

Bartenders add creativity, color to classic cocktail

■ Thirsty patrons lap it up as spirits slingers battle for East Bay bragging rights

By Katherine Tam
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Shaken. Stirred. Served with a twist. On the rocks.

But eschewing the traditional gin and vermouth martini, local bartenders on Monday night added their own twist — from cilantro and ginger syrup to mango juice and kiwi — to create signature drinks that were at

times exotic and always a bit unusual.

"Oh man, wait until you taste this," Clayton resident Derald Clearwater said to his companion as he sipped a martini cocktail with cherry gelato.

It was a cocktail lover's fantasy. Bartenders from 14 local watering holes battled it out Monday night for the honor of winning the title "Best Martini in the East Bay" from a panel of martini-sipping judges. They also

See MARTINI, Page 15



JOSE CARLOS FAJARDO/TIMES

BARTENDER FELIX PARRA from Havana Restaurant serves a martini called O Cherry during the eighth annual Best Martini in the East Bay contest Monday at the Lafayette Park Hotel.

Martini

FROM PAGE 1

vied for the people's choice award from the crowd.

Hands flew. Martini shakers shook. Bartenders called to their assistants for more vodka.

In a contest where drinking after work on a Monday night is embraced in the name of fundraising — proceeds go to the Contra Costa County Library's adult literacy program, Project Second Chance — more than 300 martini lovers packed the Lafayette Park Hotel to feast their eyes and palettes on the creations.

Fruity concoctions reigned. Drinks ran the gamut from yellow and pink to orange and red. Slices of kiwi, orange and cherry adorned the lips of glasses.

Cilantro, cucumber and mint leaves also served as garnishes.

And they had colorful names to match: Lavatini, ginger pom martini, Rosa Celeste and the Clayton classic creme brulee, which featured caramel and caramelized sugar on the rim of the glass.

"It is something different, something eye-catching," said Jason Mead, bartender at Moresi's Chophouse, who added a touch of cinnamon to his creation before passing it to a patron.

And in most cases, the recipes didn't happen overnight.

Greg Chrisman of Bing Crosby's Restaurant and Piano Bar, who created Rosa Celeste, which includes ruby red grape-

fruit juice, mint leaves, basil leaves and wine, said, "I came up with 20 I didn't like and one we liked."

Chrisman won the judges' choice award last year.

To be sure, the drinks were a decided departure from the traditional martini loved by purists. Bartenders here have allowed their creative juices to seep in.

The martini cocktail is the "thing of the millennium," said Kelli Allison, a bartender at McCovey's in Walnut Creek. "The original martini is still there, but this allows a little more creativity."

Even for San Ramon resident Rafael Terrill — who usually en-

joys vodka, hold the fruit juice — the creations being served roused some curiosity.

"They've got good ideas, and there's a lot of variety," Terrill said.

But when it was all said and done, there could only be a few winners. "O Cherry," the martini that featured a scoop of cherry gelato, created by Felix Parra of Havana, won the judges' choice award.

Mead's "Clayton classic creme brulee" won the People's Choice award.

"This year, it seems everything is very fruity," said Michelle LaHonta of Walnut Creek as she sipped her "O Cherry" martini. "They're doing different things but it's not super sweet, so they're using fruit in a good way."

Reach Katherine Tam
at 925-943-8163.