



Chambar bartender Mark Brand uses herbs and spices to prepare a tasty concoction. PHOTO BY BILL KEAY/VANCOUVER SUN

## ■ IN GOOD SPIRITS

# Fresh herbs, piquant spices add zing to bar drinks

BY KATE ZIMMERMAN

**F**ruit in our booze, we're used to — but fresh herbs and piquant spices? That's the trend, with bartenders Stateside getting on board early and Vancouver drink-slingers hot on their heels. Ingredients like fresh basil, thyme and rosemary are now showing up alongside mojito-bound mint as cocktail fodder, not to mention such pungent spices as star anise and red peppercorns.

Chambar bar manager Mark Brand thinks this development's swell. "I'm trying to set new ground rather than re-hash the classics," he explains.

Brand has featured the Basil Zayjax — basil, rum, pomegranate syrup and pomegranate seeds — on Chambar's menu for a while. Lately, he's offering a drink that features warm, cinnamon-infused sake poured over star

anise. "The blend of the anise and the cinnamon is just a wonderful experience," Brand says. Star anise, he points out, is an aromatic, and its heated fragrance hits the nose right after its exotic look makes an arresting visual impression.

In the context of happy hour, fresh herbs are equally unexpected. Brand points out that they are also healthy for your body and contain no preservatives — unlike, say, a standard bar's margarita mix. As far as he's concerned, a cocktail can contain "anything that is doable

and infusible and flavourful."

When making a cocktail with herbs, the trick is to muddle them (bruise them with a wooden pestle or other blunt implement) in the mixing glass. Pour in the other ingredients, then strain the mixture to avoid limp shreds of vegetation in the cocktail. Brand employs a fresh leaf of the herb as a garnish, a signal of what is to come.

"You're breaking moulds with making savoury cocktails that aren't a Caesar or a Bloody Mary," he says. "You're playing with the balance of flavours, and nothing is too outrageous to try."

Are there basic rules when it comes to herbs and alcohol, like "Rosemary's glorious with gin but revolting with rye?"

"I don't think any of the combinations are obvious," Brand says.

On his new list, he's offering an Amaretto di Saronno-based drink called Luini's Madonna that employs red peppercorns. This spicy Madonna is closer to Mrs. Ritchie than to Christ's mother — it's served with a poppadum that's crusted with cayenne and black sesame seeds and drizzled with caramel. Wow.

Bar managers Jamie Boudreau of Lumiere and Ron Oliver of the brand new Century in Century House are also herb and spice enthusiasts. Boudreau incorporates herbs (and infusing agents like lemongrass) into many of the ambrosial concoctions he serves up at Lumiere.

Oliver is coming up with drinks to suit the Latin-flavoured ambience at Century, where spices like cumin and coriander often show up on the food menu.

Rum is the specialty of the house, he says, along with infusions that pair fruit like pineapple with herbs like coriander. Oliver's Contraband cocktail sneaks a little basil and cracked pepper into a perky vodka, strawberry, lemon and balsamic vinegar sipper.

## ■ APPLE FENNEL BUCK

Lumiere's Jamie Boudreau came up with this refreshing drink.

**1.5 oz. Plymouth gin**

**1 oz. Manzana Verde apple liqueur**

**5 drops absinthe (or pernod)**

**¼ chopped apple**

**½ fennel stalk**

**1 lime wedge**

**2 oz. ginger ale.**

Place all ingredients except ginger beer into a mixing glass. Muddle thoroughly, ensuring that the chopped fennel gets crushed. Strain into a highball glass. Fill with crushed ice and ginger ale.