After dinner, when the night is winding down but the party still clamors to keep going, it’s an especially opportune time to savor a cordial.

Cordials & liqueurs, whether slowly sipped on ice or mixed with cream or coffee, are an age-old way of ending the night. A few stalwart brands continue to appear on the menus of no-frills diners to high-end restaurants, while usually finding a home at most wine & spirits shops. The comfort and versatility synonymous with cordials, however, have expanded the market, greatly packing shelves with a variety of newcomers alongside the classics. With the American cocktail revolution showing no signs of stopping, this also means that cordials are no longer pigeonholed as post-dinner drinks – in fact, they’re standing in as bold mixers for bartenders’ contemporary creations.

According to the Distilled Spirits Council, cordials have seen an increase in distribution of 20.5% from 2002 through 2007, with premium brands seeing the largest movement. Cordial producers have seen a 29.6% increase in revenue over the same period, noting $2.4 billion in gross revenue in 2007. Further, Adams 2007 says consistent demand for new flavor options opened the market for newcomers, while the previous year’s growth came at the expense of mainstays. In 2007, the top-ranked states based on cordials & liqueurs consumption were California, Florida, New York, Texas and Pennsylvania.

Perhaps the most well-known cordial is iconic Baileys, the classic blend of Irish whiskey and cream often added into coffee beverages. But, as the cordial market continues to become more saturated, even the leaders must stay at the top of their game. “Baileys Irish Cream is the number one selling skew at beverage alcohol retailers during holiday time and is the number one selling cordial year round. The brand does consistently well year after year,” confirms Yvonne Briese, marketing director. “Diageo has been fortunate that consumers view Baileys as both a cordial/liqueur and also as part of the broader spirits category.” Briese says that, naturally, competition leads to marketing challenges, but that Baileys has managed to stay at the forefront. “As new brands enter the cordials/liqueur category, they increase awareness of the category as a whole. As people learn to enjoy cordials/liqueurs and include them in drink selections, often times consumers turn to Baileys as their preferred cordial/liqueur,” she explains. “It is a great liquid that is supported by great programming. At Diageo, we have a fantastic distributor network that speaks directly to the trade about Baileys Irish Cream and different ways to serve the liquid.”

Rachel Lea Driver, manager of Chicago’s Lush Wine and Spirits, says cordials & liqueurs have seen renewed interest at her store. “We have certainly noticed a studied peak in interest in highly specialized...
liqueurs in tandem with a renewed interest in classic and unique cocktail recipes and small production spirits,” she explains. “The possibilities for blending and enjoying such products are wide open.”

Because of their marketing savvy, brands making their way through the rigorous launch process are already beginning to turn the heads of retailers and bartenders, like lemon-lime liqueur, Cryptonic, or Italian import Fragoli, a strawberry liqueur featuring whole wild strawberries floating at the top of the bottle. Jekyll & Hyde, from Long Tail Libations, plays on the duality of human nature with its unique two-bottle package. Dr Jekyll is the smooth, red berry liqueur, while Mr. Hyde is the mysterious, black, herbal counterpart.

In some cases, new products are highlighted by their distinct sense of place. One hundred percent natural Madagascar vanilla is the centerpiece of Navan from the House of Grand Marnier. To celebrate this year’s natural vanilla harvest, mixologist Aisha Sharpe, co-director of New York-based Contemporary Cocktail Inc., devised a Navan Orchid Martini with Belvedere vodka.

Capitalizing on the popularity of non-alcoholic elderflower cordial witnessed in London’s bar scene, Robert Cooper, president of Cooper Spirits International, formerly head of worldwide marketing for Chambord, created St-Germain, the elderflower liqueur made from French elderflower blossoms handpicked from the foothills of the Alps. “I was skeptical,” says Rick Pitcher of New York’s Gotham Bar & Grill, who designs the restaurant’s house cocktail list and had used elderflower cordial in the past. “But then I tasted it. It’s unlike a lot of spirits in that it has a very interesting floral quality to it, which lends itself to giving drinks a different perspective.” Most recently, Gotham featured The Hollywood, a cocktail with St-Germain, and DH Krahn gin that was quite popular. “There’s a strong cocktail culture now. Customers aren’t scared to experiment with a new product when it’s mixed with ingredients they know.”

