

# Making Spirits Bright

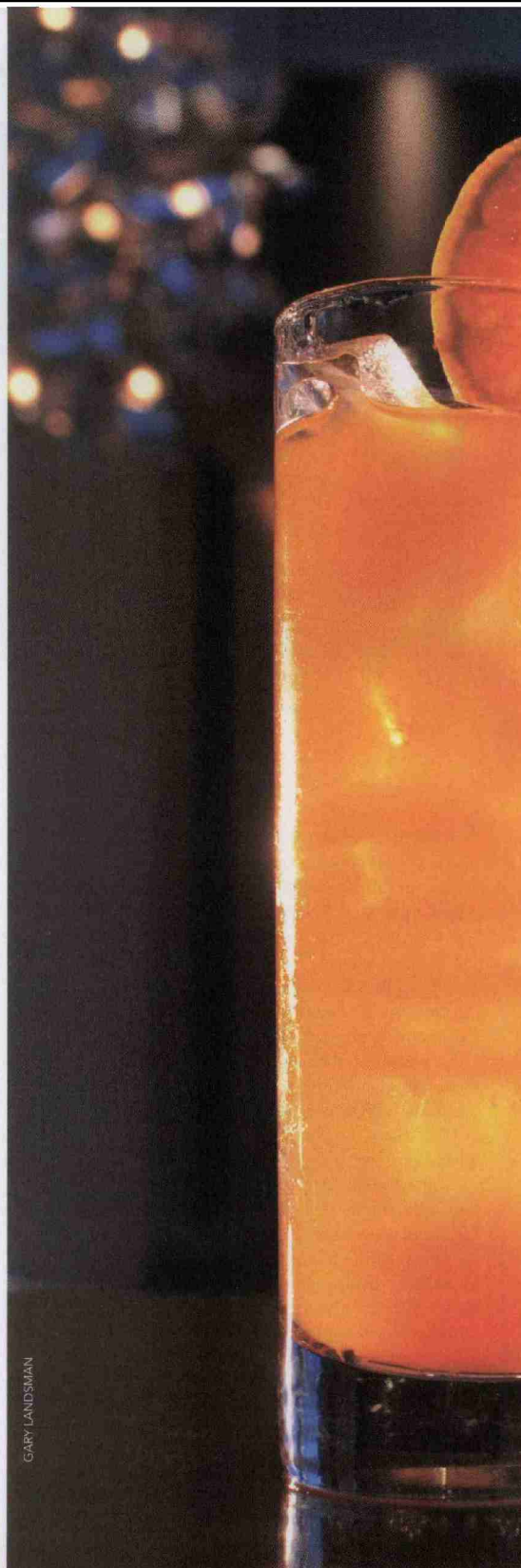
Operators add festive flair to their beverage programs this holiday season with high-end selections.

By Kelly A. Magyarics

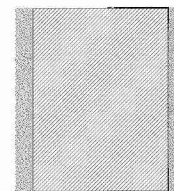
When the weather turns cooler and just a few pages remain on the calendar, it's time to celebrate with friends, family and high-end libations. A dram of Scotch or a sip of Bourbon can be a fashionable start to an evening, while a snifter of Cognac or glass of Port are both fitting to cap things off. And using these and other premium quaffs, such as Bourbon, gin and other spirits, in cocktails can even broaden their appeal. We asked operators how splurge-worthy sips are being paired, featured and promoted this holiday season; if patrons choose them in lieu of dessert; and if pronunciation challenges affect guest attitudes and sales.

At Bibiana Osteria Enoteca, a 140-seat Italian bar and restaurant in Washington, D.C., management features "The 25 Cocktails of Christmas." Daily in December, a new cocktail is revealed and offered to guests for \$12, with the previously unveiled libations also available. "This promotion mimics using an advent calendar to count down the days until Christmas," explains wine director and general manager Francesco Amodeo. The list includes holiday classics like the Tom & Jerry (\$12), a flip made with Rémy Martin VS Cognac, Mt. Gay Dark Rum and a frothy milk topper.

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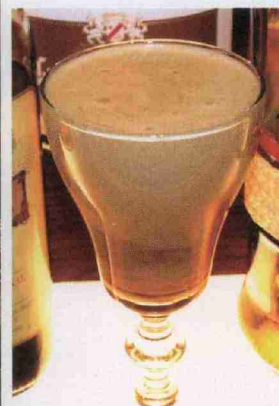
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Page 1 of 4



At Bibiana Osteria "The 25 Days of Christmas" promotion features drinks such as (from left) the Giulia, made with Hendrick's Gin, Aperol and orange juice; and the Andrea, made with homemade mandarin liqueur, Cocchi Americano, Luxardo Bitters and grapefruit juice.



