

Beverage Journal

JUNE 2025



THE COCKTAIL ISSUE

IN TODAY'S ECONOMIC CLIMATE,
HOW ARE RESTAURANTS AND BARS CHANGING
THEIR APPROACHES TO COCKTAIL PROGRAMS?



A CASE STUDY IN COCKTAIL PRICING
COCKTAILS TO-GO, FIVE YEARS LATER



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Cover Credit: Distillery of Modern Art - "The Stinger"

ON-PREMISE DINING
GOING OFF-PREMISES

I came across some information I found very interesting recently. "Off-Premises Dining Now Essential for Restaurant Consumers, Operators." I found the above titled article at the National Restaurant Association website. "Off-premises dining has become a key revenue driver and an essential way to engage consumers," said Dr. Chad Moutray, Chief Economist at the National Restaurant Association. "It now accounts for a larger share of sales for 58% of limited-service and 41% of full-service operators compared with 2019—providing a critical path to restaurant resilience and growth despite ongoing economic pressures."

Below are some excerpts from the article on-premise operators will find interesting and useful.

Who's Driving Demand – and Where**Gen Z and millennials are leading the way:**

Two-thirds say takeout is essential to their lifestyle, and nearly 6 in 10 use takeout or drive-thru at least weekly. More than 60% say they're ordering off-premises more often than a year ago.

Demand spans regions: Most urban consumers say takeout or drive-thru is essential, while 67% of rural consumers wish they had more options for takeout—highlighting areas for growth.

Preferences vary by age and format: Mobile ordering is mainstream, used by 57% of adults recently including 74% of millennials and 65% of Gen Z adults. Older adults still prefer in-person ordering. Takeout is the most frequent off-premises method, followed by drive-thru and delivery.

Restaurants are responding: 65% of limited-service operators now offer delivery, with many expecting curbside and dedicated takeout areas to be even more common in 2025. Fewer full-service restaurants currently offer



off-premises services; however, these operators see potential in the trend—43% expect curbside pickup to grow, 31% anticipate more dedicated takeout counters, and 12% foresee more drive-thru lanes. Many see these options not just as operational updates, but as strategic growth opportunities in a changing market.

**What Customers Want &
How Operators Can Deliver**

Consumers want speed, ease of use and rewarding experiences. 94% of all consumers say speed is critical, with over 9 in 10 citing customer service as a top priority. Three-quarters of delivery customers value tech-enabled ordering and payments.

Value matters, too—over 80% of consumers utilize deals like "Buy One, Get One" offers, combo meals, or real-time specials. Loyalty programs also matter: 65% of drive-thru users and over 60% of takeout and delivery users say membership affects where they order.

Meanwhile, according to consumers, here are some opportunities for restaurants:

Packaging: 90% say they'd order a greater variety of items if the food maintained on-premises quality during delivery; over half would pay more for premium packaging that supported quality during transport.

Real-time deals: Nearly 9 in 10 would use limited-time app-only offers.

New tech: Half of Gen Z adults (50%) and millennials (52%) say they'd consider ordering from an AI-generated video assistant.

You can find the entire article and accompanying report from the National Restaurant Association at their website, www.restaurant.org. ■

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ROCKET TO VENUS

AN OUT-OF-THIS WORLD GASTROPUB IN BALTIMORE'S HAMPDEN

WRITTEN BY TEDDY DURGIN | IMAGES BY ASHLI MIX PHOTOGRAPHY

When Geoff Danek moved to the Hampden neighborhood of Baltimore in 2002, he had no idea that three guys back in the 1920s tried to build a 24-foot-tall rocket ship right in his garage. The local restaurant owner was told of the local legend by a customer – the legend of Baltimore native and so-called “mathematical genius” Robert Condit, who had used the home’s garage to build a rocket with his two friends, Harry and Sterling Uhler, in 1927 and 1928. They truly believed this rocket would take Condit to the planet Venus.

A year later, their money largely depleted, Condit packed up the rocket and took it to Florida where it was displayed on the Miami Beach boardwalk. Since then, the rocket and the Rocket Man have pretty much disappeared. But Danek, along with his friend and business partner, Brian Carey, loved the kooky tale so much that they named their gastropub restaurant Rocket to Venus. Opened in 2006, it still boasts a kitschy space theme today that customers find to be a delight. Condit’s rocket has even served as inspiration for parts of the interior, most notably the bar they built using hundreds of feet of half-inch copper tubing.

During a recent interview with the Beverage Journal, Danek said, “The restaurant itself tells this very interesting story that actually happened in this neighborhood decades ago. The name really fit the place for us.”

And the name really fits with our ongoing series of articles on res-



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Laura Myers
manager
Rocket to Venus

taurants, bars, taverns, and pubs in and around the Maryland-Washington, D.C., area with funny or quirky names. The Rocket to Venus moniker has endeared itself to the locals, for sure, and attracts new customers from outside the area who venture to Hampden for the promise of perhaps a sci-fi themed eatery or maybe one that has ties to the aerospace industry prevalent in other parts of the state.

