



# YOUR STARTER for ten

QUESTION: HOW DO YOU MAKE MORE MONEY FROM THE PRE-DINNER MOMENT? ANSWER: COME UP WITH A DRINK THAT WORKS BOTH ON ITS OWN AND WITH YOUR FIRST COURSE. **JULIE SHEPPARD** WATCHES AS FIVE VENUES HIT THE BUZZER CALLED 'MAX PROFIT'

A preprandial drink doesn't have to involve a great deal of time or effort – which is probably why most restaurants and bars resort to tried-and-tested favourites such as a glass of champagne or a G&T.

Those serves are perfectly acceptable as an aperitif to kick off a meal – indeed, the team at *Imbibe* have been known to partake of the odd glass themselves. But we also think that venues could reap added rewards if they showed just a little bit more imagination...

Why not, we thought, offer customers something that works both before a meal and also through into the starter? That way you have the opportunity either to sell the same drink twice or to convince those who were going to skip the aperitif to try your bespoke offering instead of their usual glass of Pinot Grigio.

Get it right and your occasion-bridging creations can add not just pizzazz to the customer's evening, but also high-margin profit to the bill. A winning situation all round.

So we recruited five brands and five bars, and tasked them with creating a preprandial cocktail that would really wow the customers before their food appeared, and then transition through into their meal as well. It was a tough challenge, but they all rose to it manfully – and showed that we aren't just causing trouble for the sake of it; there really is a concept that's worth exploring here.

## How it worked

The five venues were asked to devise an original cocktail or a twist on a classic and pair it with a savoury snack or starter to illustrate why it worked so well as a preprandial. Members of the *Imbibe* team and consultant Christopher Cooper of Drinkonomics visited each venue to judge the results. We were looking at the strength of the pairing concept, the quality of the drink (including taste and presentation), the suitability of the food match and how well the serve worked as a preprandial.

PHOTOS: JUSTINE TRICKETT



'The challenge was getting bartenders to think about the preprandial occasion,' said *Imbibe* editor Chris Losh. Bartenders presented a range of alternatives from a blood orange liqueur spritz matched with tuna ceviche to a spicy whiskey cocktail paired with chorizo tostadas. But what were the golden rules for success?

### Perfect opener

'The ideal preprandial drink should be something dry, savoury, maybe with a touch of bitterness – something to open your palate,' said Losh. 'There are plenty of drinks that work as preprandials, from fino sherry to a classic Martini, but we want something that takes the idea of an aperitif to the next level,' added *Imbibe* managing editor Julie Sheppard.

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'The lines between kitchen and front-of-house have blurred, so more bartenders now work in synergy with chefs – which is crucial for this challenge,' commented Cooper. 'Also lots of restaurants and bars are now doing small plates, so bartenders need to think more about cocktails that work with food.'

The final serves all worked at some level, but there was one serve in particular that clearly stood out from the rest.

'There was only one that truly evolved the idea of a preprandial,' concluded *Imbibe* sub editor Gaëlle Laforest.

Read on to find out which drink scored top marks and which venue triumphed to win the *Imbibe* seal of approval for its preprandial creations... >>



## GREY GOOSE

**WHERE:** Rumpus Room, Mondrian London, 20 Upper Ground, London, SE1 9PD

**WHAT:** Le Grand Fizz & lobster roll with seasonal crudités

Top bartender Iain Griffiths chose to work with one of Grey Goose's signature serves for this summer: Le Grand Fizz. Served in a champagne flute, it's a blend of Grey Goose vodka, St-Germain liqueur and soda water, with a squeeze of lime juice and a lime wedge garnish. 'This is a basically a riff on a vodka soda; a light summery serve,' said Griffiths.

The cocktail was paired with a lobster brioche roll and a selection of seasonal crudités with a fresh sorrel dip – one of the upmarket bar snacks devised by head chef Jude Rozario for the Rumpus Room menu. 'Made with native lobster and citrus wasabi emulsion, it's a high-end dish that suits our venue,' noted Rozario.

'Le Grand Fizz is a fresh, light and easy-drinking aperitif,' approved Cooper. 'With the vodka kick coming in at the end and a sharpness from the lime, it does work perfectly as a preprandial to open up the palate,' agreed Sheppard.

