



# Bottoms up helps boost hotels' bottom line

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When you see them, you can't help but "ooh" and "aah." With their deep reds, bright oranges and seductive chocolate browns, signature drinks are colorful to the eye, pleasing to the nose and mouthwatering.

And for many metro Atlanta hotels, offering signature concoctions is supporting the bottom line at a time when the industry is struggling to get back on its feet because of the economic meltdown.

Lodgers across the metro area say they are making hundreds of thousands of dollars on Mason Jar Marys, Peach Tinquins and other signature drinks.

The drinks are part marketing tool, part revenue generator and part brand identifier. Those who succeed can grow business by bringing in crowds who might stay a night or make a bar a neighborhood hangout.

And business is so good that many are broadening their offerings from one or two signature drinks per season to five, six or more.

"As we have seen declines in dinner revenue, we have seen more revenue in beverages," said Ellen Burke Van Slyke, corporate creative director of food and beverage for Loews Hotels. Loews, which opened its first hotel in Atlanta this year, recently finalized its Lavender Drop drink after some tinkering to get the flavor right.

Increasing the signature

drink menu could prove wise. Lounges bring in about 34 percent of hotel beverage revenue, according to PKF Hospitality, which surveyed more than 500 hotels with at least a half-million dollars in beverage sales last year. That bested the beverage revenue of hotel restaurants, which was about 30 percent.

In Atlanta, the cost of the drinks range from the \$8 Velocity-tea at the Marriott Marquis to the \$550-per-glass "Le Reve des Anges" Hennessy Ellipse cognac at XO Bar at the InterContinental Buckhead. To defray costs, hotels partner with spirit makers who discount the ingredients in exchange for advertising their product to customers.

"It's a high-margin item," said Spiro Frangos, executive assistant manager of the InterContinental Buckhead. "It drives revenue, but it also creates an experience that is authentic and gives a sense of place."

That sense of place is the marketing side of the signature drink business.

Hoteliers spend months devising cocktails, looking for ingredients that say as much about the atmosphere in which the drink is consumed as they do about its taste.

Megan Gray, the food and beverage director at the St. Regis Atlanta, said she spent her first three weeks in Atlanta concentrating on the specialty drink menu, even creating the okra-infused West Paces Bloody Mary.

"We really wanted to be representative of our brand and to offer something with a Southern flavor for our location," she said.

During the recession, signature drinks often drove hotel visits. While few booked rooms, many stopped at the hotel bar for a drink.

"Even during the down economic times, these drinks allow people to have a taste of the W brand experience without having to spend the money for a night out in a luxury hotel," Marylouise Fitzgibbons, general manager of the W Buckhead said. The hotel created the "Take the Lift Home" package – which includes a night's stay with pajamas and toothbrush – specifically for visitors to its Whiskey Blue bar.

The drinks also break down barriers and make hotels, especially high-end properties, more accessible, said Ed Healey, assistant food and beverage director for the Rosewood Hotel at the Mansion on Peachtree in Buckhead.

Mark Castriota, hotel manager at the Marriott Marquis, the city's largest lodger, said the bartenders who create the signature drinks become the best sales people because they take ownership of their creations.

Joel Lindsey, bar supervisor at Trader Vic's at the Hilton Atlanta, said, "Having signature drinks enables us to stand out among our competitors and generate loyal customers who return specifically for our signature drink."



Patrick Austin, a bartender at the St. Regis in Buckhead, prepares their signature Bloody Mary. Lounges account for 34 percent of hotel beverage revenue.