The Summit restaurant (left) at the Broadmoor in Colorado, serves high-end drinks such as the Rum Raisin (above).

**A LOOK AT CLASSIC WINTER WARMERS**

Traditionally, Cognac and Port have been treated as winter warmers to wind down an evening, but Timothy Baldwin notes that he has seen that trend changing. The wine director for 744-room Broadmoor, in Colorado Springs, Colorado with eighteen restaurants and lounges, says that, "Cognac sales are dropping," he notes. Still, The Broadmoor offers 15 Cognacs priced \$9 to \$150 per two-ounce pour.

Sara Fasolino, beverage systems manager of the Chicago-based 77-location Morton's The Steakhouse chain, agrees with the downturn, adding that many guests don't understand Port and younger patrons often aren't particularly interested in Cognac. Market data concurs with the latter: from 2009 to

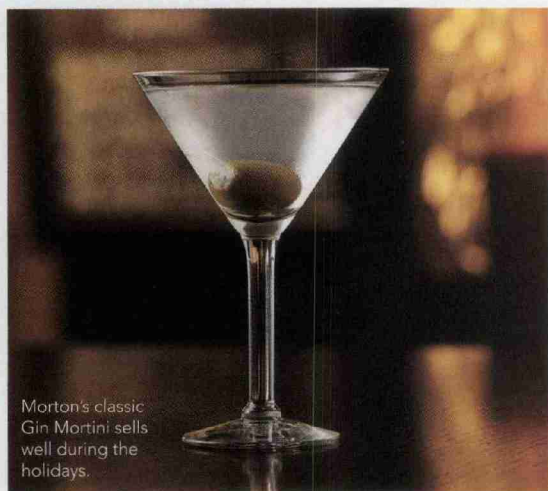
2010 sales of Cognac and brandy were down four-tenths of a percent, according to the Beverage Information Group, *Cheers'* parent company.

Nonetheless, Morton's does see a bit of an uptick in Cognac sales during the holidays. The restaurant chain offers fourteen Cognacs priced from \$9.25 to \$196 for a one-and-a-half ounce pour, and three-quarters of the spirit's total sales are in fact during the months of October, November and December. To encourage experimentation of their most expensive Cognac, Rémy Martin "Louis XIII," management now also offers it in a one-ounce pour for \$132 and a half-ounce pour for \$66. Port fans have a choice of four selections priced from \$10.75 to \$20.75.

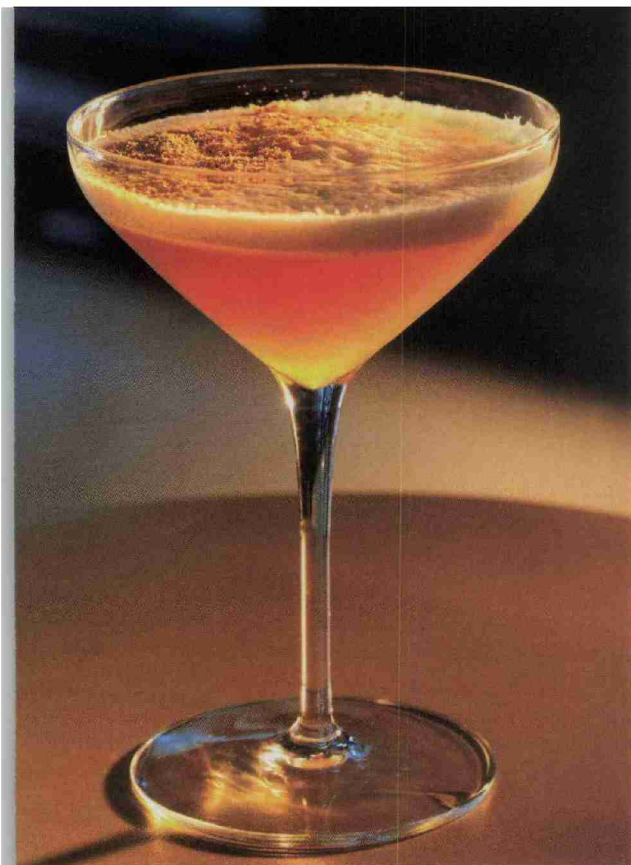
Bourbon's popularity has soared in recent years all year round, but it undoubtedly has a stronger appeal for some guests in the fall and winter. Morton's stocks nine Bourbons priced \$10.25 to \$13.25 for a two-ounce pour, which it features in drinks like their House Manhattan (\$14.75), with Maker's Mark 46 Bourbon, Carpano Antica Formula Vermouth and Angostura Bitters.

