

Raise the bar

With edible cocktails, in-house labels and mixology lessons for guests, drinks programmes have never been so exciting. Phin Foster talks to **Chanelle Duarte** of Celebrity Cruises and **Paul Shea** of Carnival Cruises about why bar innovations are creating a fizz.

It is not unreasonable to note that cruise ships and alcohol are natural bedfellows. Perhaps it is the stiff sea breeze, the socialising or the promise of adventure and escapism, but wherever you find cruise guests enjoying themselves on board, there will often be a bar somewhere nearby.

However, the days of bar operations mixing piña colodas poolside or guests deciding between white or red wine with dinner are long gone. As in all other aspects of the food and beverage agenda, guests are demanding choice, expertise and creativity.

Many of the recent bar trends are based on the innovations made by operators to enhance the culinary experience on board. Guest chefs have long been a feature of the prestige cruise, but the appearance of guest sommeliers and mixologists is a recent phenomenon.

The emphasis on seasonality and fresh ingredients in evidence in kitchens across the industry is also being reflected on cocktail menus, with demand for regionality expressed through wine and beer lists.

These innovations go beyond the ship's bar and wine stock. Shoreside excursions

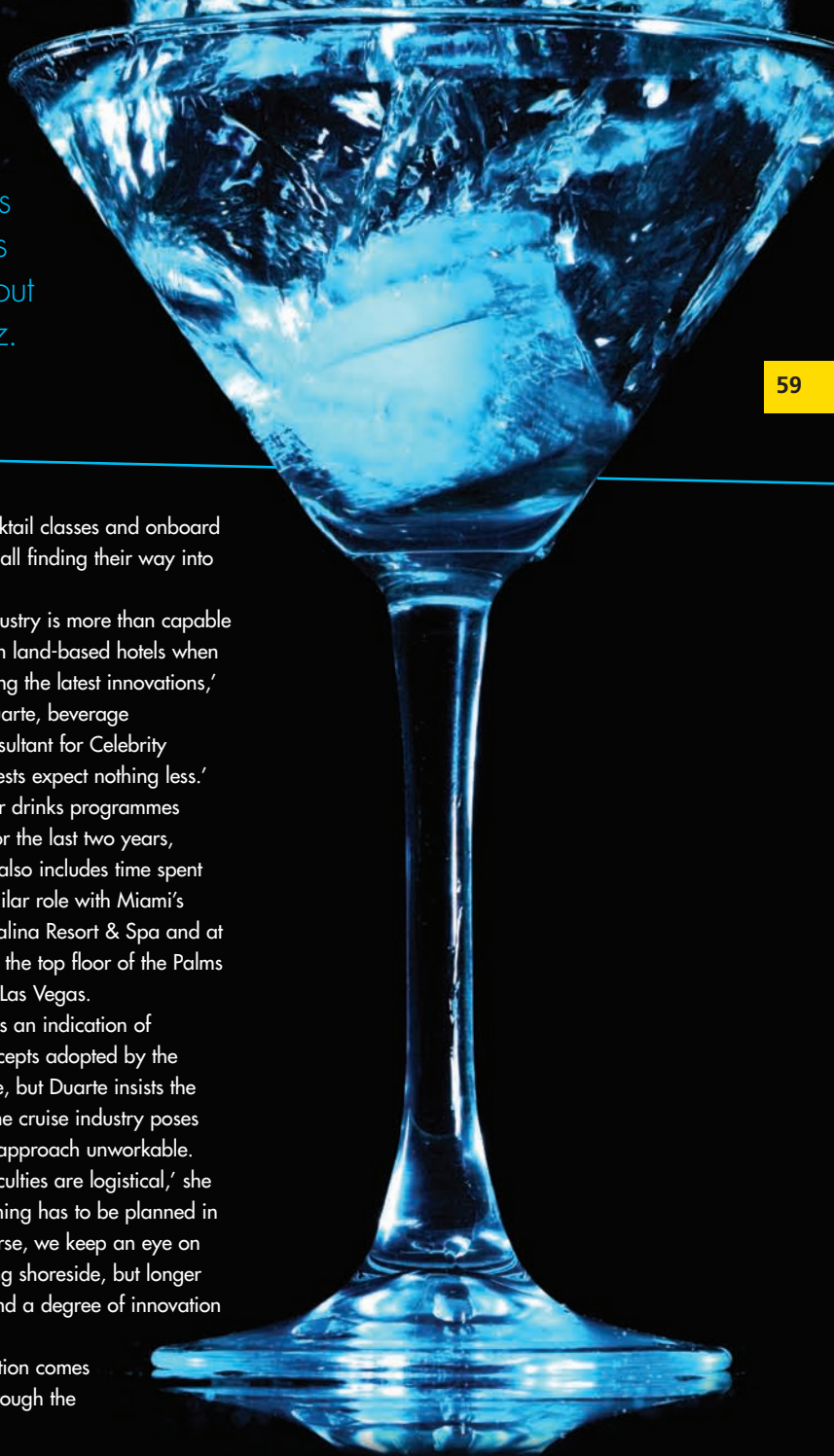
to vineyards, cocktail classes and onboard competitions are all finding their way into the mainstream.