'This is clearly a great, simple summer cocktail that can be made by many venues,' continued Losh. 'It worked really well with the fresh crudités and sorrel dip, but was overpowered by the richness of the lobster roll.' Laforest agreed: 'The herby dip brings out the fruit in the drink, but there's a mismatch of flavours with the lobster roll.'

**GREAT IDEA...** Offering a twist on a classic aperitif, such as vodka and soda, is a simple and effective way to create a bespoke preprandial.

**COULD BE BETTER...** If you're offering food with a preprandial cocktail, match the weight of the dish to the drink. >>





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## JIM BEAM DOUBLE OAK

**WHERE:** La Oficina at Cielo Blanco, 55 Exmouth Market, London, EC1R 4QL

**WHAT:** La Mora & chorizo tostada

More used to mixing with tequila and mezcal, Guillermo Uriel was tasked with creating a bourbon cocktail to match with one of the spicy Mexican snacks from Cielo Blanco. His drink was made with 40ml of Jim Beam Double Oak, shaken with blackberry shrub, lime juice, chilli liqueur and black pepper agave syrup, then topped with ginger ale, strained and served. It was garnished with a dehydrated lemon wheel and blackberry powder.

La Mora means 'blackberry' in Spanish, highlighting the fruitiness of this drink. 'Blackberry really works with pork,' explained Uriel, who paired his colourful cocktail with a fiery little tostada: chorizo and potato on a fried corn tortilla topped with aioli, coriander, fresh onion and ranchera sauce.

'The fruit and chorizo are great together,' praised Laforest. 'It's quite a strong vinegar shrub, but that's bang on with the chorizo,' she added. 'The drink is sweet, but that's balanced by spice and a little mid-palate kick,' noted Losh. 'It's not exactly a flavour match with the warming and slightly smoky food, but they do walk along beside each other perfectly happily.'

'This wasn't a classic aperitif-style drink, but it does work as an introduction to a spicy meal, so the concept suits the venue,' said Sheppard. The judges also liked the presentation of the cocktail and the bright eye-catching colour. 'It's really vibrant. It says "Drink Me!"' explained Uriel.

**GREAT IDEA...** 'It's a good way to start a Mexican meal,' noted Cooper, highlighting the importance of matching your preprandial to the style of cuisine in your venue.

**COULD BE BETTER...** The sweeter profile of the drink was a good counterpoint to spice, but didn't quite work as a palate-opener. >>



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## NAKED GROUSE

**WHERE:** Kojawan, Hilton London Metropole, 225 Edgware Road, London, W2 1JU

**WHAT:** Cosmic Grouse & lobster dog

Served in a metal alien 'egg' swirling with dry ice and paired with a lobster bun that was made with dramatic charcoal black bread, this Cosmic Grouse serve suited what bar manager Jon Lee described as 'the intergalactic space lounge feel' of Kojawan, which is decked out with metallics and futuristic Manga graphics.

The cocktail itself was made with Naked Grouse, homemade honey and camomile syrup, apple juice and fresh lime. 'This drink is very much a sum of its ingredients,' noted Laforest. 'Quite sweet and fruity; it does exactly what it says on the tin.'

Chef Russell Oxtoby worked with Lee on the food pairing. 'The lobster dog is our twist on a lobster thermidor. The lobster is wrapped in nori and steamed, so it looks like a maki. Then it's topped with shellfish hollandaise,' he said. 'The sauce works well with the whisky,' commented Laforest. 'And there's a sweetness in the lobster flesh that's matched to the honey note in the cocktail,' added Sheppard.

'For me the lobster brings out more of the whisky character in the drink,' said Losh. 'But the other ingredients in the drink don't really work with a savoury dish. It might be good with a tarte tatin,' he added. 'The concept is good and the drink is good, but for me this isn't an aperitif,' agreed Cooper. 'I wonder if a simple Whisky Highball would have worked better?' said Sheppard.

**GREAT IDEA...** The eye-catching presentation and theatre of serve at this smart hotel, where guests probably have time to linger, was a good way to showcase the preprandial occasion.

**COULD BE BETTER...** Remember that a preprandial should open the palate, so focus on drinks with a dry, savoury character. >>



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WHISKIES DOUBLE  
MATURED IN FIRST-FILL  
SHERRY CASKS.  
ALL THAT MATTERS  
IS THE CRAFT.'

