

SHAKEN AND STIRRED

SHAKEN AND STIRRED; Care for a Drink Before Your Meal? Sure, but Hold the Meal

By William L. Hamilton

April 20, 2003

AT 7 p.m. on Wednesday in Midtown, what most interested Ven Medabalmi about Citarella -- the \$3 million restaurant designed by the celebrity architect David Rockwell and boasting a David Bouley-trained chef, Brian Bistrong, in its kitchen -- was the \$12 cocktail he was drinking.

Mr. Medabalmi, 28, who had arrived with two friends, bumped into another friend, who was there with two companions; they were now a party of six. None of them were headed upstairs to the acclaimed dining room.

"I'll grab something later in my neighborhood, something local, something quick," said Mr. Medabalmi, a lawyer, wearing a suit with a dark dress shirt and without a necktie. "I've found that recently, people are not as inclined to go out to eat. Every time you propose dinner, people are like, 'Well, we'll just meet for a drink.' It's less complicated, less logistics. And you can do it more often during a week."

Mr. Medabalmi said that he chose Citarella's bar because "the atmosphere is clearly nicer" than a standard bar, and "the drinks are more interesting."

Kimberly Sevy, a friend of Mr. Medabalmi who had one denimed leg tucked under her as she sat at the bar, agreed.

"It's very mellow," said Ms. Sevy, a waitress who is also 28. "You have a chance to relax and have a cocktail and be able to have a conversation with people and not scream. Times have changed. We've all gone through something. The economy's not so fabulous, and anyone who lived in New York in the last year went through incredible trauma. When I go out, I just want to spend time with the people I'm with and talk." Yes, Ms. Sevy conceded, "this is a big change for me."

The cocktail's renaissance as a sophisticated way to drink has coincided with a cultural moment -- a hunger for the comforts of casual behavior. Underscored by the economic moment, which is bad, meeting for drinks has produced a new version of the old night out --

not the prelude to the evening, but the main event.

It is not about barhopping, with its mating and dating, or the power and prestige of a 9 o'clock table at the best new restaurant -- sacred cattle of New York City.

It is, instead, an easier, cheaper, friendlier alternative, increasingly popular -- a last-minute plan with lower stakes, higher flexibility, a maximum of social entertainment in a minimum of time, and a sweet lack of stress.

The taste for cocktails, a shaky pocket and an impatience with self-imposed pressures in the face of realer threats are telling many people something that they might have suspected but not yet admitted.

They want the night off when they go out for the night.

"This is not about getting blunted," said Cyndi Stivers, editorial director of Time Out New York, the weekly listings magazine, which is publishing a pocket guidebook to bars on May 23 because, she said, "bars are all anybody goes to."

"Dinner's so intimate," she said. "Bars have a less serious veneer. People are going out in groups now, even on dates, and keeping things casual."

KAREN RAMS, whose hair was cut short and who was wearing a red jersey, said: "I mean, you've got to eat, but reservations? Dinner?"

Ms. Rams, 37, a researcher, was sitting at the bar at Verlaine on the Lower East Side last week, the dregs of a satay plate -- wooden skewer, uneaten rice and peanut sauce -- uncleared in front of her.

"It was definitely the litchi martinis that drove us here," she said. When Ms. Rams, Greg Di Noto and Tricia Melton, three friends who have worked together "in one capacity or another," Mr. Di Noto said, get together now to catch up and argue, agree, tease, take sides, confide or commiserate, they do it over drinks, not a dinner table.

"It feels looser to just have cocktails," said Ms. Melton, 37, an advertising executive, seated next to Ms. Rams.

"There's no set agenda," said Mr. Di Noto, 43, a marketer, on a stool pushed back from the bar between them. "We could decide that we want to eat -- at 11 o'clock."

Ms. Melton, whose hair was long and who was wearing a white peasant blouse, said, "Because I'm married, sometimes we make a reservation." Her voice softened, in explanation. "If we're getting together with couples."

Ms. Rams shot her a look across the bow -- Mr. Di Noto's black T-shirt.

"I live in Brooklyn, which is not an outpost, O.K.?" Ms. Melton said quickly, and loudly.

Ms. Rams, all smiles, said incredulously, "You need a reservation in Brooklyn?"

Ms. Melton regrouped with the last sip from her glass, as the next round arrived.

"The bars are doing a really good job of making it more interesting," she said. "The litchi martini! I thought, 'Never had one -- sounds delish.' "

Mr. Di Noto woke up and said, "Sounds delish?" then burst into laughter as if it were a sudden sweat. "Listen, darling."

Bars introduced an effective concept, the lounge, years ago, with club-style seating and suave lighting for drinkers who wanted mood with their martinis. But restaurants, experts at ambience that were likened to theater in the 1980's and 90's, are facing what E. Charles Hunt, the executive vice president of the New York State Restaurant Association, called "the perfect storm" -- a fatal confluence of 9/11, the war in Iraq and the economy. Fewer people want to be onstage for two hours, eat three courses and pay four figures.

