

holy yerba buena!

by tony abou-ganim



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It is springtime once again. Baseball, barbeques, and the 131st running of the Kentucky Derby are close at hand. The season's most welcome herb is aroused from its slumber. *Mentha piperita* and *Mentha spicata*, peppermint and spearmint respectively, return to reawaken senses and quench thirsty palates as the mercury begins to rise.

Mint is one of my favorite cocktail ingredients and perhaps the most overlooked and underutilized. It adds such a wonderful aromatic element as a garnish to a properly constructed mai tai or rum swizzle. Similar to tea, it can be incorporated into refreshing long drinks through steeping or infused into simple syrup. But as the foundation for the classics, the mint julep and the mojito specifically, mint really rocks.

“RUN FOR THE ROSES AND A COUPLE OF MINT JULEPS!”

Gary Reagan, in *The Book of Bourbon* praises the mint julep: “. . . the aristocrat of mixed drinks, it is a creation that brings wisdom to fools, turns wallflowers into the life and soul of the party, makes the clumsy graceful, the weak strong, and brings sophistication and charm to the most ill-mannered lout.” An 1806 edition of *Webster's* provides a less poetic definition: “a kind of liquid medicine.” I am inclined to agree; one or two juleps certainly feel like what the doctor ordered.

Each year during the first weekend of May, Churchill Downs stages the running of the Kentucky Oaks and the Kentucky Derby. During this two-day celebration of horse racing, over 80,000 mint juleps are consumed, including 150 bushels of mint. This is believed to be more juleps than the number enjoyed over the remaining 363 days of the year combined! This is a situation that needs serious adjustment.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, YOU'RE OUT OF FRESH MINT?”

I am completely baffled when ordering a mojito to hear that the bartender is without one of the most basic, yet essential, staples. Is the bartender really out of mint or just short on desire to put the necessary love into preparing a fine drink? Quite honestly, a supply of fresh mint should be the least of a bartender's concerns behind the

stick. According to the *University Journal*, the United States produces 70 percent of the world's mint supply—three million pounds of spearmint alone. To me, this means no excuses!

The mojito is not some trendy new drink that has been made popular by showing up on *Sex in the City*. It's a classic that has been rediscovered and even become quite the rage. Why? I would venture that the newfound success of the mojito is due in part to the spreading trend toward providing a premium cocktail experience through the use of fresh ingredients. Fresh mint is finally becoming a priority for the well-stocked bar.

Thankfully, you don't need to follow the ghost of Ernest Hemingway to Havana's La Bodeguita del Medio to find a fabulous mojito. Be wary, though: this is a beverage that cannot be faked. But crafted with fresh ingredients by capable hands, the mojito can be tantamount to liquid nirvana.

“GET YOUR JUICES FLOWING!”

Make a commitment to stock fresh mint, which lends itself to so many creative uses. Try it in variations of the mojito, caipirinhas, and caipiroskas or with fresh fruit in smashes. Pay tribute to great Southern hospitality with the classic mint julep, or step out a little—utilize seasonal ingredients and have fun reinterpreting this granddaddy of all mint-themed drinks. Remember, it may be traditional to serve juleps during the Derby, but your guests are sure to enjoy one anytime the temperature starts to rise. Santé!

BLACKBERRY SMASH

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- 2 fresh blackberries
- 8–10 spearmint leaves
- 1½ ounces fresh sour (2 parts fresh filtered lemon juice, 1 part simple syrup)
- 1½ ounces Belvedere Citrus Vodka
- ¾ ounces Marie Brizard Blackberry Liqueur Powdered sugar
- 2 fresh blackberries and sprig of mint as garnishes

In a 16-ounce mixing glass, muddle the blackberries, mint, and lemon sour. Combine the vodka, blackberry liqueur, and ice in the glass. Shake until well blended and strain into a double old-fashioned glass filled with crushed ice. Garnish with a couple of blackberries and a mint sprig dusted with powdered sugar.