'The cruise industry is more than capable of competing with land-based hotels when it comes to offering the latest innovations,' says Chanelle Duarte, beverage development consultant for Celebrity Cruises. 'Our guests expect nothing less.'

Responsible for drinks programmes across the fleet for the last two years, Duarte's résumé also includes time spent performing a similar role with Miami's prestigious Acqualina Resort & Spa and at Alizé, located on the top floor of the Palms Casino Resort in Las Vegas.

The latter offers an indication of where many concepts adopted by the industry originate, but Duarte insists the challenges that the cruise industry poses make a copycat approach unworkable. 'The biggest difficulties are logistical,' she explains. 'Everything has to be planned in advance. Of course, we keep an eye on what is happening shoreside, but longer lead times demand a degree of innovation on our part.'

Where innovation comes into its own is through the





encouragement of guest participation. Celebrity's wine enrichment programme, developed in partnership with the United States Sommelier Association, features a host of wine events offering guests the opportunity to expand their understanding and appreciation of oenology. It also incorporates workshops Celebrity introduced in 2007 in partnership with wine glass company Riedel Crystal.

The cruise line's Signature Spirits events look to awaken guests' 'inner mixologist' through Mixology 101 workshops developed alongside Bacardi. Celebrity will also host the industry's first Molecular Mixology programme developed by self-anointed 'Liquid Chef' and toast of the New York bar scene, Junior Merino. Merino will also be opening a 'Liquid Lab' on board the *Celebrity Equinox*.

'He is a real innovator,' Duarte enthuses. 'Edible cocktails, the use of multiple flavour combinations; he offers something that our guests would not necessarily see shoreside.'

But operators also appreciate that, while cocktails offer scope for creativity, they must not lose the essence of fun. Carnival, for example, has introduced onboard mixology competitions for guests in which their custom-made cocktails are evaluated by a panel of judges drawn from the ship's food and beverage department. The winner's creation is then sold in the ship's bars and lounges throughout the rest of the cruise.

Thirst for knowledge

Recent innovations in the wine sector are indicative of the added value an intelligently sourced cellar can provide.

Holland America Line's (HAL) introduction of its Sommelier Wine Package at the beginning of the year is a case in point. Available fleet-wide on sailings of ten days or longer, it involves two wine tastings, a six-course wine and food pairing dinner, and a commemorative bottle. This is all overseen by the fleet's team of certified sommeliers.

Meanwhile, Crystal Cruises, the first cruise line to employ sommeliers as standard, has launched its own 'C' Wine label, the result of ongoing collaborations with several vineyards. The *Crystal Symphony's* Wine & Food Experiences of Discovery cruises in November 2009 will feature wine tastings with renowned



The Enomatic system extends a wine's life.

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sommeliers David Glancy and Kris Margerum, respectively. The programme also includes cocktail classes.

A thirst for knowledge about wine offers many opportunities for operators to leverage greater value from their cellar and onboard expertise. It has also forced those in charge of bar operations to monitor closely the manner in which they maintain and develop their wine lists.

'I ask all suppliers to consider our demographic and remember that what guests generally like are recognisable wines that carry a perceived value,' says Paul Shea, director of bar operations at Carnival Cruise Lines. 'I also want to address wine trends. Where is it going? What are the latest changes in the industry? There are major departments for evaluating these things.'

With guests more informed than they once were, Shea changed the way in which Carnival's wines were listed last year. Originally grouped, regardless of region, into categories based on sweetness

and body, they are now defined by variety and price.

'Guests have an understanding of what they want,' he explains. 'Having a more educated clientele on board requires less guidance. We just need to make it easier for them.'

Behind the bar, new technologies are transforming the way in which wines can be stored and served. Duarte is a fan of the Enomatic wine serving system that uses inert gas preservation to enable the flavours and characteristics of a wine to remain intact for more than three weeks after opening the bottle.

'It has allowed us to massively expand the number of wines available by the glass throughout the ship,' she explains. 'If a guest would like to try an Opus One, for example, but is not willing to buy the bottle, we can now offer it in a 1oz, 3oz or 5oz serving. That simply would not have been possible previously.'

An ability to offer guests a taste of extravagance without breaking the bank is particularly useful during a period of financial uncertainty. While cruise lines continue to expand their bar repertoires, some operators have noticed a marked shift in consumer habits that can be directly linked to the economic climate.

Royal Caribbean International and HAL have seen an increase in beer consumption at the expense of more premium products, with director of beverage and signature services at HAL Oliver Hammerer observing that his ships 'still see a high consumption of wine and mixed drinks, but not as much as in the recent past'.

Matching shorter-term consumer trends is as important as leading them and HAL has reacted to this development by increasing daily happy hours and rolling out a number of drinks promotions.

Royal Caribbean has increased its marketing in an effort to get guests buying-up once more. Shea's team at Carnival has introduced premium cocktails that push the concept of value, something he says has been a 'tremendous success'.

Such efforts are necessary, but the relationship between cruisers and the occasional tippie remains as strong as ever, despite the economic climate.

With innovative operators finding various new ways to evolve this rapport, that should also be the case for some time to come. [wc](#)