"I've never seen anything like it," he said of the circumstances hovering over the higher end of an industry that now wants a larger piece of the new cocktail bar action.

Mr. Hunt said that savvy restaurateurs are adapting to the strongest areas of the market. "Hopefully, you'll stay for dinner," he said. "But if you have a drink or finger food and move on -- God love you, you're in the chair. The toughest thing in the world in a restaurant is an empty chair."

The average price of a meal at New York restaurants dropped last year for the first time since 1990, said Tim Zagat, a founder of the Zagat Survey and guides. He attributed the decline in part to people's eating less formally, or "bar style" as he called it, ordering smaller, appetizer-size plates.

Citarella, on Avenue of the Americas at 49th Street, which designed the area beside its bar as a dining space in 2001, stripped the starched cloths off the tables when cocktail drinkers moved in instead.

It is not by accident that one ring of the three-ring circus at 66 in TriBeCa, Jean-Georges Vongerichten's latest project and New York's most conspicuous recent restaurant opening, is a lounge, greatly expanded from what would have previously been a basic holding pen for diners with reservations at the restaurant.

In the first three months of 2003, 24 of the restaurants that opened in New York -- 55 percent of the total -- included a substantial bar or lounge area, according to the Zagat Survey, up 10 percent from the same period last year.

"Look at the most popular places, the younger, hipper restaurants, the newcomers," Mr. Zagat said. "There's an effort to provide bar space, lounge space." He cited Blue Fin in the W hotel in Times Square, and the Dos Caminos restaurants, on Park Avenue South and in SoHo, developed by Stephen R. Hanson and his company B. R. Guest. "You can barely squeeze past the bar to get to the restaurant in the back," Mr. Zagat said. "Younger people are socializing in restaurants, but they do less eating."

Danny Meyer, whose popular dining establishments include Union Square Cafe, opened in 1985, and Blue Smoke, opened last year, has increased the space given to the bar at each successive restaurant. Fifty percent of the customers at Blue Smoke's bar are there to drink, not to dine, Mr. Meyer said.

"It's a cocktail generation," he explained. "It's fun -- it's sexy. It's more fun than a glass of chardonnay. People are going out to socialize over drinks, not the dinner table."

"This recession is painful," he added. "Everyone is trying to figure out how to capture customers. I'm interested in never giving up on fine dining, but I'm interested in being full all the time, too."

Guastavino, the much-publicized restaurant under the Queensboro Bridge, has a brisk evening bar scene. It converted its formal dining room to a V.I.P. bar area two weeks ago after it proved itself more successful as a late-night weekend lounge. Peter Hoffman, the owner and chef of Savoy in SoHo, moved his main dining room upstairs to a smaller space and turned the ground floor into a cafe bar.

"People are changing the way they think about entertainment and dining," Mr. Hoffman said. Saying that he, too, remains committed to fine food, he explained the advantages of a bar clientele: "You can do volume without kitchen labor involved. One guy can make a lot of drinks. I understand why people are in the bar business -- the economics are far better."

Jeffrey Beers, an architect and designer who designed DB Bistro Moderne in Midtown, has spoken with its namesake, the chef Daniel Boulud, about redesigning the front dining room as a lounge, as well as making Daniel, Mr. Boulud's signature restaurant, "more sexy."

"Daniel's getting very curious about this," Mr. Beers said. "You need the restaurant to reinforce the idea that you're not going to a club. But having drinks with friends is very appealing. It's more accessible by more people. Enough with sitting up straight and ordering the right wine."

At Salt Bar on Clinton Street, New York's newest restaurant row, the owner and chef, Melissa O'Donnell, opened a bar that serves food, rather than a restaurant, to hedge her bets. "People don't want five courses, but they don't want beer on the floor either, and if they aren't interested in a meal, they stay to drink and order food anyway," she said.

At Amuse, a handsome lounge and restaurant in Chelsea that was formerly the Tonic until it was renovated and reopened two weeks ago by Gerry Hayden, its chef and an owner, a table of 20 people in their 20's and 30's sat in the bar and lounge area on Wednesday, socializing, drinking and eating side orders or desserts. No one had plans for dinner, not even next door, in Mr. Hayden's attractive dining room.

For younger New Yorkers, the advantages of an evening out over cocktails are distinct: less money, less hassle, less commitment and an ability to get home at a reasonable hour on a weeknight for those many who live outside Manhattan.

"You can get everybody you invite to come out if you just do drinks," said Holly Hunnicutt, 27, sitting with friends and colleagues from the publishing house where she works. "We order 50 baskets of French fries -- that's dinner."

Ms. Hunnicutt turned back to her friends to talk. Reka Simonsen, 32, who was sitting next to her in a sleeveless dress with an ink silhouette on her arm, replied, when asked, "Yes, it's a real tattoo, and yes, it's really Nancy Drew."