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Tea time gets a new, fruity kick

Gary Regan

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"Yes, but it's pronounced 'chee,' " the Professor, our cocktailian bartender, explains to Leo, a mischievous joker who pops into the bar to see the Professor occasionally. "It means 'life force.' It's one of those Eastern things."

"As in tai chi?" asks Leo.

"Exactly, Leo. Exactly. Tai chi means 'supreme life force,' I think."

"So why is it spelled Q-I?"

"I have absolutely no idea, Leo, I'm just the bartender. I guess they can spell it however they darned well please when they make a liqueur this good."

The Professor is fawning over **Qi** Lapsang Souchong Tea Liqueur, a product made by **Qi** Spirits, a new company in San Francisco. The liqueur is distilled by Lance Winters of St. George Spirits in Alameda, a partner in the new venture.

The Lapsang Souchong used to flavor **Qi** is smoked over cedar fires, a normal process for this style of tea, then blended with "rare fruits, exotic spices, wildflower honey," and aged brandy made from Chardonnay grapes. The resultant product is startling.

Legally, sugar in one form or another must be a component in any liqueur, but this bottling, made with only 2 percent sugar by weight, is far from overly sweet. It's incredibly smooth and very complex, bearing rich, smoky vanilla notes, a hint of honey, and a wonderful orange-y finish that lingers in the back of the throat.

"So what are you going to make for me with this 'key' liqueur," asks Leo, purposefully mispronouncing the name to annoy the Professor.

"I'm going to try to recreate this drink that Kieran Walsh came up with over at the Solstice Lounge, Leo. He says that the smoke, vanilla and orange flavors in **Qi** reminded him of an Old-Fashioned, so it's a drink that calls for muddled fruits. He uses kumquats and bourbon in his Mamere cocktail, and a couple of different styles of bitters to boot. It's a pretty complex potion."



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The Mamere calls specifically for Bulleit bourbon from Kentucky, a whiskey that garnered a gold medal in the 2004 San Francisco World Spirits Competition. Walsh says he chose it because of its citrus qualities, and adds, "The **Qi** liqueur's orange and smoke nuances really become the zipper that brings this whole drink together."

The Professor finishes assembling the drink and hands it to Leo.

"Wow, Professor. Great drink. That key liqueur is something else," he says.

"Key? That's not pronounced 'key,' Leo. It's pronounced queue-eye. Just say the letters," says Bobby, the bar's resident bore, who just joined Leo at the bar and is studying the label on the bottle of **Qi** liqueur.

"Queue-eye, Bobby? No, it's pronounced 'chee.' As in tai chi," the Professor offers.

"Not in quantum mechanics it isn't, Professor. Oh, no. Q. I. stands for quantum information. You can measure Q. I. by using Shannon's entropy, I believe. Named for Claude Elwood Shannon, you know. Now there was a genius for you. 'Father of information theory' they call him . . ."

The Professor turns his back, rolls his eyes, shakes his head, and walks down the bar to the service area where the Boss is standing.

"What's going down with Leo and Bobby, Professor?" the Boss asks.

"I'm not entirely sure, Boss. I'm not even sure which particular universe I'm in right now."

Mamere

Adapted from a recipe by Kieran Walsh, bar manager at Solstice Lounge in San Francisco.

INGREDIENTS:

3 kumquats, halved + 1 kumquat for garnish
1/3 ounce simple syrup
2 dashes Peychaud's bitters
2 dashes orange bitters
1 3/4 ounces Bulleit Bourbon
1/3 ounce **Qi** Tea Liqueur

INSTRUCTIONS:

Muddle the halved kumquats with the simple syrup and both bitters in a mixing glass. Add ice, the bourbon and the **Qi** liqueur, and stir for approximately 30 seconds. Strain into an ice-filled old-fashioned glass and add the garnish.

Gary Regan is the author of "The Joy of Mixology: The Consummate Guide to the Bartender's Craft" and other books. E-mail him at wine@sfchronicle.com.