John Cooper, under the auspices of his own company, Maurice Cooper et Cie, developed an equally successful knockout liqueur: Domaine de Canton. Produced in Cognac, it’s made with a blend of Grande Champagne VSOP and XO cognacs and baby ginger from Vietnam, as well as flavors of Tunisian ginseng, Tahitian vanilla and Provencal orange blossom honey. “The product is being received extremely well,” notes Cooper. “We have found that the demographic truly ranges—we have top French chefs, renowned Asian chefs, famous bartenders and consumers using it. Our supply of fresh baby ginger has to be tripled to meet the demand.” For Cooper, one of the keys to attracting this coveted demographic is education of bartenders. The 2009 Bartender of the Year Awards is one such incentive, encouraging bartenders from across the country to submit an innovative Domaine de Canton cocktail in the hopes of securing the prestigious title and $10,000.

Getting product into the hands of the right bartenders, ones who can really highlight its star qualities, is key. “It’s not cut and dry. You have to reach someone who knows what to do with it,” says Kirk Spahn, co-founder of TY KU, a citrus liqueur with a soju base made with exotic Asian ingredients, like the superfruits mangosteen, goji berry and yuzu.

“Liqueurs are a hard category; it’s not a vodka, not a tequila. There are no boundaries. It demands a little more adventure in a way,” adds Spahn. Spahn’s next adventure is continuously introducing TY KU to new markets and building upon the success of the liqueur with a premium soju and sakes.

MORE THAN MARGARITAS

“Ultra-premium cordials are showing tremendous growth potential. People have come to realize that better spirits make better drinks, across the entire spectrum of spirits categories,” says Matt Carroll, chief marketing officer, Patrón Spirits Company. Orange liqueur like Patrón Citronge, perhaps most well known for its presence in the ubiquitous margarita, is one such example. “You just haven’t tasted a real margarita until you make one with Patrón Citronge, and that’s exactly how we market this spirit,” says Carroll. Yet, traditional margaritas are paving the way for more inventive cocktails. For their Patrón Music in Motion Tour, a fundraiser for New Orleans, bartender John Hogan whipped up signature cocktails like the AKA Velvet Orange, with Patrón Citronge, Patrón Reposado tequila and Angostura bitters.

Grand Marnier, the blend of Cognac and oranges which has been around since 1827, continues to flourish. Although they’ve partnered with Jose Cuervo to create the “Grand Margarita,” Grand Marnier also promotes a roster of non-traditional drinks like the Grand Raspberry Fizz with raspberry puree.

GranGala Triple Orange Liqueur, with VSOP brandy and Sicilian oranges, has been embraced by bartenders who see its versatility. Leo Ramirez, mixologist at the Trina Lounge in Fort Lauderdale’s Atlantic Hotel, has cocktails like the Verana, with Gran Gala, Flor de Cana rum and cranberry syrup on the menu.
Newfangled liqueurs might be ushering in a new era for dynamic cordials, but the tried and true cream, coffee and chocolate varieties are still thriving and inspiring modern spins on after-dinner cocktails.

Baileys is slated to unveil a new flavor this fall, simply called Baileys with a hint of Coffee. “Diageo continues to innovate with Baileys, as seen with the recent launch of two flavors: Baileys with a hint of Caramel and Baileys with a hint of Mint Chocolate,” says marketing director Yvonne Briese. Those successful flavor additions have garnered interest in such cocktails as the Baileys Mint Chocolatini and the Baileys Caramel Appletini.

Godiva Caramel Milk Chocolate Liqueur is the latest in chocolate powerhouse Godiva’s liquor line-up, including original, milk chocolate, white chocolate and mocha. In Providence, RI at Temple Downtown at the Renaissance Providence Hotel, the Godiva-tini is one of the drinks on the menu. Michael Hocter, vice president of Sage Restaurant Group notes, “We use Godiva Chocolate liqueurs because of the rich history that the brand has. It is recognized by our guests as a liqueur that is truly special and unique.”

