



Evan Faber shaking things up at Salt Bistro's bar. Photos by Elizabeth Grant.

# DIY DRINKS

Salt Bistro's Evan Faber is moving the art of cocktail construction out from behind the bar.

BY JAYME OTTO

When you peer into your cocktail glass, can you detect the layers of study? When you take the first sip, does your palate pick up on the art, philosophy, history, geography and chemistry that have combined to form a once-in-a-lifetime flavor? According to 29-year-old Evan Faber, the beverage director at Boulder's Salt Bistro, there's no other way to enjoy a mixed drink. And in order to gain that level of appreciation, you need to create it yourself.

Faber is the visionary behind The Cocktail Element, a mix-and-match drink menu at Salt that enables patrons to architect their own personal libations. The menu lists three elements to choose from: *the base spirit*, such as Scotch or gin; *the flavor*, an herb or spice; and *the style*, which determines what other ingredients are added, such as club soda or lemon juice.

“There’s no rules beyond that,” says Faber. “And once you get the hang of it, anyone can do it.”

To make his point, Faber uses the example of a trendy coffee shop where customers are comfortable ordering specific styles of drinks, like a *latte macchiato*, and then adding their personal preferences, such as making it a *double* (with two shots of espresso), or making it *caldo* (with steamed hot milk) versus *freddo* (with cold milk).

“If baristas can inspire an entire generation of Americans to embrace DIY lattes, and to order them in Italian, just think about what passionate bartenders could do with customers interested in the aesthetics of cocktails.”

What if a customer devises a concoction that turns out to be less than pleasant? “We haven’t seen much of that yet,” says Faber, who debuted The Cocktail Element at Salt in August. “When you treat a liquor as more than itself—more than just bourbon but as a liquid flavor, say butterscotchy caramel richness—it really untethers it from conventional perceptions and allows for a lot more creativity and open-mindedness.”

Besides, the elements listed on Faber’s do-it-yourself drink menu are far from random. The man did his homework. Using a model of pre-Prohibition drinks, assertively flavored spirits popular in the United States prior to the 1920s restrictions on alcohol, Faber studied more than a dozen books published between 1862 and 1935 to get a sense for what ingredients traditionally worked best together. His major takeaway was how similar one drink’s ingredients could be to another’s, like using lemon juice instead of lime juice, and yet how different they could taste.

“That’s what really solidified the concept for me,” Faber says. “I realized that a drink didn’t have to be static, with a set ingredient list. By thinking of it as a *style* of drink, it becomes much more dynamic. Take a *sour*, for example—it’s built by mixing lemon juice + a base liquor + a flavor. Now imagine that the liquor doesn’t have to be the traditional whiskey. The idea is that a person can discover new versions of the *sour style* using any liquor and its coordinating flavors.”

But will customers get it? Faber says yes. He sees The Cocktail Element as the next evolution of the popular pre-Prohibition cocktail trend. “People have already demanded more craftsmanship and complexity in their attraction to pre-Prohibition drinks. This is just the next step.”

Faber is referring to the fact that spirits from the pre-Prohibition period require a certain level of sophistication and experience to truly enjoy, as they are beefier beverages than your basic mojito. A person who’s earned that distinction would most likely enjoy upping the ante again by embracing Faber’s DIY style of mixology.

Convinced of the strength of his concept, Faber put it to the test this fall when he recognized an employee from Upslope Brewing

Company at the Salt bar, and asked him and his friends to consider beer as just another “liquid flavor.” As part of Faber’s experiment, he poured Upslope IPA into a glass and asked for feedback on the essence behind the alcohol. The consensus of the Upslope gang was chocolate and coffee. Faber picked out some complementary flavors—cream and simple syrup, and added a dash of coffee-flavored Roundhouse Corretto to turn out a mixed cocktail. “It had a very unique flavor profile,” Faber says. “It started off as chocolate creaminess, and finished earthy.” As for the Upslope crew, they ordered an entire round after one taste.

Diners at Salt, as well as visitors to Salt’s Cellar Bar downstairs, have also shown support. “I love The Cocktail Element. It’s so much more interesting than simply ordering a cocktail that’s based on an old recipe—I really enjoy being a part of the process, and connecting to a different time and place through its pre-Prohibition roots,” says Boulder resident Amanda Rubino, 31, co-owner of Frisk jewelry store. “The only thing more glamorous than creating your own signature drink is creating a new one the next time.”

At press time, Faber was in the midst of winterizing The Cocktail Element ingredient list. The *sour style* (base spirit + flavor + lemon juice) and the *collins style* (base spirit + flavor + lemon juice + club soda) will stay, but the other styles are changing. The winter menu will include styles such as the *martini*, the wash, the *hot toddy* and the sure-to-please *hot chocolate*.

“Imagine creating your own hot chocolate, experimenting with different liquors and spices,” Faber says.

As soon as he’s finished creating the winter menu, Faber can turn his attention back to a pet project he’s been working on with Salt’s upstairs neighbor, InspiringApps. “I thought it would be really fun if customers had another way to interact with The Cocktail Elements,” Faber says. He designed an iPhone app that allows users to put the three elements together like a puzzle, selecting a base spirit, flavor(s) and style. “Then you can text it directly to Tyler,” Faber laughs, referring to Salt’s main man behind the bar. “He’ll have it ready for you by the time you get here.”

Faber’s goal is to make the app a viable resource beyond Salt, which would mean a more universal adaptation of the concept of drink *styles*, using terms like *collins* and *rickey* more as a point of reference than as an exact drink. Faber thinks we’ll get there. In fact, he recently read about a concept similar to his being introduced at a club in New York City. “So we’re really just waiting for both coasts to catch up with us,” he says.

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Boulder-based freelancer Jayme Otto writes about the people, places, ideas and events that are changing the way we think about the world. [JaymeOtto.com](http://JaymeOtto.com)

# Recipes from Evan Faber



## ROUNDHOUSE KICK

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- 3 ounces Upslope IPA
- $\frac{3}{4}$  ounce Roundhouse Corretto
- $\frac{1}{2}$  ounce simple syrup
- $\frac{1}{2}$  ounce cream

Add all ingredients to a mixing glass; add ice. Since the beer is carbonated, gently tumble the ingredients about 8 times. Strain and serve up in a martini glass.

## GINGER PEAR SCOTCH HOT CHOCOLATE

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- 1½ ounces Scotch (an Island Scotch will add more smoky notes—yum!)
- 1 ounce Ginger Pear Syrup (see below)
- Hot chocolate

### **Ginger Pear Syrup**

Boil 1 cup each water and sugar with 1 skinned and sliced pear and a grated 3-inch piece of fresh ginger. Strain and chill. Gently stir ingredients together in a latte glass or mug. Fill with rich hot chocolate.

## BOURBON APPLE CINNAMON SOUR

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- 1½ ounces bourbon (You could use Stranahan's Whiskey for its floral and green apple notes)
- 1 ounce Apple Cinnamon Syrup
- 1 ounce lemon juice

### **Apple Cinnamon Syrup**

Boil 1 cup each water and sugar with 1 skinned and sliced apple and 2 cinnamon sticks. Strain and chill. Shake all ingredients and serve in an Old Fashioned glass.