

Here's one we made earlier...

TOM INNES AND BAR MANAGER PAUL MATTHEW PUT
READY-TO-DRINK AND PRE-MIXED COCKTAILS TO THE TEST

Ask someone how they are and the word 'busy' is almost a default answer. Maybe it's because more people are contactable 24/7 through their phone, Blackberry or assorted social networks, or maybe they genuinely are busy, but certainly there's a perception that more people are 'time-poor'.

A lack of time is perhaps one reason why we are being offered shortcuts for everything. That is, presumably, why people will pay around £2 for a carton of pre-washed and seasoned potatoes at Marks & Spencer rather than buy the spuds, wash them, cook them and bung on some butter and seasoning.

The world of cocktails has been slow to catch on with such shortcuts. Since the likes of Dick Bradsell started shaping modern cocktail culture in the UK, these drinks have tended to be the preserve of on-trade outlets, and with a few excep-

tions the quality cocktails tend to be found at top-end venues.

When mass market venues started trying to jump on the cocktail bandwagon, the results were, if you'll pardon the pun, mixed. Some drinks were over-complicated, requiring specialist ingredients, while anything in a cocktail (as in Martini) glass wasn't really suitable for vertical drinking in a busy venue, where a stray elbow could leave the customer wearing their drink.

In a bid to encourage the spread of cocktail culture to a wider range of on-trade outlets, as well as the at-home sector, a new wave of ready-to-drink cocktails and cocktail mixers has sprung up in the past couple of years.

Some of these products have been sent to the *Theme* offices, and we have traditionally viewed them with suspicion and 'filed' them at the back of cupboards. We've certainly never consumed any of them. Until now.

I'm not sure what the tipping point was, but it may well have been the arrival of some jazzy looking 'just add alcohol' cocktail pouches from **Funkin**. The company's purées are widely used and well-respected in some fairly renowned venues, so we reckoned their cocktails would be worth a try.

Thus it was that I found myself heading down to nearby Hide Bar in Bermondsey clutching an array of products which were then made up in the company of manager Paul Matthew. Paul also made his own version of each cocktail by way of comparison, and the results were illuminating.

All in the mix: Paul puts the products through their paces



MOJITO

The Mojito is nothing, well not much anyway, without the zest of fresh lime and the 'zing' of fresh mint. These were conspicuous by their absence, and we were left with a long lemony drink (West Eleven) with a resemblance to apple juice (Speaks). The **Funkin** Mojito was incredibly sweet, and Speaks Raspberry even more so. The balance and zest of the real thing came as a blessed relief.

COSMOPOLITAN

Cointreau is traditionally used in a Cosmo, although there was no sign of this on the Funkin ingredients label. We served the drink over ice, as per the instructions, it was sweet and there was far too much cranberry juice – to be fair, a mistake often made by bartenders.

"I don't know what they're trying to achieve," sighed Paul.

The Speaks version was also sweet, while West Eleven's Pomegranate Cosmo was thick and cloying, the opposite of moreish. Again we fell back on two fresh versions – the straight Cosmo – light and balanced – and a Pomegranate version with some welcome sharpness.

MARGARITA

The gurning expressions Paul and I were both displaying when we tasted the

excessively sweet pre-mixed cocktails were in danger of becoming permanently etched onto our faces. Funkin's Passion-fruit Marg was incredibly sweet, and the absence of fresh lime all too obvious.

BRAMBLE

According to the West Eleven label, this drink "was created at Fred's Club in London in the 1980s and we think we've improved on it". We, on the other hand, had to disagree – a faint raspberry tang, little evidence of gin, very sweet and gloopy. The freshness and tang of the real thing was light years away.

MAI TAI

West Eleven also claimed to have improved this drink. The orgeat was discernible but other flavours were killed by sweetness and the smack of fresh lime and rum backbone of a real Mai Tai were missing.

TAPIO RTDS

Tapio doesn't call its drinks cocktails, and they don't correspond to any conventional cocktails, so we tasted them separately with a fresh version of the same drink alongside.

The rum, apple and ginger tasted natural, not as powerful as the fresh version but at 4.7 per cent we thought

this could work served cold with a picnic.

The ginger came out better in the fresh version. We were less impressed by the gin, pink grapefruit and cherry – a disappointing brown colour alongside the vibrant pink of the fresh version, it was also thin and tasteless and had a sharp, saccharine-like aftertaste.

CONCLUSION

The 'what are they trying to achieve?' question remained unanswered. Almost all the products were concealed underneath a thick layer of sugar, and of course it's more or less impossible to make a drink less sweet, whereas a drink that's considered too tart can be easily sweetened.

We'd seen well-known names like Jamie Stephenson, Ben Reed and Funkin and thought the products they'd created would be worth a try, but we were disappointed.

True, they're not aimed at top-end venues, but mass market venues would surely be better off investing in training to make real cocktails, or sticking to good quality mixed drinks, while those serving pre-mixed cocktails at home when entertaining would probably impress their guests as much as serving M&S ready-meals while wearing a clip-on tie. ■



Unconvinced: Tom and Paul thought training to learn how to make cocktails from scratch would be a better investment.



RUNNERS AND RIDERS

Funkin: seven varieties, no artificial colour/flavour/preservatives, 10-second serve. They say: "Consumers demand quality. Cocktails add a more dynamic, flavoursome and fun element to an occasion."

West Eleven: five ready-to-drink varieties in 275ml bottles, produced in association with Ben Reed of IPBartenders. They say: "We knew we would have to source the finest, freshest and perhaps crucially the most authentic ingredients if we were going to call these drinks 'real cocktails in a bottle'."

Tapio: bottled in the UK and launched in 2007, with premium spirit base, not-from-concentrate juices and natural fruit extracts. No added sugar. They say: "A clean, refreshing drink which, being free of added sugar and 100 per cent natural, is in line with modern consumer tastes."



Speaks: produced in association with Jamie Stephenson, distributed by Hi Spirits, 10-second serve. They say: "Simply open, pour over ice and a double shot of spirit and you've got it! Because we only use all-natural ingredients, they also taste amazing. Our range is constantly expanding, so you'll always have the drinks people want."