But a name alone can't make a business a success. Danek credits the Rocket to Venus staff as the main reason why the establishment will be celebrating its 20th anniversary next year. "A lot of our staff have been here for a long time," he noted. "They've formed relationships with the clientele. About 70 percent of our clientele is always there for us. Our 'regulars.' The hope is, of course, to pick up new people along the way. But we thrive because of the people who come back and see us and enjoy seeing the staff. Some of our employees have been with Rocket to Venus for 10-plus years . . . some for over 15 years!"

He continued, "They're the ones who truly run the place. They're the heart and the soul of Rocket to Venus. For our customers, stopping in and seeing them is like an extension of their own house. We're like a second home to many."

His staffers, notably manager Laura Myers and beverage manager Paul Krolan, also help him get through the tougher aspects of running



a service establishment in such a competitive market and tough economic climate. Danek remarked, "One of the really cool things about this business – and one of the things that you just have to know – is that it is so unpredictable. It constantly keeps us on our toes. It's all I know, because I have been doing this more than half my life. But it's always changing, always interesting. But for some people, it's just way too much stress. It's a lot of problem solving. But the business also al-

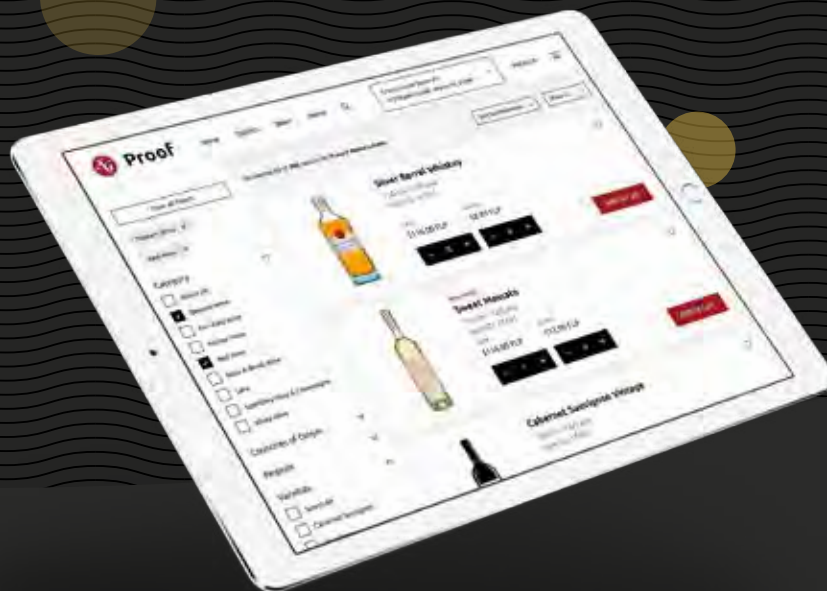


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lows you and your staff to be creative. You just have to roll with it and laugh sometimes.”

The creativity extends to the menu. Rocket to Venus’ food offerings change twice a year. Its drink menu is ever-evolving. “Our beverage manager, Paul, has done a really great job to cater to both the alcohol and non-alcohol side of things,” said Danek. “It’s been a lot of fun for him, and it’s been a lot of fun for our customers to try different things. Our drinks menu keeps people social. We saw after COVID, there was a big surge in people going out and being social again.”

He added, “Paul especially loves doing things with fresh ingredients. Right now, one of our favored spring-summer drinks is our Figgy Pop,

which is a cool play on Iggy Pop, the great musician and artist. It’s a fig vodka with seltzer water and a fresh orange slice.”

Because Krolian, Myers, and the rest of staff are given a lot of freedom to explore and take ownership of the business, too, Danek prefers to stay largely in the background and watch the magic happen. Rocket to Venus will indeed celebrate 19 years in business this December. “The business has evolved over that time to become a living, breathing thing of its own,” he said.

When asked to give some advice to other managers, bartenders, and waitstaff who might be reading this and hoping to own their own eating and drinking establishment one day, Danek was quick to answer: “You don’t have to make your bar or restaurant your 100 percent priority. Make sure you are still able to have some fun. Don’t look back later and wonder, ‘Why didn’t I have more fun? Why did I think, at every single moment, that I needed to be at the restaurant?’ You need to have a good, strong work ethic. But make sure you don’t burn out.” ■



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INSIDE THE 2025 DISCUS ANNUAL CONFERENCE

MORE THAN 450 SPIRITS INDUSTRY MEMBERS CAME TOGETHER FOR THE DISCUS ANNUAL CONFERENCE, WHICH PROVIDED VALUABLE INFORMATION FOR NAVIGATING THE CHANGING SPIRITS LANDSCAPE

From March 26 to 28, Washington, D.C. welcomed more than 450 spirits industry members to the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States' (DISCUS) annual conference. This was a particularly important moment to gather, amidst a climate of tariffs, changing consumption habits, and pressure from anti-alcohol organizations, and attendees came out of the three-day event better prepared to navigate the changing marketplace for spirits.

The conference sessions kicked off with an overview of trends shaping the future of the spirits industry, led by Chris Swonger, the president and CEO of DISCUS, and Kaleigh Theriault, the director of thought leadership, beverage alcohol vertical, at NielsenIQ. The following sessions explored the forthcoming Dietary Guidelines for Americans update—and potential implications for the spirits industry—the impact of tariffs on the spirits industry, and consumer demographic shifts.

