

# Restaurant

HOSPITALITY



## Agua fresca freshens up drink menus

The Mexican fruit-based beverage is making a splash with guests looking for alternatives to soda

When the temperature rises and thirst kicks in, not everyone reaches for a soda. Summer's bounty of sweet fruit is the perfect ingredient for agua fresca, a staple beverage of Mexican cuisine.

Agua fresca can be made with fruit, grains, seeds and even flowers. Those ingredients are traditionally mixed with sugar and water, but depending on the sweetness of the fruit, sugar can be omitted altogether. Some also choose to use sparkling water instead of still to add a fizz reminiscent of soda.

"Agua frescas are classic beverages you'd receive at pretty much any taco stand in Mexico," said Daniel McLaughlin, general manager at Mission Taqueria in Philadelphia, where the restaurant offers three traditional flavors — jamaica, horchata and tamarindo. "The jamaica is a hibiscus tea that is steeped and then cooled. The tamarindo is made directly from tamarind pulp that we simmer with sugar and add

water, and the horchata is a rice milk that's flavored with canela (Mexican cinnamon) and then thickened with a little sweetened condensed milk.”

The classics will always work, but if you're interested in integrating ingredients from the local farmer's market or a rooftop garden, agua fresca is the perfect vehicle.



### **Breaking with Tradition**

“A lot of people ask for the typical horchata or jamaica juice, but we wanted to give something more handcrafted,” said Sabrina Mitchell, bartender at Del Sur Mexican Cantina in San Diego. “We make every drink custom, so if someone wants the watermelon basil agua fresca without the basil, we can do that for them.”

When using fresh produce, the agua fresca selection can also change with the seasons.

“My inspiration for the agua frescas is the quality of the produce,” said Ricardo Heredia, head chef at José Andrés’ China Poblano at The Cosmopolitan in Las Vegas, where the restaurant features two new agua frescas daily. “Right now I’m inspired by fruits like peaches, plums, and strawberries. I like to say I’m in the flavor business.”

The availability of ingredients and what’s on the menu influences the agua frescas offered at Alma Cocina in Atlanta.

“I enjoy pairing sweeter fruits with an aromatic root or herb,” said Kit Lewis, beverage manager. “The combination tends to create an agua fresca that is refreshing, without being cloying or one-dimensional.”

While agua fresca may first appear to contain just fruit and water, there are usually some clever ingredients added to boost the flavor factor.



### **More than Fruit and Water**

For a creative twist, some bartenders are focusing on the drink's mixer.

"We add soda water or Squirt [soft drink] to make it spritzier," said Mitchell of Del Sur Mexican Cantina. "Our spicy mango agua fresca has mango puree and a poblano syrup in it. We take poblano peppers and soak them in sugar and water and make a simple syrup out of it to add a little bit of spice."

Most of the restaurant's agua frescas are actually inspired by cocktails served at the bar, allowing them to use fresh ingredients in both places, Mitchell added.

Citrus can also brighten an agua fresca.

"Citrus, typically fresh lemon or lime, is almost always added to our agua frescas," said Lewis of Alma Cocina. "This gives the acidity necessary to balance out the sweetness of the drink."

Knowing your ingredients is especially important.

"The ingredients will tell you if they need added sugar or not," said Heredia of China Poblano. "It's been a really hot summer and we're seeing really great fruit."

## **Creating a Market for Agua Fresca**

How well agua fresca sells largely depends on where it is listed on the menu. Putting the beverage under the “non-alcoholic” section usually results in children or those avoiding alcohol ordering them. But listing agua fresca in a neutral section with other drinks may inspire additional purchases.

Agua fresca drinkers at Del Sur Mexican Cantina are half kids and half pregnant women, according to Mitchell.

“Pregnant women want to feel like they’re drinking a cocktail, and our cucumber mint agua fresca is a lot like a mojito without the alcohol,” she said.

A brief description of what an agua fresca is can also be helpful.

“The agua frescas are listed on our beverage menus as ‘Bebidas,’ which we describe as non-alcoholic, infused juices for guests who may be unfamiliar,” Lewis said. “Our agua frescas are super popular during lunch. Everyone drinks them. During dinner, they are a great non-alcoholic option for those who abstain, and I’ve seen a lot of our guests ask to add spirits to them, creating their own cocktail.”

Mission Taqueria is creating more agua fresca fans by including the popular beverage with its lunch special.

“We include an agua fresca in our Oaxacan Express lunch special,” McLaughlin said. “It costs \$15 and includes a taco, a cup of tortilla soup and an agua fresca.”

Training staff in selling the drink can also boost customer interest.

“We depend on our staff to help us promote the rotating agua frescas,” Heredia said. “And right now during the summer, I think it’s an easy sell.”

## **Mixing Things Up**

At The Blind Burro in San Diego, the Agua Frisky is made with jamaica agua fresca, Cutwater Fugu vodka, lime juice, a Tajín salt rim and lemon.

At Hello Betty Fish House in Oceanside, Calif., fresh watermelon and mango sorbet are blended to create a Watermelon Agua Fresca Float.

At The Bonnie in Astoria, N.Y., bartenders use housemade watermelon agua fresca, hibiscus-infused tequila, Vida Mezcal, Campari and ancho chile salt to create the restaurant’s most popular summer cocktail, The Wayside.