

Los Angeles Times

ENTERTAINMENT

A clear trend in Southern California's craft cocktails scene

Drink experts from the Varnish, 1886, Neat and other bars are playing up the delicate dance of vodka, gin and other clear spirits.

By Jessica Gelt, Los Angeles Times

May 18, 2012

Cranberry is not vodka's best friend. Real vodka drinkers know this, but for years their taste has been marginalized by a craft cocktail scene obsessed with whiskey. Change is on the horizon, however. As Los Angeles bartenders vie to keep up with the next trending drink wave, venues all over town are favoring clear spirits. Well-regarded mixologists including Aidan Demarest and Marcos Tello of the cocktail consulting firm Tello/Demarest Liquid Assets are leading the way, serving as brand ambassadors to Stoli Elit vodka and Bols Genever (a grain-based, gin-like spirit), respectively, and featuring both — and other clear varieties — prominently on their own drink menus, and bartenders including Devon Tarby (the Varnish), Garrett Mckechnie (1886) and Tricia Alley (director of mixology for Southern Wine & Spirits) are enthusiastically creating unique drinks featuring vodka, gin, rum, cachaça, pisco and more and learning to play up their more subtle flavor profiles in drinks. "I have clear thoughts every single day," says Alley, winking from behind smart black-framed glasses at a recent gathering at the Wine House meant to educate drinkers and bartenders about the remarkable variety of clear spirits. "You hear, 'Oh, mixologists hate vodka.' I love vodka. But I think it should be consumed as simply as possible." Demarest agrees. He poured two fingers of vodka meant for sipping; it's the same way he likes to serve the spirit at his Glendale bar, Neat. It tasted smooth, with an earthy depth redolent of grain. It would be easy to erase the flavor with any number of other ingredients. Even putting it on ice threatens to do that, says Demarest. "The colder the vodka gets, the less flavor it has," he says. "You can chill the hell out of it and then it becomes this really beautiful glass of water. I want to taste it." That's not to say that clear spirits don't have an illustrious past when it comes to drink-making. Particularly gin, which was a beloved intoxicant before Prohibition and enjoyed a much better reputation than vodka when craft cocktails came of age again. Still, light spirits were often misunderstood and misused. "It's a delicate dance with these clear spirits," says Tello. "You can bury them by hitting them with a lot of citrus and sugar, but you're a better bartender if you know how to play up their flavor and texture." At 1886, the retro hideaway inside the Raymond in Pasadena where Tello consults, the new menu has two unique drinks featuring lesser-known clear spirits. The first, called Barrel Roll and created by mixologist Lacey Murillo, combines barrel-aged Bols Genever, Carpano Antica and Green Chartreuse. It's garnished with a candied Campari chip. The second, created by Garrett Mckechnie, is named Water of Life and calls for a mixture of Aquavit (a clear Norwegian herbal spirit made from potatoes, caraway seeds and herbs), homemade camomile syrup, and gin and is topped off — Collins style — with tonic and a fresh sprig

of camomile. These are light drinks for sunny days, meant to refresh. And clear spirits often get the job done better than the dark stuff. For that reason, Devon Tarby of the Varnish is crazy for Williams Pear Brandy from Oregon's Clear Creek Distillery. "I have to restrain myself or this would be in everything I make," says Tarby. "It's really clean and beautiful. It's the way you want water to taste." **Alley, who consults on menus across the city, is excited about a gin drink that she says really pays tribute to the unique qualities of that spirit at Mi Piacce in Pasadena. It's called Crimson Reaper, and it features Death's Door gin, fresh lemon juice, sugar cane syrup and cherry liqueur.** "The enthusiast will recognize their ol' pal gin in how well the profile of the white spirit is supported," writes Alley in an email accompanying the recipe. "The gin novice who is looking to take a walk on the white side with juniper will appreciate how the spirit is enhanced by the supporting components." In addition to enjoying vodka neat, Demarest is mixing it in ways that ensure you can still taste the spirit. One of his favorite concoctions, the Lemon Thyme Fix at Spago in Beverly Hills, calls for muddled lemon thyme, fresh lemon juice, elderflower liqueur and vodka. It's shaken and double-strained into a coupe. He also served an extremely popular vodka, sherry and elderflower liqueur drink called the Troika at the recent Manhattan Cocktail Classic in New York City. Says Demarest about his former attitude toward vodka, "I've been eating my words about vodka left and right."