Other sessions provided tactical advice on using sustainable practices to reduce operating costs and better the en-

vironment, understanding control states, and how to not only make, but execute, a business deal such as a merger or acquisition. The first full day of the conference closed out with a rooftop reception sponsored by Suntory.

The conference also leveraged its location to provide the spirits trade with access to members of Congress, bringing a strong advocacy component to this year's event. Several congressional fly-ins took place, in which attendees went straight to Capitol Hill to discuss taxes, tariffs, and the Dietary Guidelines for Americans update with legislators. Representatives from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Mexican embassy, and the EU also spoke.

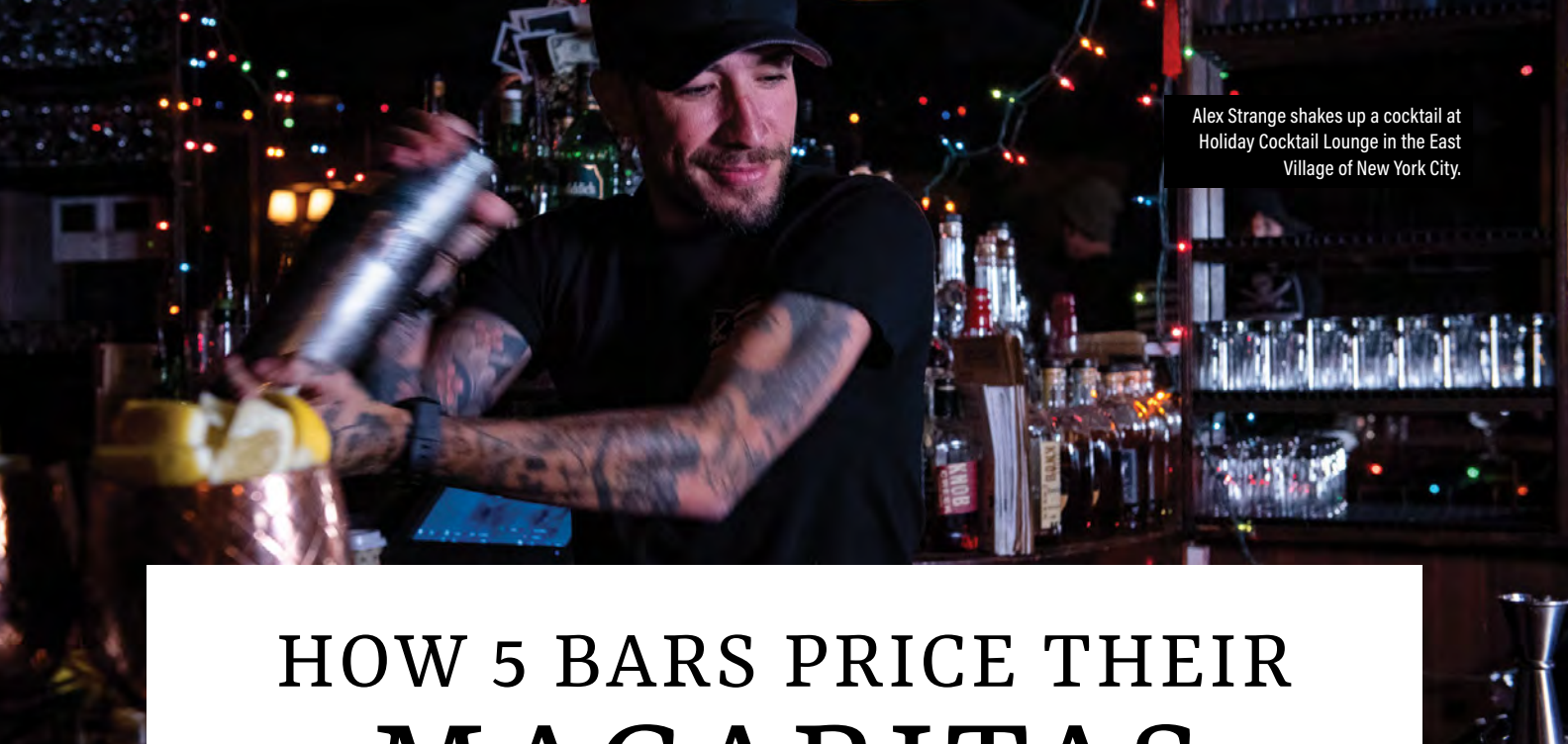
Several awards were also presented during the DISCUS annual conference, including the DISCUS Lifetime Achievement Award, awarded to Lynne J. Omlie, the former DISCUS senior vice president, general counsel, and corporate secretary; the DISCUS Impact Award for Emerging Leaders, awarded to Marco Barassi, the government relations and sustainability director, Americas, at Campari Group; the DISCUS Dave Pickerell Memorial Craft

Member of the Year, awarded to Sonat Birnecker Hart and Robert Birnecker, the founders of KOVAL Distillery; the DISCUS Distinguished Service Leadership Award, awarded to Deborah Brenner, the founder and CEO of Women of the Vine & Spirits; and the DISCUS Top Shelf Award, awarded to U.S. Rep. James Comer, Republican of Kentucky.

