

What's the first thing that comes to mind when you think of a steakhouse cocktail? Probably the classics – martini, Old Fashioned, Manhattan – being drunk by a group of dudes, probably all wearing Brooks Brothers suits, probably all putting the tab on their expense accounts.

It's predictable, yes. But steakhouse drinks are classics for a reason. They are time-tested, easy to make, and they usually taste really good.

Conceptually, they're also very similar to steakhouse fare, which, at its core, is straightforward (if exorbitantly expensive) stuff. "Traditional steakhouse cocktails... are big and simple, like the Manhattan and the Old Fashioned," says Bryan Schneider, bar director for Quality Branded Restaurants, a hospitality group that includes NYC steakhouse Smith & Wollensky. "The vodka martini is the perfect example of this; ice-cold vodka, no vermouth, served straight up in an oversized glass."

But the rise of cocktail culture and mustachioed mixology is permeating the hallowed ground of \$100 slabs of meat. Across the country, steakhouses [are diversifying their menus](#), offering international fare like sushi and Greek lamb stew alongside traditional porterhouses and Caesar salads. Cocktail lists are likewise expanding, showcasing increasingly complicated and modern creations.

One factor driving the change in steakhouse cocktail menus is the overall atmosphere becoming less testosterone-fueled. "From the '90s on... more women [came] into male-dominated steakhouses to take their rightful place as a share of our business," Tylor Field, VP of wine and spirits at Strip House, which has several locations around the country, says. "We saw women as having more inquisitive palettes and to be much more discerning in their selections."

The other part of the equation is the rise of cocktail culture due to the efforts of people like Dale DeGroff, and the boom in high-end craft spirits from small distilleries in virtually every corner of the country. People just became a lot more interested in what they were drinking.

In order to appeal to changing tastes and demographics, without alienating the navy-suited brigades, many steakhouses thoughtfully update the classics. Both Smith & Wollensky and Strip House have barrel-aged cocktails available – a Manhattan at the former, an Old Fashioned at the latter. American Cut, Marc Forgione's ultra-modern steakhouse, has a bevy of modern cocktails on the menu, including the OG Smoked Plank Old Fashioned made with Maker's Mark and maple smoke.

Of course, Vegas also has its share of steakhouse cocktail innovation. The new Bavette's Steakhouse & Bar offers four different types of Old Fashioneds made with rye, Tennessee whiskey, Japanese whisky, or cognac. And D.C.'s BLT Prime

has a drinks menu that includes the Manhattan Tea Party, made with tea-spiced vermouth, and a BLT Old Fashioned, which substitutes Mt. Gay Black Barrel rum for whiskey. (Trigger warning: BLT Prime is located in the Trump International Hotel and prominently features Trump Winery on the wine list.)

All of this is excellent news for carnivores who also happen to have an interest in mixology, but it's not like the classics are going anywhere. "A cocktail list needs a sip for everyone," says Jessica Norris, director of beverage and wine education at Del Frisco's Double Eagle Steakhouse. "An updated twist on a classic, molecular mixology, or the standard-bearer itself all provide excitement within a list."

Forward-thinking cocktails are good selling points, but they don't necessarily drive sales. At next-generation and old-school steakhouses, most people stay faithful to the tried and true. Schneider reports that vodka martinis are still really popular at steakhouses. And according to Field, the Old Fashioned remains one of the best-selling drinks at Strip House.

"Classics will always be your backbone; they are classic for a reason," Field says. "Our job is to elevate that classic cocktail to a new dimension through superior products, glassware, training and execution. The innovation is in the details."

An Old Fashioned barrel-aged for six months with a puff of cedar smoke is all well and good; but ultimately, people want what they want and like what they like. "I don't think it has anything to do with cocktails tasting good with food," Schneider says. "Vodka and steak is certainly not the best combo."

That's not really the point, though. Like joining a conga line at a wedding, some phenomena only make sense in certain surroundings. Sipping a crystal-clear Martini before sinking your teeth into a bloody hunk of meat might not be the most logical pairing; but in the mahogany-paneled confines of a white-napkin steakhouse, it just works.

Bartenders and beverage directors are wise to develop interesting cocktails for a new generation of steakhouse diners. Those with discerning palates might prefer to pair their sustainably sourced ribeyes with a better-made Manhattan, Japanese whisky Old-Fashioned, or Martini with craft gin. In any case, the classics, like Caesar (dressing), reign supreme.

Recipes

Smith & Wollensky's Martini

A Manhattan institution in an 1897 green-and-white building, Smith & Wollensky's white-jacketed waiters add stars to their pockets for every 5 years of service.

Ingredients

3 ounces dry gin

1 ounce dry vermouth, preferably Dolin

2 dashes orange bitters

Instructions

Stir until well chilled.

Pour into a chilled martini glass.

Garnish with a lemon twist.

Bavette's Hibiki Tokyo Old-Fashioned

This new Las Vegas steakhouse offers a fleet of Old Fashioneds made with international and craft spirits. This version features Hibiki Harmony, a Japanese whisky.

Ingredients

2.25 ounces Hibiki Harmony

.25 ounce Kokuto syrup, or other brown sugar simple syrup

1/3 dropper Angostura bitters

1/3 dropper Regans bitters

Instructions:

Combine all ingredients in rocks glass.

Stir without ice until syrup and spirits are integrated.

Add large ice cube, stir. Serve.