

TASTE OF THE MET



Raising the Bar

A Fresh Approach at Fiddler's Elbow Adds a Creative Dash of Cocktail Cool **BY ALIA AKKAM**

Photography courtesy of Fiddler's Elbow Country Club

When members of Fiddler's Elbow Country Club, in Bedminster Township, New Jersey, sit down to the bar, instead of the usual Margaritas and gin and tonics they might order up an El Guappo, a newfangled highball concoction uniting Casamigos Reposado tequila with Fernet Branca, a homemade root beer reduction, fresh lemon juice, and club soda.

Steve Fette, the bar manager and head bartender, decided a few years ago it was time to put the kibosh on soda guns spewing shoddy sour mixes. He ushered in a bright new era of craft cocktails, featuring fresh-squeezed citrus and syrups made from scratch. "There was a need for an elevated bar program. We put a lot of money and effort into our club's renovations and I felt that our customers should also have access to the best drinks possible," Fette explains.

Seeing quality ingredients take center stage at bars across the country, Fette—a New Jersey native who started his decade-long career "bottle flipping" at TGI Fridays—felt it was time to give the beverage program a creative re-boot. Fiddler's Elbow now flaunts a 60-strong whiskey collection; Fette remembers there were barely a handful of bourbons when he first started slinging drinks

here. Likewise, his guests today aren't just seeking out predictable swigs of Maker's Mark and Jack Daniel's, but "stepping out of their comfort zone and exploring [drinks made with] the more esoteric green Chartreuse, maraschino liqueur and vermouth as well."

This change was, of course, a "struggle at first," Fette reflects. "When a guy gets his Martini the same way every time for twenty years and you suggest something different to him, it takes a while for him to change. But once you build that trust, they will appreciate all your drinks." Which is why a libation like the Plymouth Rock (Old Weller 107 bourbon, Laird's straight apple brandy, Carpano Antica vermouth, Sorel liqueur, maple, sassafras bitters and a spicy beer-candied bacon garnish) is also a hit, as is the Dreamsicle (Aylesbury Duck vodka, black tea, vanilla, fresh lemon juice and Bittermens orange bitters, crowned with a scorched foam). To keep both the traditional and modern camps of Old Fashioned fans pleased—those who shun and those who favor the addition of, say, muddled oranges—Fette's version flaunts a fruit-based simple syrup.

"Sure, we have some members who still want their Grey Goose Martini extra dirty with lots of ice chips," he notes, "but we've created a real culture here and people are taking an interest in our cocktails. A Whiskey Sour made with fresh-squeezed juice versus sour mix means a guest is likely to order a second one. You need to drive a bar with passion. If you don't love making drinks and making people happy, this isn't the career for you." ■



(Left) Steve Fette demonstrates his five-finger grip behind the bar at Fiddler's Elbow. Fette has enlivened the club's cocktail scene with drinks like El Guappo (top) and the Plymouth Rock (above).

Do Try This at Home

Want to amp up your own home concoctions? Here are a few of Fette's suggestions:

- Choose fresh ingredients over artificial ones. A Cosmopolitan or Gimlet made with just-squeezed juice will pop with natural flavor.
- Step outside your comfort zone. Most people do not realize gin is simply flavored vodka. The next time you make a vodka Martini, add a splash of gin or vermouth.
- Add bitters. A few drops will add new layers of flavor and complexity. For spring, Fette suggests adding a couple dashes of peach bitters to brighten a Manhattan.