Overall, the DISCUS annual conference was a successful opportunity to bring together spirits industry leaders and key government officials at a time when partnership and advocacy is more important than ever. ■



Chris Swonger, president and CEO of the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States



Alex Strange shakes up a cocktail at Holiday Cocktail Lounge in the East Village of New York City.

HOW 5 BARS PRICE THEIR MARGARITAS

A MARGARITA'S STICKER PRICE REVEALS MORE THAN JUST THE RISING COST OF AGAVE AND LIME—IT INCLUDES INSURANCE, LABOR, GARNISHES, AND OTHER INVISIBLE MARKERS OF TODAY'S ECONOMY

BY KATE DINGWALL

As drinkers are well aware, we're in the age of the \$20 cocktail. It's easy to complain about the sticker shock, but for many bar owners, the final price is the result of a delicate—and difficult—dance with increasingly unpredictable elements. Labor costs are rising, as are utilities and rent. There's breakage, shrinkage, and operating costs to consider.

Then factor in the bar industry's current state of flux. Tariffs and inflation have escalated the price of almost every raw ingredient, from the lime juice and agave spirits for Margaritas, to the English gin and French vermouth required for Martinis.

"Prices have inched up. Inflation and other external factors have come for everyone," says Seth Watson, the owner of Distillery of Modern Art in Chamblee, Georgia. "Tariffs and inflation means we raise prices faster than we would normally, and when our guests may be less willing to come out and join us."

Alex Strange, the bar director at Holiday Cocktail Lounge, agrees: "It's 100 percent believable that your Margarita may creep up to \$25 in the next ten months."

Profitability is a tightrope act. Proprietors have to offer a drink that appeases the guest's wallet and palate. But the price also has to satisfy those who are signing payroll, paying purveyors, and handling all the other elements of keeping the lights on.

Using the nation's most popular cocktail as an example, *Beverage Media* talked to venues across the country to understand how they price their Margaritas.

TOP-SHELF MARGARITA; \$33

*The Holiday Cocktail Lounge,
New York City*

A classic Margarita at Holiday Cocktail Lounge, one of the East Village's most iconic and industry-heavy dive bars with notably great cocktails, is \$18, made with the usual tequila, Cointreau, and lime. But to contextualize what a higher-end pour looks like, Strange broke down what a two-ounce Casamigos Margarita costs in New York City.

■ ALCOHOL: \$2.51

The raw cost of two ounces of Casamigos would run Strange \$2.07. Triple Sec is \$0.44, making his alcohol cost \$2.51. (Strange prices drinks with a 16 percent pour cost—that is, the cost of goods per pour—so the cocktail price to account for the tequila alone would need to be \$15.69.)



Tommy's Margarita



The Right Now



The Stinger

■ **NON-ALCOHOLIC INGREDIENTS: \$1.92**
Limes cost around \$0.75 cents and work out at \$1.17 cost per volume.

■ **GARNISH: \$4.10**

A lime garnish and a straw will add a few dollars, as will ice. This price also factors in the cost of Libbey glassware and Kold-Draft ice. “Getting someone to fix a Kold-Draft machine, which happens almost monthly, is an immediate \$250,” says Strange.

■ **LABOR: \$6.90**

Labor includes unloading cases, juicing limes, weighing sugar, changing CO2 tanks, prepping the bar, and many other tasks outside of shaking and stirring.

■ **OVERHEAD + MARK-UPS: \$18**

Holiday Cocktail Lounge integrates all costs and profits into every ingredient,

so it’s difficult to unpack a specific profit number. This figure includes everything. “There’s maintenance costs—compressors, autotaps, and soda guns,” explains Strange. They pay \$27,000 a month for liquor liability, general liability, and worker’s compensation insurance plus unemployment benefits to retain staff, “the latter of which is very difficult to do in the post-COVID world,” says Strange. “When all those factors come together, it’s very understandable that your Margarita is over \$20.”

TOMMY’S MARGARITA; \$18

Mirate, Los Feliz, Los Angeles

This Tommy’s Margarita variation—made with tequila, lime, and a homemade substitute for agave nectar—is served at Mirate, a 180-seat, multi-story Mexican restaurant and bar in Los Feliz, Los Angeles.

■ **ALCOHOL: \$1.03**

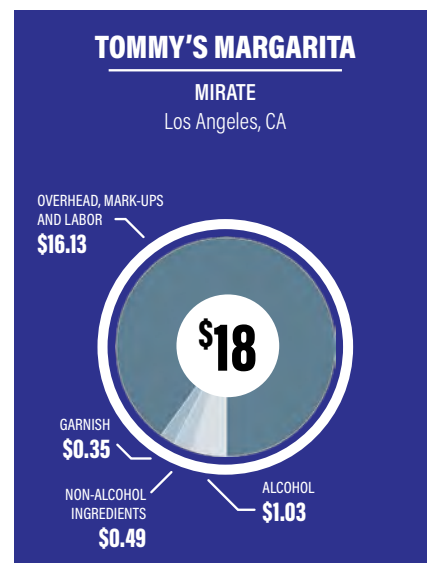
\$0.75 for blanco tequila or \$1.03 for mezcal, depending on guests’ preference. Both costs are factored into the menu price.

