their efforts will determine success or failure.

Perhaps the best way to get your staff to buy into the concept quickly is to hold a contest to invent the drink itself. Tell your bartenders that you want something unique - that tastes delicious, looks stunning and appeals to both men and women. Explain your vision to make this concoction the bar's very own brand. Then have a staff "party" at which all your staff tastes the drinks that your bartenders have come up with and votes on their favorite.

Finally, train your staff on how to sell. Give your servers and bartenders a couple of "scripts" that they can use with customers. When the customer sits down at the bar, your bartender could say,

"How are you this evening? Are you here to have one of Joe's Bar's Famous SWIRLS?"



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