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Building The Harvey Milk Punch

Reconstructing A Big Easy Cocktail Favorite, With A SF Twist



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The Mission District's historic saloon Elixir celebrates 150 years of serving its neighbors this year. The building itself is a replacement of the original that burned down along with the rest of the city in 1906, and was designed by Brainerd Jones, the most famous architect in Sonoma County history. One of his lesser known yet historic and beautiful buildings is the home of Elixir, a mixed-use property on the corner of 16th Street and Guerrero in the Mission District.

This architectural concept of starting with one key idea and building around it also applies to the construction of a good cocktail. Begin with a core flavor component and an idea of the style direction and build from there. The influence can come from a classic formula or a regional influence and, of course, there is room for the application of signature touches that make the drink each creator's very own. When style is applied to the core idea, the end result is always greater than the sum of its parts and is in and of itself a new creation.

The core flavor component is usually a base alcohol with a particular flavor profile that can be built upon. As to a style direction, Jones referenced Victorian, but for our purpose - building a drink - New Orleans will be our inspiration.

The Big Easy's famous brandy milk punch is a cocktail little known in San Francisco, but deliciously deserving of more recognition. The core spirit in that drink is brandy, a barrel-aged distillate made from grapes. Cognac, the base of Grand Marnier, is brandy from the region of Cognac, France.

This cocktail is constructed with a method known as "building," as opposed to shaking or stirring. Building a cocktail means that the drink is made in the same glass it's served in. The original recipe for a milk punch is brandy, milk, sugar, vanilla and nutmeg, so utilizing Grand Marnier in place of brandy is a nice twist that introduces orange and spice components. A vanilla flavor may also be added by using another Cognac-based liqueur named Navan. Both are sweet, so no additional sugar is needed. Add milk and roll the entire contents of the drink into an empty glass, back and forth several times, in order to mix it. Top it off with grated nutmeg and add a "signature" by dusting with a bit of cinnamon and the twist of an orange peel. The luxury of this cocktail can be taken up two levels by trying it with Grand Marnier's cuvée du centenaire and cuvée du cent-cinquanteenaire bottlings, which incorporate older Cognacs in the blend.

This San Francisco version of the New Orleans classic is called the Harvey Milk Punch and is available at Elixir and the newly opened Level III restaurant in Downtown San Francisco. Brainerd Jones would have been proud.

Take a sip at www.cocktailambassadors.com

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