■ **NON-ALCOHOLIC INGREDIENTS: \$0.49**

\$0.17 for their house-made Nogave, an agave alternative made in-house from demerara sugar and wildflower honey, and \$0.32 for one ounce of lime juice.

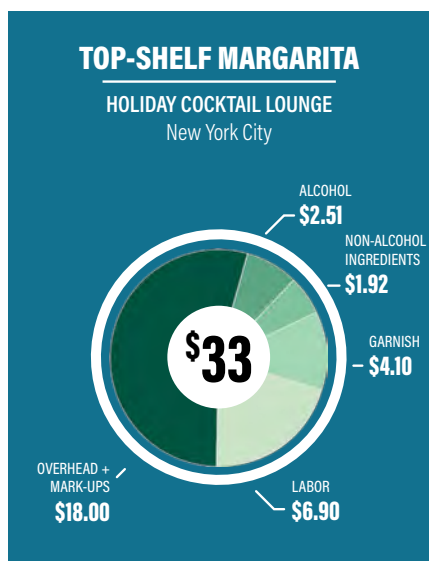
■ **GARNISH: \$0.35**

Bar director Max Reis allocates \$0.05 for a salt rim and \$0.30 for liquid nitrogen to chill the glass.



■ **OVERHEAD + MARK-UPS: \$16.13**

That price primarily includes labor which, Reis points out, is expensive in California and only doubled by their prep-heavy program and large space, which requires a lot of bodies to operate. The labor costs also include menu building—the R&D time needed to build and finesse each cocktail. This figure also includes rent, loss and spillage, glassware, and breakage.



Max Reis, Mirate

THE RIGHT NOW; \$15*Too Soon, Portland, Oregon*

Too Soon, a neighborhood bar with a cocktail lean in Portland, Oregon, serves a Margarita-ish drink called The Right Now, made with tequila, Cynar, lemon, and simple syrup. “It’s like a Sour and Margarita had a baby,” says co-owner Nick Flower. The drink is a nod to the Too Soon, a classic cocktail invented by Sam Ross.

**ALCOHOL: \$2.01**

The tequila is \$0.71 and \$1.30 is for Cynar. “People love agave, so tequila is always a big seller,” says Flower. “The key is picking a brand that is high quality and affordable. Real Del Valle Blanco is delicious and comes in a liter-sized bottle, so it amounts to \$0.71 cents an ounce.”

NON-ALCOHOLIC INGREDIENTS: \$0.32

Less than \$0.05 for simple syrup and \$0.27 for the lemon. “Lemon pricing varies,

but right now we can get a case of 75 to 100 lemons for about \$35 to \$40. There is around one to 1.5 ounces of juice per lemon, so we can get anywhere between 150 to 300 ounces of lemon juice per case.”

GARNISH: \$0.67

“We shake with two slices of cucumber, which are running us \$1.75 each these days,” says Flower. It’s \$0.17 for the artichoke salt (a shelf-stable blend of dehydrated artichokes and salt) used on the rim. “It’s very affordable to make,” says Flower. “The cost of everything is going up, so it’s important to consider ingredients that are affordable and sustainable. And only half-salting the rim goes a long way.”

LABOR: \$2.25

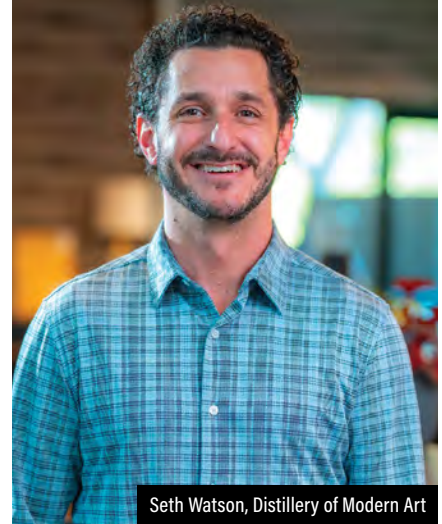
Labor is currently 15 percent. “Ten percent labor is our dream, but with a kitchen it makes it tough,” says Flower. “You can’t plan on what sales you’ll do on any given night, so it’s best to be well staffed to give the best service possible. As expensive as it is, we don’t mind taking a hit on labor while we build our following and business.” To balance labor costs, he works service himself three to four nights a week.

OVERHEAD + MARK-UPS: \$9.75

This accounts for glassware, breakage, heat and AC, utilities, and insurance. On every drink, he makes around 20 percent profit (roughly \$3).

THE STINGER; \$14*Distillery of Modern Art, Chamblee, Georgia*

The Stinger is a spicy Margarita riff from Distillery of Modern Art, a 3,000-square-foot distillery, events space, and cocktail lounge. It’s made with jalapeño-infused vodka, bell pepper syrup, lime juice, and house-made tepache. It’s topped with sparkling water, rimmed with habanero salt, and garnished with a dehydrated lime.



Seth Watson, Distillery of Modern Art

ALCOHOL: \$1.65

They make their spirits in-house but price out the cost for bookkeeping by adding together the wholesale price per ounce and the cost of flavoring ingredients—in this case, jalapeño.

