

Lake County RECORD-BEE

Great Guns



Allie Schell serves a French 75 at Blue Wing Saloon.

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Blue Wing bartender Allie Schell shuns the messy historiography of the French 75. After all, the cocktail is just four parts splashed together and chilled down.

Lemon juice and simple syrup sound a bright, chirpy note, like the whistle warning of an incoming artillery shell. A belt of gin explodes in an alcoholic wallop, sending off botanical shrapnel. The finish of sparkling wine is like an airburst — the flickering fallout from summer fireworks drifting to earth.

There is both a serious jolt and cheerful jest, sweet charm and rough hewn spirit all packed into an icy glass.

“It’s a really fun cocktail,” Schell observed.

The French 75 has become synonymous with celebration, thanks to the bubbly finish. It also substitutes for mimosas at brunch, at least for those who prefer more complexity with their eggs benedict.

It is indeed a delightful cocktail. Yet the name was derived from the sodden trenches of World War I, the mud-splattered horror of no man’s land.

You see, the 75 millimeter was a sturdy French artillery piece. It churned the turf of Verdun and flung chunks of bottom land around the Aisne into the air and toppled trees in the Argonne forest. Reporters covering the war raved about it’s power.

A decade later, when cocktail books described a drink packed with the potency of gin, scribes dubbed it the French 75.

Take a sip of the drink as prepared by Blue Wing staff and you will puzzle over the name. Yes, it is dangerous, starting with that volley of Tanqueray. What stands out, however, is the deft balance and crisp finish — hardly the grim visage of trench warfare.

As Schell said, it's really a fun cocktail. The zest of citrus is calmed by Tanqueray's composed yet intricate botanicals. Soft floral notes curtsy and sway, yielding to the hoarse call of dried herbs. This builds into an acetic crescendo, strewn with fennel and pine needles.

But this is a false wave. A second clamoring finish, rippling with the bright bubbles of sparkling wine, brightens the mood. A subtle salinity and earthen dusk round off the rugged splinters of gin.

It becomes a refreshing, spirited and nifty sip.

No wonder. Dig further through dusty tomes, peak beyond the muck of war to the Victorian glitz before the guns of August and you find similar cocktails — Champagne cups topped off with gin, Cognac sparked by wine, classics with the bubbling stuff in place of soda water.

The 75 millimeter cannon was loud and powerful. The French 75 is cultured, a thing of beauty, crafted from the most basic ingredients behind a bar.

It is a cocktail for moments of jubilation.

"I'm glad we added it," Schell said. "Sometimes simple is best."