And let's not forget about gin, whose inclusion in complex concoctions makes it a toast-worthy tippie. Amodeo uses oak barrels made by his grandfather on Italy's Amalfi Coast for barrel-aged cocktails like the Aged Maddalena (\$14). Bombay Sapphire, Luxardo Bitters and Cocchi Vermouth spend three months in cask, which renders a mellow yet multi-dimensional drink. The Broadmoor's Kiss the Sky (\$10.75) mixes cucumber- and rose-scented Hendrick's Gin with smoky Del Maguey Tobala Wild Mountain Mezcal, pomegranate, hibiscus and rosemary for a dichotomous study in widely contrasting flavors.

The classic gin Martini also gets its own menu sub-category at Morton's. Premium Gin Mortinis (\$13.25) offer the guest a choice between Beefeater, Bombay or Tanqueray Gin; the Super Premium Mortinis (\$14.25) up the ante with a selection of Bombay Sapphire, Hendrick's, Plymouth or Tanqueray 10 Gin. All are garnished with hand-stuffed, blue cheese olives.



Morton's classic Gin Mortini sells well during the holidays.



At Bibiana the 8 Simona, which is part of The 12 Days of Christmas promotion, is made with Blackwell Rhum, egg white and nutmeg.

### TOASTY TIPPLES

When thoughts turn to sleigh rides and stockings hung by a crackling fireplace, soothing warm beverage options are there to ward off the chill. “Hot cocktails of course pick up traction in the winter,” Baldwin says. During the holidays, The Broadmoor’s “Winter Warmer” program spotlights four hot cocktails, including the Rum Raisin (\$10.25), with 1982 Toro Albalá “Don PX” Sherry, Ron Zacapa Centenario 23 Rum and fresh vanilla cream.

Though Cognac may seem to be struggling at some operations, Scotch sales remain strong during the holidays, as well as year-round. Many venues are partial to stocking premium bottles, but Baldwin cautions against pricing Scotch out of reach of curious customers. “Too many restaurants that I have seen only carry elite selections—you need to allow people choice to build up to that.” The Broadmoor carries 32 kinds of Scotch, priced \$8 to \$70 for a two-ounce serving.

For years, Scotch and a good cigar was the requisite nightcap for many spirits lovers. After the smoking ban went into effect in many cities several years ago, many venues thought it would put a dent in sales. Fortunately, Fasolino says, that has not proven to be the case at Morton’s. For one thing, smoking is still permitted in many markets. Additionally, some locations host holiday Scotch or Cognac tastings on the patio, where guests pay \$45 for a tasting flight that’s paired with a selection of cigars. Baldwin also believes Scotch aficionados are not altering their habits due to smoking legislation. “Guests who are interested in [Scotches] will still drink them without a cigar.”

Libations like Cognac and Scotch are undisputedly premium classics, but at venues that have a particular culinary or ethnic focus, they might not seamlessly fit into a beverage program. Bibiana Osteria Enoteca turns to Italian counterparts to satisfy clients’ thirst for a high-end holiday cordial or spirit. Amodeo features between 10 and 12 Grappas and Amaros on the menu, demonstrating, he says, that “after dinner drinks don’t need to be from France.” This holiday season, guests can also sip aged cocktails like the Katia (\$14), with Redemption Rye, Averna Amaro, Marasca liqueur and chocolate bitters made in-house.

### THE PRONUNCIATION GAME

Accessibility is often facilitated by guests’ ability to feel comfortable ordering a spirit. Part of that process often includes feeling like they can pronounce the name of their desired quaff. Foreign aperitifs and digestifs, such as those from Italy, as well as any high-end spirits and liqueurs, often have an inherent intimidation factor in their problematic pronunciation. Amodeo admits that guests are often concerned about how to say the name of a beverage on their menu, but believes it’s the role of staff and management to make sure they feel comfortable ordering it. So he trains servers not to correct guests’ pronunciation, however inaccurate.

“It doesn’t matter how you pronounce it, as long as you try it,” he muses. Fasolino puts this challenge a bit more bluntly: “If they can’t pronounce it, they won’t order it.” In markets where alcohol laws permit it, Morton’s servers present a “VIP Tray” of complimentary cordials tableside to guests, giving them the chance to easily sample and partake in unfamiliar beverages. Fasolino sees Cognacs and some Scotches to be particularly vulnerable to pronunciation blunders by intimidated customers.

Premium ingredients undoubtedly have a place on drinks menus all year long. But during the holidays, everyone is a little merrier, and guests seem more willing to splurge. Just as twinkling lights woven in the trees lend a festive air, a selection of high-end libations add a sparkling touch to any holiday drinks program.

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