NON-ALCOHOLIC INGREDIENTS: \$0.91

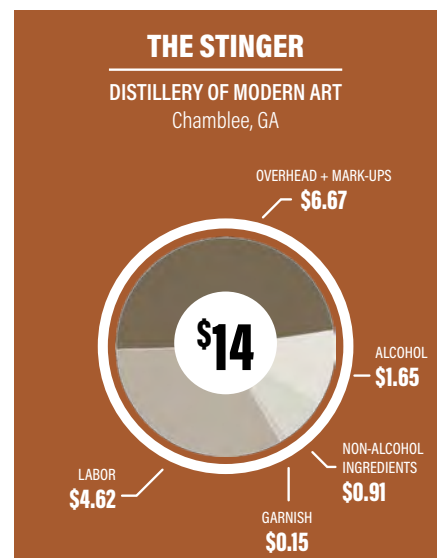
This cost covers bell pepper syrup, sparkling water, house-made tepache (a fermented drink made with pineapple discards and sugar), and lime juice.

LABOR: \$4.62

“Thirty-three percent of the costs go towards labor,” says Watson. “It takes about 30 minutes to two hours of actual labor to make most of our non-alcoholic ingredients, sometimes spread out over a few days if things need to rest or macerate.”

GARNISH: \$0.15

\$0.15 covers the rim’s habanero salt and a garnish of dehydrated lime.



Nick Flower, Too Soon

■ OVERHEAD + MARK-UPS: \$6.67

“Waste and shrinkage is calculated at four percent (\$0.56). Costs and inventory are checked to confirm this on a regular basis,” says Watson. “Operating costs and overhead sit at 20 percent, or \$2.80.” On every drink, they make a profit of \$3.31.

TOMMY'S MARGARITA; \$12.50 (\$17 CAD)

Simpl Things, Toronto, Canada

Simpl Things, an all-day snack and cocktail bar in Parkdale, an up-and-coming area in Toronto, also serves a Tommy's Margarita.

■ ALCOHOL: \$2.76

A bottle of Los Altos Tequila costs owner Evelyn Chick \$35, or \$1.38 (\$1.89 CAD) an ounce. She serves two ounces in her Margarita.

■ NON-ALCOHOLIC INGREDIENTS: \$0.84

They sweeten the drink with 2:1 agave syrup, which costs around \$26 (\$36 CAD) to make three liters, or \$0.27 (\$0.37 CAD) per drink. Fresh lime juice runs them \$0.57 (\$0.79 CAD) a lime, or one ounce of juice.

■ GARNISH: \$0.07

A fresh lime wheel garnish, at \$0.57 (\$0.79 CAD) per lime, costs \$0.07 (\$0.10 CAD) a wheel.

■ LABOR: \$1.08

Chick calculates her labor based on three bartenders working a 5.5-hour shift at \$13 (\$18 CAD) an hour, plus vacation and sick pay. “Minimum wage has jumped from \$10.30 to \$12.43 (\$14.25 to \$17.20 CAD) in the last three years in Ontario, and we go above it to make sure our team is supported. On top of that, we run monthly paid staff training sessions to ensure everyone is equipped not just to serve guests—but to build a long-term career in hospitality. We pay staff for the full time they're in training.”

■ OVERHEAD + MARK-UPS: \$7.75

Rent in Toronto is more affordable than in New York City, but, divided by the 3,000 cocktails they serve on average in a month, still amounts to an add of \$1.18 (\$1.63 CAD) a drink. “Rent and overhead have also crept up—we've seen a consistent five percent annual increase, plus rising insurance, maintenance, and supply costs,” says Chick. She also allocates \$0.36 (\$0.50 CAD) to cover glassware, ice, and incidentals.

Currently, they're clearing around \$6 (\$8.34 CAD) profit per drink, not inclusive of payroll, deductions, maintenance, insurance, and other factors that contribute to their bottom line. “It's sustainable, but three years ago, we'd clear about \$8 to \$9 (\$11 to \$12 CAD) profit per drink,” says Chick.

COST-CUTTING MEASURES

Each bar looks for ways to reduce costs where they can. At Holiday Cocktail Lounge, the additional 16 percent Strange adds to every raw cost provides a financial buffer for unexpected expenses and other expensive elements like food programs—which is a requirement for New York City bars according to the New York State Liquor Authority. The Distillery of Modern Art also uses a working equation to factor in their extra expenses. “We keep ingredient costs, including garnishes, at 18 percent or less of the price of the drink,” says

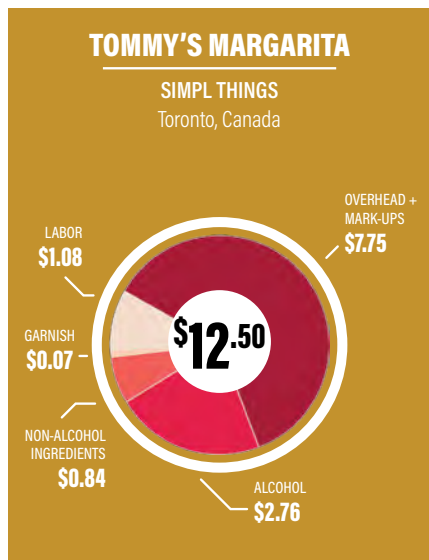


Evelyn Chick, Simpl Things

Watson. “To price, we take the cost of the drink, multiply by five and round up. This gives me room to price in labor and overhead, which I am always thinking about.”

