

As Females Gain Equal Right To Imbibe, 'Girlie Drinks' Beckon

Women's Libation

STORY BY **JOANN KLIMKIEWICZ** COURANT STAFF WRITER • PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY **MARK MIRKO** THE HARTFORD COURANT

The cocktail menu at Trumbull Kitchen in Hartford is brimming with sweet, fruity drinks and chocolate concoctions. Poured in pretty glasses and garnished with flair, they're branded with names of the "-tini" variety: Espresso Martini, Bellini-Tini, Valentini.

The chance that a tray of these dainty drinks is headed to the trio of strong-jawed men in the corner?

"Slim," restaurant manager Jennifer Derleth says over the din of the evening crowd. "Very slim."

Don't misunderstand, Derleth says. These drinks pack an alcoholic punch.

But with sweet, creamy flavors that mask the bite of liquor, these — she hesitates on the phrase — are "girlie drinks."

"They're the kind of drinks that are more appealing to women," says Derleth.

And they're the kind of drinks moving females from the coffee klatch to cocktail klatch, appealing to the sensibilities of stylish young women who are holding off marriage and have more disposable income tucked in their designer purses.

"You're just more likely to meet for drinks than coffee after work," says Derleth. "And it's always just a good way to let off some steam."

It's a cocktail culture spawned by Carrie Bradshaw and her chick-lit peers, a free-spirited lifestyle in which everyone looks better-dressed with a martini glass — after work, on a girls' night out, at the spa, even on a girls' night in.

"Taboos associated with women drinking, even sitting at bars by themselves, are really falling by the wayside," said Margie Fox, president of the New York marketing firm Maloney & Fox. "It's a much more confident

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woman these days, drinking not just cocktails but bourbon and beers. And they want a cocktail or signature spirit that reflects their style."

The alcohol industry is responding with products that appeal to the taste buds of these young urban females, from fruit-flavored vodkas to sweet, fizzy malt beverages — so-called alcopops — that go down as easy as cherry soda.

Ads pepper glossy fashion magazines and run during popular female-targeted programs such as "Sex and the City," the television show (inspired by Bradshaw's writings) that helped give rise to this fun, flirty drinking culture. (The show's Kim Cattrall even signed on to represent Bacardi's new rum concoction, Island Breeze.)

"The alcohol industry studies all these social demographics trends, scratches their heads and says, 'How can we construct a very appealing marketing message that taps into these very real demographic changes?,'" says Rob Williams, a professor of history and media studies at Champlain College in Burlington, Vt.

And if the message that has penetrated the male psyche associates drinking with masculinity and sexual conquest, he says, the one for women is "be a good girl by day; shed your inhibitions at night."

"They're saying it's OK to consume as much alcohol as the guys," says Williams. "In fact, it's a way to sort of claim your womanhood, claim your female status."

It's reminiscent of the "You've come a long way, baby" cigarette campaign of the 1970s and 1980s, when Virginia Slims

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equated smoking with women's liberation.

Similarly, Williams says, the message is: "Drink alcohol; strike a blow for crafting your own female identity."

Gary Galanis, vice president of corporate relations for Diageo, an alcoholic beverage company whose North American headquarters is in Norwalk, says the company doesn't consider the female market any more important than others.

"Adult consumers [of all markets] expect innovation and expect new brands and flavors," says Galanis.

Fox says female drinkers can expect to see new alcohol products incorporating teas and chais, their campaigns borrowing from the serene elements of spa culture.

It's that sensibility that helped her craft a successful "Chocolate for Charity" campaign around Godiva Liqueur, produced by Diageo, in December 2004. Fox's firm connected with stylish women by teaming up with the Louis Licari salon during a time when celebrity blondes were going brunette. The brand donated \$50 to the Step Up Women's network for every woman who darkened her hair. Women mingled with celebrities, sipped luscious cocktails and chose from a hair color menu inspired by the liqueur's various flavors.

The result, Fox says, was stellar media coverage that helped boost sales 92 percent in California and 12 percent in New York.

It seems like harmless fun — women kicking back and connecting with each other over tasty new drinks.

But sometimes the underlying messages can be troubling, says Williams.

"The message from the alcohol industry is, as a young woman, if you drink, you'll somehow become more free, more womanly, more independent, more mature," he says, "when in fact, alcohol has exactly the opposite effect. It makes you less free, less independent, less capable of making healthy, informed judgments about any given social situations."

Some industry critics worry about the health and behavioral risks associated with female alcohol consumption — heart disease and date rape, for example — especially among younger women.

While binge-drinking gets a lot of attention on college campuses and while the "Ladette" drinking culture has been well-documented in the United Kingdom, risky drinking among young American women appears to be flat. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism reports no significant change in risky drinking among women between the ages of 18 and 29 in the past few years.

But of concern, and getting much media attention in recent years are the fizzy alcopop drinks — beverages like Smirnoff Ice and Bacardi Silver. Youth advocacy groups point to a recent study by the American Medical Association showing these drinks particularly

attract teenage girls. Critics call them a gateway beverage, a young drinker's transition from soda to alcohol. And they say boys know to ply girls with these drinks to take advantage of them sexually.

According to a 2004 study by the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth, 71 percent of eighth grade boys reported drinking an alcopop in the last 30 days, compared with 86 percent of girls. For 12th graders, the gap becomes clearer: 57 percent of boys compared with 74 percent of girls.

"It's the product design, the taste, the color. It goes down easy," says James Mosher, a lawyer and director of the Center for the Study of Law and Enforcement Policy in California. One of the most vocal critics of the drinks, he's working to change their classification from "beer" to "distilled spirits," which would curtail their advertising to the youth market.

Galanis, of Diageo, which produces Smirnoff Ice, says the company has a tradition of advocating teen education and responsible drinking. He says the company only advertises in venues where 70 percent or more of the audience is of the legal drinking age — a standard critics call inadequate.

In Connecticut, Diageo is supporting a new law that would toughen penalties for adults who provide alcohol to minors.

"The younger a girl will start to drink, the more likely she is to develop a dependent, some would say addictive, relationship with alcohol," says Champlain College's Williams. "That's a great business if you're the alcohol industry, but it's a really troublesome problem if you care about the public health of society as a whole."