



Trend Spotting

By Phyllis Ann Marshall

Raise the bar!

This is clearly the era of the bar and lounge. **Cary Redfearn**, owner of **Oysters and Oceans 33^o** says, "The bar is now a popular place to eat. Less structured dining requires no reservation and often offers the same dining experience especially for singles".

Here are ten random thoughts to make your bar and lounge more popular and profitable.

1. Dining is sometimes an after-thought. A young professional client said last night, "When we leave the office we never go to dinner, we go have a drink and relax. One thing leads to another. I have a couple of beers and then order a plate of Ahi. My bill usually exceeds \$25...and we do this every night." More formal restaurants are waiting for guests and those absentees are gathered in a bar/lounge not consciously thinking about food.
2. Be ready when the hungries hit! Bartenders and cocktail servers need to be cross-trained: able to suggest and serve food as well as anyone on the floor. Familiarity with cocktails, as well as wine—both by the glass and bottle—and the complete menu is key. They must keep their eye on replenishing drinks while suggesting appetizers, moving guests from one appetizer to another to an entrée or even dessert or cappuccino and suggesting that groups share if they won't commit singly.
3. Focus on the Bar. Add all the bells and whistles you can dream up. At **Claim Jumper Restaurant** in South Coast Plaza, **Craig Nickoloff** and his architect/design team, **Steve and Sue Ellen Langford** elevated the position and appearance of the bar with lights and ceiling racks displaying highly visible, colorful premium bottles in artistic groupings. The result is a substantial increase in sales of alcoholic beverages, even at the tables.
4. Glassware that "Wows" and a clever name that Sells. Rad ideas for new techniques are easy to find in Las Vegas where competition for the "best bar" is fierce. Visit the **Mandalay Bay** collection. From three-story vertical wine cellars with traversing wine angels at **Aureole** to an iced bar full of frozen Vodka bottles at **Red Square** to **Rumjungle's** list of Trader Vic-style cocktails, it's all part of the fun. **Ziing's Asian Bistro** in Fullerton has a gong that rings each time a pretty girl enters. Bartenders with great personalities, the ability to have fun with guests and still keep a professional handle on the bar are worth finding and keeping and a mix of gals and guys works well.
5. Be careful to not give Happy Hour away. This tradition was designed to bring folks in early with hopes that they stay and dine. Many don't stay, so use Happy Hour to create energy and an early buzz. Reduce the price of well drinks as an inducement, but go easy on discounting premium products and free vittles. Most will pay happy hour prices for upgraded appetizers if the selection is enticing. Happy hour works if well brands and inexpensive beer and wine are utilized, pours are carefully executed, and all drinks are rung up!
6. Strict bar controls are essential. Schedule a review of acceptable alcohol policies and procedures based on the latest guidelines from the ABC. Shot glasses or jiggers are recommended for accurate measuring. If bartenders insist they can free pour accurately test them regularly. Management must watch where the tip jar is located (not next to the cash register), check the POS system regularly to see that all current tickets have been rung up and require a manager's signature to treat a regular guest. Giving away liquor is illegal and the ramifications are serious. Watch for the batching of sales, no rings, and working out of the tip jar.
7. What I've learned this year. Never before has there been more opportunity for restaurants to share in the fun. Guests are excited by the variety, curious to try new beverages and willing to pay top price for premium drinks made carefully by an experienced bartender. Often the beverage bill is bigger than the food bill yet knowledgeable wine connoisseurs are resentful of over-priced easily available wines and high corkage fees are counterproductive. We all strive to achieve the "buzz" of happy guests talking about our restaurants, but the critical buzz that these policies elicit works against us.
8. The retro-power of the cocktail is back and premium Vodkas rule. Offer a good selection and place the beautiful bottles in full view. Research the hot new concoctions: sour apple, lemon drop, and cosmopolitan martinis are the most popular. Add one or two house specialties and have fun over the holidays with appropriate flavors just like **Starbuck's** does with their Frappaccinos—white chocolate, eggnog and cranberry all have a festive attitude.
9. Cozy tables in the bar. Adding more tables is a valuable use of space today, especially the high cocktail tables that afford a view of the action, an opportunity to be seen, and a comfortable place to dine.
10. From swizzle to sizzle. After tempting the swizzle stick crowd with martinis move into Meal-tinis. Santa Monica's **Le Merigot Hotel** created a See-food Martini that's available at **Le Troquet** bar for \$35. A gigantic martini glass arrives overflowing with Maine lobster, jumbo and baby shrimp, Diver scallops, Alaskan king crab, black mussels, Ahi tuna and caviar, all on the rocks. At **Rancho Valencia Resort** in Rancho Santa Fe they serve a "two-martini" lunch—first is a lobster martini in a champagne vinaigrette and second, a Sabayon Martini (egg custard) with fresh berries and pistachios. Other ideas from **Nic's** in Beverly Hills are gazpacho and ceviche all pretty when served as a Meal-tini.

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For information about The Summit-Reinventing Your Restaurant, an invitation only event in January 2004 for independent operators or to obtain a special discount for this limited seating event, e-mail info@foodpower.com.