

Debate Stirred on Infused Drinks

By: Katie Worth

Examiner Staff Writer

April 11, 2010



New trend: The Golden Gate Restaurant Association says spirits mixed with fruit, sugar or spices is not a health risk and should be allowed since they boost the industry. (AP file photo)

SAN FRANCISCO — San Francisco’s drinkers need not worry — they can sip their sangria in peace.

The Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control has agreed not to actively enforce a rule outlawing alcoholic infusions — usually spirits steeped with fruit, sugar or spices and later served as part of mixed drinks — until a compromise is reached on the regulation.

The regulation was explained in an industry advisory in May 2008, but it was never enforced until one night early this year when ABC investigators visited three bars in San Francisco and warned each of them to dump out their limoncello and other infusions or be cited.

The sudden enforcement of the virtually unknown regulation raised the hackles of San Francisco bar and restaurant owners, an estimated half of whom serve these “rectified spirits,” according to Golden Gate Restaurant Association Executive Director Kevin Westlye.

The situation has yet to be fully resolved, but the restaurant group did meet with ABC leaders at the San Francisco offices of state Sen. Mark Leno in March. Westlye said the director of ABC was very responsive to the GGRA’s concerns and has promised to withhold further enforcement of the regulation for the time being and find some sort of compromise.

Leno said he would be willing to sponsor legislation amending the anti-infusion law if it proves necessary. He noted bacteria and other contaminants do not survive in alcohol, so there is not an obvious public health concern with the practice.

“I asked [ABC Director] Steve Hardy if there has ever been a reported public health concern because of infusion that you’re aware of, and he couldn’t say that there had been. So my question was, ‘What are you guys doing?’” Leno said. “Especially in this economic downturn, anything that threatens the health of our night scene must immediately be addressed.”

Though ABC spokesman John Carr didn’t discuss the specifics of the meeting with Leno and bar owners, he said in an e-mail that the agency is working with the senator to clarify the topic for businesses. The regulation is not an enforcement priority, he said, and the agency “is not allocating any of [its] precious few resources to investigate complaints on this issue.”

“The activity of a few conscientious police officers ... does not dictate or establish the direction of ABC’s priorities,” he wrote.

Westlye said he has been impressed with the agency’s responsiveness and was confident a resolution will be found that ensures the infused drinks will keep on pouring in San Francisco.

“A large part of the success that local bartenders are seeing is thanks to these specialty drinks they’re serving,” he said. “We’re kind of on the leading edge of a movement of the country with these infusions — the public loves the drinks and frankly, the bartenders are becoming celebrities off them.”

Infused or not?

How to tell if you are drinking an infused beverage:

What is infused or rectified alcohol? Rectification is any process whereby distilled spirits are cut, blended, mixed or infused with any ingredient that changes the character and nature or standards of identity of the distilled spirits. For example, many bars make their own limoncello, in which sugar and lemon are added to vodka and stored, to be used later in drinks.

What does the regulation allow? Currently, it allows the simple mixing of alcoholic beverages with other ingredients for immediate consumption.

How many San Francisco bars serve infused liquor? The Golden Gate Restaurant Association estimates that about half do.

Source: Golden Gate Restaurant Association, Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control

kworth@sfexaminer.com

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