

Raising a Toast to Flavor Innovation

The Society of Flavor Chemists and Chemical Sources Association Midwest meeting delivered beverage alcohol category insights and a survey of technical advances in flavors

“We’re different tomorrow than we are today,” said Sarah Kirkmeyer, director of sensory for Givaudan Flavors, during a Society of Flavor Chemists lunch session in Cincinnati. Kirkmeyer focused her talk on the role of sensory in flavor development by focusing on the importance of understanding consumer expectations of flavors. Using the example of caramel, she displayed three products, some of which were category leaders, despite lacking creamy and burnt sugar notes typical of traditional caramel. This is possible, Kirkmeyer noted, because some brands have done an excellent job reinforcing category expectations with their products. Because of this, when customers or consumers say they want “caramel,” interpretation of expectations is everything. Or, as Kirkmeyer put it, “What you think you want may not be.”

These references are ever-changing. Taking mojito cocktails as an example, Kirkmeyer showed how this iconic Cuban drink has evolved into the mainstream. Just as Minute Maid has set the pace for consumer expectations around lemonade, Crystal Light’s non-alcoholic Mojito Mocktail Drink Mix represents a category-setter for non-alcoholic mojito flavor profiles. Skinnygirl brand premixed margarita, meanwhile, features blue agave tequila and agave nectar sweetener, is 12.7% alcohol by volume, and is only 100 calories per serving. The wildly popular beverage will never be mistaken for the real thing, said Kirkmeyer, because it references the flavor of traditional margarita mixes, not fresh margaritas. That in no way has impeded its sales.

Another novel product, Bacon Vodka, has pushed cocktails into a more savory area. Describing the vodka’s flavor as fatty, smoky and burnt, some in the audience noted it tasted more of bacon bits than actual bacon. Kirkmeyer noted that while



Kirkmeyer’s presentation included tastings of Skinny Girl margarita and Bacon vodka.

the flavor seemed relatively mild in one sip, when applied in greater quantities in a cocktail—a bloody Mary or BLT martini, for example—the flavor would build to a more substantial level.

Kirkmeyer then offered attendees a view of a model that tracks the path from today’s consumer expectations to those of tomorrow. In the beverage alcohol world, factors include market products and other reference products, the ways in which flavors fulfill the names assigned to them (does this “lemonade” taste how a consumer expects lemonade to taste?) and bar-made cocktails encountered by consumers.

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Aaron Graham (Griffith Laboratories), left, demonstrates his mixology skills for professional mixologist Francesco Lafranconi.



Sarah Kirkmeyer provided examples of the ways in which consumer flavor expectations take shape, evolve and affect product development.

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Yet even in a world with bacon-flavored vodka, the reality is that traditional flavors remain the most preferred. Kirkmeyer noted that the pairing of traditional and new flavors to achieve palatability in beverage alcohol continues today and that alcohol burn acceptance varies widely, meaning optimization is difficult.

At the same time, aging consumers change their cocktail preferences over time. As people get older they tend to drink less hard alcohol and more wine. Meanwhile, chemosensory sensitivity changes, appetite decreases, as does variety in diet, and olfactory sensitivity diminishes. Serving these consumers requires further research.

To that end, Kirkmeyer touted the need for ethnographic projects to examine off-premises (home) consumption, flavor congruency, mixologist trends, emotional factors and genetic sensitivity to certain sensates.

Inside Mixology

Later in the day, picking up the themes outlined by Kirkmeyer, Francesco Lafranconi, national director of mixology and spirits educator for Southern Wine & Spirits of America Inc., presented an insider's look at mixology and beverage alcohol trends. Noting that olfactory memory informs his flavor combinations, Lafranconi explained that he focuses on notes and creating an experience for the customer and that successful flavor profiles are "all about balance." While both bartenders and mixologists create drinks for customers, he explained that a mixologist is a professional with a deep understanding of flavor balance.

In the United States, vodka comprises 32% of liquor sales (flavored varieties include cucumber and tomato), rum comprises 14% (and rising), and tequila comprises 7%. Cocktail trends include the use of bitters, pisco (grape brandy), soju (a vodkalike spirit popular in Asia), mescal (a liquor distilled from agave), Italian amaro (an herbal liqueur), organic spirits, rye whiskey, corn moonshine, cachaça (a liquor distilled from sugar cane), savory cocktails and beer-based cocktails.

Lafranconi outlined the anatomy of a cocktail, which comprises a spirit, alcoholic modifier, bitter-aromatic component, sour/astringent element, nonalcoholic modifier/mixer and a sweetener. At this point, select participants from the audience were placed into one of four three-person teams and asked to design three types of cocktails: an aperitif, a long drink and an after-dinner/dessert drink. The resulting mixology session was entertaining (see photos for evidence of the fun that was had). The concoctions that resulted bore names such as Prickly Personality and Indulgent Bliss.

A Survey of Flavor Industry Innovations

Innovation is the sum of creativity and value, said Alex Woo, managing director of W20 Food Innovation, during his overview of recent technical advancements in the flavor industry. Creativity, he explained, is the ability to connect dots with insights. Value, on the other hand, is a creation that people are willing to pay for. Woo stressed that innovation can mean bringing something new to a team, not necessarily something wholly new to the world.



One of the mixology teams included, from left, Deborah Barber (Kraft Foods), Alpa Roman (Flavor & Fragrance Resources) and Leann Du Hagashi (AM Todd/Wild Flavors).



Judging the amateur mixologists' drinks were, from left, Francesco Lafranconi (Southern Wine & Spirits of America Inc.), Cyndie Lipka (Bell Flavors & Fragrances) and Sam Tharpe (Wild Flavors).

Woo categorized technologies in three phases: emerging, pacing and mature. Mature technologies are those shared by most or all companies, while pacing technology is characterized by a handful of category leaders. Emerging technologies are those new elements, which are in flux. For perspective, pacing technologies include biotech, fermentations, enzymology, electronic noses and retronasal analysis. Among the emerging technologies identified by Woo were bioinformatics, yeast or bacterial encapsulation, ingestible fragrances, multilayer/micro/nanoemulsions, f-MRI, diffusion NMR, sensomics and GCO/LC-taste.

Woo provided a look at the range of taste technology pursued by the industry, including high-potency products (stevia, monk fruit extract, monatin), bulk sweeteners (tagatose, nutriose, L-sugars), salt substitutes (enhancers and microcrystals of ground salt boosted by greater surface area), and taste modulators and bitter blockers (for bitter blocking and savory enhancement).

Of taste modulation, Woo concluded, "This, to me, is the future."

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