European-inspired Café Bohême Coffee Créme Liqueur is a decadent mix of gourmet coffee, multi-distilled French vodka and crème. “I like the fact that it is vodka-based and not whiskey which makes it very different,” says renowned mixologist Willy Shine, co-director of New York-based Contemporary Cocktail, Inc. “It mixes well, stands up in a cocktail and is extremely fresh.” Shine, along with partner Aisha Sharpe, have developed signature dessert cocktails for the brand, including the Tiramisu with vodka and amaretto and the Temptation, with vanilla vodka and Godet Cassis or Chambord.

Coffee behemoth Starbucks ventured into alcoholic territory when it launched coffee and cream liqueur flavors. The coffee version naturally features Starbucks House Blend. Last winter, Grant Landry of The Abbey in Los Angeles, says they ran a promotion with table tents promoting the various flavored latte martinis made with the Starbucks liqueurs, as well as mixers like blueberry vodka and Frangelico. As Landry says: “What most impressed me as a bartender, as well as our customers, was not only the versatility of Starbucks Coffee Liqueur and the pleasant pairings with both fruit flavored vodka and rums but that it created incredibly delicious cocktails made completely out of alcohol-based products.

Crystal-clear Cointreau, distilled from sweet and bitter orange peels, has looked toward the trend of molecular gastronomy for their next marketing move. Using scientific techniques and analysis, they’ve created Cointreau Caviar, alcohol transformed into solid, iridescent caviar bubbles, that can be served alongside a Cointreau cocktail or floating within it. This first for the spirits industry has attracted interest from such esteemed restaurants as Daniel in New York City. Furthermore, Cointreau Noir, a blend of Cointreau orange liqueur and Rémy Martin Cognac, has just been released.

The newest player to the orange liqueur scene, though, flaunts the oldest recipe. While living in France, Scott Goldman, president and director of sales for Cadre Noir LLC, which imports Combier, discovered the Combier distillery in the Loire Valley, whose orange liqueur was the recipe for the original triple-sec. “With the cocktail craze, it’s wrong the original formula for triple sec isn’t a part of it. This recipe’s never changed. It’s one hundred percent natural,” explains Goldman. With the big brands firmly in place, loyal customers already drinking their product, how does Goldman intend to make an impact on the marketplace? “We’ve been very selective in who to approach and intend to let it just grow on its own,” he reveals. Currently, Combier is available in New York and was recently listed in Pennsylvania. “Sometimes bartenders get skeptical, but this product existed before the term triple sec was even coined. This is how triple sec was intended to taste,” Goldman says.

DeKuyper is one brand that has taken the public’s affinity for flavors and turned it into continual innovation with their sixty-product strong portfolio. Their newest product, Burst Bar Shots, add to that mix of flavors. After thorough analysis, DeKuyper found that shots and shooters, while popular at the bar, were not as popular on the homefront, mostly because consumers felt the mixing component was complicated. “These pre-mix shots contain all ingredients,” points out Jill Nelson, DeKuyper’s marketing director. “Once they try it, they get addicted and it sells itself.”

Lichido is the lychee liqueur which launched in 2006, has now expanded to eight markets and gained a presence at high-end, stylish establishments like Ono at NYC’s Gansevoort Hotel. “There’s sex appeal. The bottle is hot and exotic and fits into different categories,” says Lana Lang, Lichido’s marketing director. “Once you put things on a menu, people see it and there’s recognition,” she explains. “Once they try it, they get addicted and it sells itself.”

Super Fruits
With research consistently showing the American palate seeks out a range of flavor choices, liqueurs with key fruit components are one step ahead in attracting a loyal fan base.

Wolfberger Fruit Liqueurs from Alsace are one such example, available in flavors like Litchini, lime and Coconut Splash.

PAMA, the successful 100% natural California pomegranate liqueur continues to be a staple on many mixologists’ back bars. Bridget Albert, director of mixology, Southern Wine & Spirits, Illinois, and author of Market-Fresh Mixology enjoys using PAMA in mojitos, fresh sours and hot cider. “The feedback I get from cocktails I make with PAMA is how very balanced and tasty they are. People are most surprised by how very easy it is to mix.”
associate brand manager. “It gets to the simplicity of the product. Bartenders can get behind it too because it means less time in preparation and more time with their customers.” This falls on the heels of their DeKuyper Five Families launch in February, a new approach to segmenting the market and maximizing interest in cordials across all flavor profiles. “A lot of shoppers in the cordials aisle are confused and overwhelmed but they buy by usage and flavor. What we did to hook into that consumer insight was organize our products into five core families,” explains Nelson: Luscious, Burst, Pucker, Signature and Brandy.

