

Unexpected Flavors

HOUSE-MADE LIQUEURS INSPIRED BY THE WILLAMETTE VALLEY by William Kennedy

The people behind popular Eugene restaurant Party Downtown, located at 55 W. Broadway, apply a “make-it-in-house” ethic to everything they do, from curing meats to baking bread. Bartender James West is particularly passionate about house-made liqueurs — distilled spirits infused with the flavors of fruit, berries, herbs or even flowers.

“I want to make things that are for sale in the liquor store,” West says. “But if we have as good or better ingredients in the valley, I will forgo buying something and make it myself.”

“Liqueur implies richness, viscosity,” he continues, adding that liqueurs have high sugar content but shouldn’t be thought of as strictly dessert drinks. “I always want people to be brave about when they’re having things and not feel contrived to a sequence of an experience,” West says, explaining that many liqueurs are aperitifs — or “before-the-meal” beverages.

This past winter, a popular drink on West’s menu was the house-made Irish Cream: Clontarf Irish whiskey, organic condensed milk, organic half ‘n’ half, Wandering Goat espresso, chocolate ganache and organic almond and vanilla extracts.

West serves the drink over frozen Wandering Goat Abyssinian coffee cubes and even makes his own half ‘n’ half. “Half milk, half heavy cream adds a nuanced richness,” he says.

West uses recipes as a reference when making liqueurs but frequently expands on them. “The

instructions are really easy,” West says, “but it’s up to you to choose the quality of ingredients and really take it somewhere that has more potential.”

And being located in the heart of the Willamette Valley, West has access to a dizzying array of quality ingredients to experiment with — making everything from Doug fir brandy to elderflower liqueur.

“I go and actually forage my own elderflowers with a hoe and a basket,” West says. “The whole energy is to harness anything we have seasonally available and make it instead of buying. If you’re a gardener and you have great produce and fruit at home, you can make your own liqueurs.”

West is currently working on a green walnut nocino — a sticky, spicy and sweet Italian liqueur. And during currant season — usually mid-summer — West makes his own crème de cassis, mixing black currants with pink ones from a tree in his own yard.

Crème de cassis is “definitely a liqueur,” West says, “but is usually used as a mixing agent.” West uses crème de cassis as a mixer in a popular drink called the Bourbon Renewal: bourbon, lemon, crème de cassis and bitters.

“One of the things that making house liqueurs does is it starts a conversation,” West says. “You’ll get some people that will come and have [the Irish Cream] and say, ‘I remember, 15 years ago, I tried this and tried that.’ You see that glint in their eye when they cared for a moment about craft mixing. And what we’re doing now is reminding them of that.” ■



GREEN WALNUT NOCINO
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