

Spirited Dining

Magic often happens when lively libations are paired with fabulous food

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“Eat, drink, and be merry!” Since biblical times, that phrase has happily exhorted us to indulge in the pleasures of the palate as a formula for the enjoyment of life. The thoughtful combining of food and spirited beverages results in a gastronomic experience so much more than the sum of its parts, with each component enhancing the other.

This is especially true when cocktails, many with myriad ingredients and nuances of flavors, are paired with special dishes. Sometimes the combination succeeds because the flavor profiles meld and play off of each other, and other times it’s the result of a pleasing contrast. From appetizers to dessert, our favorite chefs “get in the spirits,” and show us how it’s done.

Bernard Guillas, The Marine Room

Espelette Lemongrass Scented Cobia Crudo paired with a San Diego Stormy

Made with Malahat Artisan Ginger Rum, ginger beer and lime, Executive Chef Bernard Guillas deems the cocktail “the perfect storm of flavor and freshness” paired with the appetizer he and Chef de Cuisine Ron Oliver created for the restaurant’s new winter menu. “Cobia has a rich, buttery flavor and dense texture which slowly absorbs the curing ingredients of espelette pepper and dried lemongrass powder,” Chef Bernard describes. “Pomegranate seeds, Nashi pear, lemon-infused olive oil, fennel pollen, cashew pesto, and purple basil flowers add synergy to the delicate flavor of the fish. The pairing excels because the fresh lime juice in the Stormy echoes the citrusy character of the lemongrass, while the ginger’s sweetness and touch of heat work with the spice of the pepper and the fruitiness of the pear and pomegranate.”

The Marine Room

Jason Knibb, NINE-TEN Restaurant & Bar

Stone Crab & Old Bay Spaghettini paired with a Si, Señor

"I find that the successful pairing rule is to complement, not overwhelm, the core flavors of the dish," Executive Chef Jason Knibb elucidates. In addition to the Old Bay seasoning, his housemade pasta dish is vibrant with the flavors of toasted garlic, Fresno chile and lemon, while the Fortaleza Añejo Tequila, starring in the cocktail, smoothly shows off the fresh taste of muddled celery and lemon. "The Old Bay tastes predominantly of celery and celery salt," Knibb points out. "The celery in the cocktail highlights the pasta. Lemon is a classic accompaniment with crab, accentuating the meat's sweetness. Hence, the lemon zest on the pasta and lemon juice in the cocktail. Only a small amount of simple syrup is used to round out the body of the cocktail without masking the refreshing acidity that will lighten up the dish. The smoky flavor of the Añejo Tequila works in tandem with the roasted garlic."