Switching out or balancing more and less expensive ingredients also offers some flexibility in pricing. “We use our lower cost items on our menu to balance out pricier-to-produce items that we don't want to make more expensive,” says Reis of Mirate. At Too Soon, certain ingredients just can't feature on the menu any longer. “Liquor prices have gone up: the amaros, Cynar, certain tequilas we've used in the past,” says Flower. “We can't use those ingredients anymore because I don't want to raise prices. So we adjust our flavor profiles. That flexibility is the cost of staying open.”

To a degree, there is only so much wiggle room, not just due to the true cost of goods and services, but to consumer endurance for rising prices. Given “the nature of our neighborhood, we also cannot charge more for a beverage, because the average price of what people are willing to pay isn't that of another neighborhood, like downtown,” says Chick. She is also committed to fostering a healthy work environment, which adds to costs, but, she says, she always finds that tight attention to detail helps make the cost sheets balance out in the end. ■





FIVE YEARS ON, THE STATE OF TO-GO COCKTAILS

**COCKTAILS TO GO HELPED BARS SURVIVE DURING THE PANDEMIC.
CAN THEY STILL DRIVE SALES IN 2025?**

BY NICKOLAUS HINES

In June 2020, Iowa passed the first pandemic-era cocktail to go law to help bars and restaurants survive during a time when indoor dining was widely prohibited. Thirty-eight other states followed. Today, all but eight of those states still allow cocktails to go in some form. In New York, the pandemic-era policy was extended to 2030, and California, Illinois, and New Jersey have temporary allowances. More than half of

U.S. states now have permanent laws allowing alcohol to go. In 16 of those states and Washington, D.C., third-party delivery services can fulfill to-go alcohol orders.

Yet, for all this legislation, the number of businesses offering cocktails to go now is far fewer than when in-person restrictions were in place. The reasons vary by state and by individual business, but to-go alcohol for on-premise establishments isn't the universal revenue driver that it once was.

"None of my clients have to-go cocktails anymore," says Linda Kavanagh, the owner of the New England Culinary Group and the Connecticut-based, hospitality-focused PR agency MaxEx. "From COVID to 2023, 75 percent of them devised a way to make the to-go cocktail enticing." Now, "without high demand, these costs just don't make sense anymore."

Other restaurants, however, are finding new ways to make it work, with cocktails to go helping to diversify revenue

streams. Ainsley Giglierano, the vice president of public affairs and state policy at the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, expects drinks to go to remain “a regular part of dining culture moving forward.” When it comes to bars, though, they’ve encountered a different set of challenges—and solutions. Five years after this milestone in drinking culture, *Beverage Media* spoke to restaurant and bar managers to find out if and how cocktails to go are still driving sales in 2025.

WHEN, WHERE, AND HOW TO-GO COCKTAILS ARE WORKING

The revenue promise of cocktails to go can be seen in the city long famous for its allowance: New Orleans. Charles Regnard, the sommelier at Copper Vine, a wine pub and inn in the Central Business District, says to-go drinks offer “an extra way to engage with our guests,” rather than replace the customer base that would otherwise sit down at the bar. During large events or a Saints home game, Regnard estimates as much as 30 percent extra revenue comes from to-go drinks sales.

A location with heavy foot traffic in an area known for cocktails to go can make sales easier. In places without that benefit, a bar program focused on drinks that people don’t typically make at home can be the path to steady sales.

BELOW: Linda Kavanagh, the owner of New England Culinary Group and MaxEx.



Rustan Lundstrum opened Coach Meeting House in Oyster Bay, New York, on March 14, 2020. When the restaurant got its liquor license on April 1, it added frozen Margaritas to go to compliment the restaurant’s take-out taco trays. Sales quickly took off and remain important today. The legal drinks to go pause in New York in 2021 “was a huge blow,” Lundstrum says, as the drinks made up 20 percent of gross sales and 40 percent of profit at the time. “Thankfully Governor Hochul brought them back. To-go business never rebounded to prior levels, but it’s still solid.”

To-go margins overall are higher with alcoholic drinks. “If you can upsell the customer an artisanal cocktail, slushie, or something else they can’t make at home the same way, your to-go business has good margins,” Lundstrum says. In the summer, cocktails to go make up about 25 percent of his bar sales; in colder months that figure is about 10 percent. Specials like a “buy one, get one” deal on Tuesdays and a set price fill-your-own container on Monday help boost sales. Competitive pricing also helps: \$15 for a 20-ounce drink and \$20 for a 32-ounce drink to go, compared to \$15 for a 12-ounce cocktail seated.

“You can’t just post your cocktail menu and hope people get something unless you’re in a major tourist area with foot traffic,” Lundstrum says. “In the ‘burbs of Oyster Bay, you have to be—and stay—creative.”