Hiram Walker, known for their schnapps, liqueurs and brandies, and another leader on the flavor forefront, released their white peach and blueberry passion schnapps a few months ago. “We use all natural flavors and the taste we’re going for is natural. We don’t want it to taste like candy, but like fruit,” says Hiram Walker’s marketing director, Cort Kinker. This fall, after the success of their pumpkin spice flavor, they will follow up with a gingerbread liqueur fitting for the holiday season. Although Kinker does see a resurgence in consumers caring more about their cocktails, he also notes a shift from the on-premise focus to retail sales. This is when illustrating to consumers how simple Hiram Walker is to work with becomes essential. Simple-tini retail racks, for example, show customers it’s as easy as mixing, shaking and pouring.

**STEEPING IT UP**

The very idea of a cordial, maybe sipped after work, on the rocks, evokes timeless brands like Drambuie, the honey- and herb-flavored scotch whisky liqueur, or fruit, spice and whiskey-flavored Southern Comfort. With the plethora of new brands on the market, it seems like it might be harder for these old-time brands to stay relevant. But, on www.drambuie.com, consumers can use the Drambuie Mixer to determine which Drambuie cocktail best suits their mood, whether a light apple soda or a rich macchiato. Southern Comfort, meanwhile, has reached out to younger audiences with substantial marketing efforts like the SoCo Music Experience festival tour, showcasing national and live music acts and partnering with digital media to add artist interviews to the mix.

These kinds of programs are effective, especially when considering similar-minded products like Celtic Crossing, the blend of Irish whiskey, Cognac and honey that has become popular in bars like Cole’s Tavern in Franklin, MA, where owner and manager Scott Amandola poured Celtic Crossing and Red Bull shots throughout the playoffs when the aptly named Celtics won the World Championship.

Wild Turkey American Honey, the only bourbon-based liqueur, has proven popular since it updated its packaging and increased its proof last year. Still, according to Andrew Nash, global director for the brand, “it’s a crowded marketplace. While there’s no other bourbon liqueur, there are a host of other brands competing.” Nash says American Honey continues to see great growth, though, as it’s particularly well-received by bartenders who create modern cocktails around it, like the Tootsie Roll with Kahlua.

Frangelico, the hazelnut liqueur in the well-known monk-shaped bottle, is another brand that constantly stays one step ahead. “Despite the category growth, some people still think that liqueurs are excessively thick, sweet and syrupy. Through hands-on training we’re able to show how liqueurs add complexity and flavor that is needed in most cocktails,” says brand manager Jill Palais.

SKYY Spirits’ Midori Melon Liqueur, perhaps most well known for the Midori Sour, keeps its image fresh and sexy through campaigns like their Spirit Awakenings program, including an interactive web site inviting customers into a concept that there are eight muses and Midori can guide them to become the ninth.

Premium Italian coffee company, illy, has now come out with an espresso liqueur, part of the Niche Import Co. line-up. Niche’s liqueur portfolio has always been strong, with brands like Germany’s herbal Killepitsch Krauter Liqueur and the twenty-two karat gold-flecked Goldwasser.

Bitter Campari is another retro brand still going strong and showing off in cocktails like Negroni. Dominic Venegas, a San Francisco-based mixologist at hotspot Bourbon & Branch says: “Campari is one of the old faithfuls. Any bar that opens in the world is going to have a bottle of Campari in the back.”

In New York recently, B&B, the blend of Benedictine and brandy, celebrated its 70th anniversary at the 21 Club, the same location where the brand was first invented. Brand manager Valerie Fender points to B&B’s mixability as to why it is still thriving today, fitting in nicely in amid the cocktail resurgence. “The perception of the cordials category is so dynamic, including a wide range of products,” says Fender. “For that reason, it is challenging to define “cordials” as a category. Luckily there are still brands such as B&B that have a rich and authentic history, and have been able to command the premium status they had when originally created.”