

Drinks Take To The Skies

SCOTT MAYEROWITZ, AP Airlines Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Airlines have found a way to take the edge off the stress of flying and make a few extra bucks along the way: fancy new cocktails, craft beers and elegant wines.

The drinks advertised in the back of in-flight magazines — or on sleek seatback touchscreens — are starting to resemble those at the hottest nightclubs.

— Virgin America offers "Grandma's Coffee," an iced cappuccino with Jack Daniels whiskey for \$9. Its beer selection includes San Francisco-based 21st Amendment and Black Star from Whitefish, Mont. Both cost \$7. A Bud Light is \$6.

— US Airways has partnered with mixer company Stirrings to sell mojitos and cosmos for \$8 each.

— Delta offers the "Sky Breeze," which is vodka, Fresca and a splash of cranberry-apple juice over ice for \$7. It also sells small batch bourbon from Woodford Reserve for \$7.

Other airlines create drinks to get travelers into the mindset of their destination. United sells a "Trader Vic's Mai Tai" for \$9 on flights to and from Hawaii.

"It's simply a matter of finding a way to get people to spend money," says Henry Hartevelde, a travel industry analyst with Hudson Crossing. "They see people spending \$12, \$14, \$15 or more for fancy martinis, cosmopolitans or other beverages on the ground."

Flying isn't what it used to be. Long lines, ever-changing security rules and limited overhead bin space have all made traveling much more stressful. It's no wonder many passengers look for a little escape.

Airlines — which created much of this anxiety — are happy to oblige.

"We wanted to do stuff to surprise people, be a little more different and have fun," says Megan Mosier Ireland, who helps design Delta's drink offerings.

The specialty drinks are part of a larger push to get passengers to pay for a little in-flight luxury. Fliers can now opt for more legroom, Internet access or even shorter security lines, all for an extra fee. Those perks and others — along with baggage fees — now account for nearly 7 percent of U.S. airlines' revenue. That's up from just 2 percent five years ago. The government doesn't require airlines to break out specific data on alcohol sales.

But airlines are clearly doing everything they can to drive liquor sales. And it's not

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just by putting fancy drinks on the menu.

Want to buy a drink for that lovely lady across the aisle? Virgin America will soon launch a "send a drink" feature. Passengers can use the plane's seatback entertainment system to buy their neighbors a margarita, merlot or maybe a shot of tequila.

When people fly is a significant factor in how much they'll drink, according to GuestLogix, which processes about 90 percent of onboard credit card transactions for North American airlines.

Fliers drink more on Thursdays than any other day of the week, with alcohol sales in the past year averaging \$62 per flight, according to GuestLogix. For many consultants, salesmen and other frequent fliers, Thursday marks the end of their week away from home.

"That's when I let loose and wind down," says Oscar Rondon, a road warrior and director of cable network sales systems for WideOrbit. "After a long week, it's a nice reward ... even if it's in a little tiny, plastic cup."

Fliers drink the least on Mondays — average liquor sales per flight are 44 percent below Thursdays.

Time of year and the destination also determine how many bloody marys, vodka tonics and beers are poured.

The week of March 8 — spring break — had the highest overall liquor sales in the last 12 months at nearly \$58 a flight. The slowest time of year is right after Christmas and New Year's, when passengers have already had plenty to drink and many are traveling with their families.

Alcohol sales on flights heading to Las Vegas average \$99, nearly double the industry average. The trip home isn't as happy; only \$49 in liquor is sold per flight.

"Vegas passengers are big drinkers," says Betty Thesky, a flight attendant with a major U.S. airline and author of "Betty in the Sky with a Suitcase: Hilarious Stories of Air Travel by the World's Favorite Flight Attendant." Those are the same folks "who sat in the 'smoking section' back in the day."

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