Packaging can be a make-or-break consideration, too. Cesar’s Mexican restaurant—famed for its Killer Margaritas—was one of the first restaurants in Chicago to use a sealing machine for boba drinks to package cocktails to go, says owner Israel Sanchez, and the practice continues today. Sanchez estimates about 60 to 70 percent of dine-in tables order Margaritas to go on weekends, which helps free up seating occupied by people lingering over a last drink. Some walkthrough orders come in with people on their way to the shore, too.



ABOVE: Rustan Lundstrum, the owner of Coach Meeting House.

Delivery platforms like Uber Eats and GrubHub, however, remain a key point of sale, with the vast majority of orders including some sort of alcoholic beverage. A precise sales percentage is hard to measure because the drinks to go are paired with food orders, but Sanchez estimates about 10 percent of delivery sales are Margaritas to go, “which is huge because it’s a component that we never had before, but now we rely heavily on.”

Average delivery orders can increase by up to 30 percent when alcohol is offered, according to DoorDash, and a 2024 survey of 400 restaurants found that 79 percent of owners view alcohol delivery as a great revenue driver.

THE STATE OF COCKTAILS TO GO AT BARS

The situation for bars that aren’t attached to a restaurant is less straightforward. To-go programs created extra expenses with fewer upsides once people could easily

BELOW: Cesar’s in Chicago is famed for its Killer Margaritas.



drink on-premise again. Bars that kept to-go programs have moved on from basic, straight-forward offerings.

The Roosevelt Room, a high-end bar in Austin, is known for its cocktail menu with 90-plus drink options. “We wanted our to-go program to live up to those standards, so we weren’t just going to offer a small menu of 10 drinks,” says owner-operator Justin Lavenue. “We ended up offering almost all of them.” (One notable exception? A Blue Blazer, for obvious reasons.) Drinks are made to order, and available in either a 250- or 750-milliliter bottle, with recipes adapted to each bottle size. The container choice, along with the custom labels and handwritten thank you cards, matches the elevated atmosphere of the bar.

Deliveries play an important role here, too. The Roosevelt Room was one of the first cocktail bar accounts on Uber Eats in Texas, Lavenue says. Today, orders for cocktails to go are about 85 percent for delivery, 10 percent for pick-up, and five percent from people who sat at the bar for drinks and want to continue at home. On a good day, Lavenue estimates between \$500 and \$1,000 in to-go sales, or about 40 to 50 bottles.

“It’s a nice little padding,” Lavenue says. “It’s not a huge part of our program because

people still want to go out and have the experience, but it’s worthwhile and allows people to enjoy the drinks at home. I think that’s helped to keep us top of mind for some of our regulars, and helps introduce new people to the offerings.”

Cocktails to go are a brand extension at other bars as well. Bread Bar in Silver Plume, Colorado, a town of under 200 permanent residents, exists in what partner-owner Stephen Fenberg describes as a “living ghost town”—an old mining town that never fully transitioned to tourism, yet never truly went away either. The bar started selling its Old Fashioned variation to go as an experiment in late March. Even without a promotional push, the drink saw promising early sales, particularly from “folks who probably aren’t in the bar every weekend,” Fenberg says.

The sales aren’t a lifeline like cocktails to go were for many bars at the start of the pandemic, but the diversified revenue stream helps contribute to the long-term sustainability of the business. Bread Bar’s cocktails to go come in glass bottles with four servings inside, protected by a cork enclosure to “honor the quality and the spirit of what we’ve developed over the last nine years or so,” Fenberg explains.

Cocktail bars attached to distilleries have found success as well. Lucky Sign Spirits in Gibsonia, Pennsylvania, sells to-go drinks in eight-ounce plastic bottles that serve as an entry point to the brand. “Many questions we receive from consumers that are new to our products are about how they can utilize our spirits themselves, in their home bars,” says beverage manager Lisa Belczyk. Sales of cocktails to go from the bar at Lucky Sign Spirits has consistently been about five to 10 percent of sales over the past two years. A business’s walkability plays into

LEFT: The Roosevelt Room offers almost all of its cocktails to go, in two sizes.



ABOVE: Bread Bar sells its Old Fashioned to go.

to-go sales; the first Lucky Sign Spirits location was in a more walkable neighborhood, and to-go sales there were closer to 10 to 20 percent.

The craft cocktail bar The Wallingford Dram in Kittery, Maine, took an entirely different approach with to-go drinks. In 2020, owner Julian Armstrong turned the bar’s signature cocktails into canned ready-to-drink (RTD) beverages that can be purchased to go from the bar as well as Armstrong’s ramen restaurant next door, Anju Noodle Bar. Most of the RTDs purchased at Anju come after diners finish a meal, along with regulars who stop by specifically for the drinks. On a good night in the warmer months, the two businesses still sell between 40 and 50.

Rather than keep to-go sales of made-to-order cocktails, some bars and restaurants have turned to RTDs as well, which are easier to prepare for the guest and can fill the gap from pandemic-era to-go profits.

There’s no one-size-fits-all approach to cocktails to go, but with permanent laws in place, designing something specific to the business can help boost sales. “Convenience continues to be a thing that people look for and will pay money for,” Lavenue says. “I don’t think it’s going anywhere, unless the legalities of it change.” ■