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**NAKED  
GROUSE**  
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## SOLERNO

**WHERE:** Coq d'Argent, 1 Poultry, London, EC2R 8EJ

**WHAT:** Spritz the Brits & tuna carpaccio

Coq d'Argent bar manager Pawel Rolka chose an on-trend spritz as his preprandial cocktail. 'The spritz will dominate this summer,' he predicted. 'They are light and refreshing, so I would definitely recommend this as a preprandial.'

Spritz the Brits was a mix of 50ml Solerno and Fever-Tree Mediterranean Tonic, with three drops of lavender bitters. Flavour-wise, it was a definite hit. 'Blood orange and lavender are an amazing match,' said Laforest. The cloudy white drink was garnished with a slice of dried blood orange and a sprig of lavender. 'Beautiful presentation,' praised Sheppard. 'This is a simple yet lovely cocktail, with nice bitterness on the palate.'

Visually, the spritz made a pretty pairing with an artfully arranged dish of tuna carpaccio, served with heritage beetroot, radish, and a wasabi and pea emulsion. 'The cocktail is light and delicate, so it won't overpower the food,' explained Rolka, who finished the dish with a spray of Solerno from an atomiser to give a continuation of the blood orange flavours.

'This pairing has been well thought out,' noted Cooper, 'though for me the texture of the tuna doesn't quite work with the drink.' Sheppard agreed: 'The drink and dish are light and appetising, and they open the palate up. But would white fish have worked better than tuna?'

'As a summer pair, this is a decent match,' concluded Losh. 'The cocktail is simple and approachable, plus a spritz is an easy sell. Yet it has a bit of structure to work as a food pairing and I'd say it would work with a variety of foods, too.'

**GREAT IDEA...** Tapping into relevant drinks trends, such as spritzes, is a way to make your preprandial offer interesting and bang up to date.

**COULD BE BETTER...** A very good effort, this pairing was only let down by the drink not quite standing up to the texture of the dish. >>



## SOLERNO FRESH SICILIAN

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### INGREDIENTS

50ml Solerno  
3 sprigs of mint  
2 lime wedges squeezed  
Soda or sparkling water

### DIRECTIONS

Build ingredients with ice,  
garnish with a blood orange  
slice, some mint and top with  
soda or sparkling water.





## TANQUERAY NO. TEN

**WHERE:** 7 Tales, Sosharu, 64 Turnmill Street, London, EC1M 5RR

**WHAT:** Yukimi Nagano & sea bream sashimi

'Our pre-prandial cocktail aims to prep the palate for a Japanese dinner in the same way that a small first bite or amuse-bouche would,' explained bar manager Geoff Robinson. 'More specifically, it stimulates the palate by incorporating the elements of sushi that enliven your taste buds.'

Robinson mixed Tanqueray No. Ten with Cocchi Americano and sweet turnip brine, muddled with dried nori strips, then topped it with sparkling saké and garnished with tobiko in a nori cone.

'This drink is everything that's wonderful about a Tanqueray No. Ten Martini,' continued Robinson. 'Sharp grapefruit and juniper notes underpinned by delicate aromatics. I've augmented those with the salty umami of the nori, sweet acetic notes of the brine and rich, oceanic flavours of the tobiko itself – all lifted by the light, yeasty effervescence of the sparkling saké.'

The judges were wowed. 'The flavour profile is totally on point,' praised Cooper. 'There are so many layers of flavour and this really opens up your taste buds. The nori is such a good idea – it really makes you think of the food you're about to eat,' added Laforest.

That food consisted of two small Japanese dishes: sea bream sashimi and Sosharu's version of temaki, made with cobia fish. 'A brilliant match,' praised Sheppard. 'The food and cocktail actually interact with each other, with the sashimi bringing extra floral and fruity elements to the cocktail. It really makes you want to eat and drink more, just as a preprandial should.'

'What I especially love about this is that it's better than wine would be,' added Losh. 'It totally works flavour-wise and the drink is so well-balanced that it doesn't pull the delicate food out of shape.'

**GREAT IDEA...** 'Simply a wonderful match,' said Laforest. 'It's a perfect answer to this challenge, especially as it's an evolution of the preprandial drink.'

**COULD BE BETTER...** There was simply no room for improvement here. Full marks to Robinson and his team at Sosharu! 🍷



# THE BARTENDERS' FAVOURITE GIN\*



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