

Craft Spirits *and the* Farm-to-Table Philosophy

WRITTEN BY RICH MANNING
PHOTOS COURTESY OF
FARMHOUSE AT ROGER'S GARDENS

**“You’ve heard
of jujubes, right?”**

This is not the question I’m expecting to hear from Anthony Laborin, bar manager and so-called “Chef de Swigs” for Farmhouse at Roger’s Gardens in Newport Beach, California. We’re in the middle of a conversation about the synergy between local fresh ingredients and local craft spirits, and he drops the name of a candy. At least, that’s what I assume.

“I have heard of jujubes,” I reply, thinking he’s using the gummy fruit treat to concoct the craft cocktail equivalent of Homer Simpson’s infamous SkittleBrau. Laborin briefly disappears and re-emerges with a pair of plump, reddish-brown oblong spheres about the size of golf balls. He recognizes the confusion on my face.

“These aren’t the candies,” he explains. “They’re Chinese dates. We have a bunch of them soaking in a jar of 102-proof bourbon.” We sample the referenced liquid. It’s way better than candy — subtly sweet and slightly funky, like smoky caramel. I ask what he’s planning to do with the juice. “Oh, I have some ideas,” he says with a grin.

It makes sense that Laborin possess-



es this kind of experimental streak. It can be argued that his workspace is an ongoing experiment of sorts. Roger's Gardens is a sprawling nursery. Farmhouse occupies its back corner, steps away from colorful plants, fragrant herbs, and the occasional clinging clang of wind chimes. It's not exactly the place where one would expect to find a restaurant equipped with a killer bar. But it's a locale that completely feeds into Laborin's penchant for playing around with fresh, seasonal, and unique ingredients, and he's not shy about praising his muse. "I'm pretty astounded by how we're essentially surrounded by gin botanicals," he says. "It fuels inspiration. Being able to come up with cocktails in an environment like this is just too much fun."

Indeed, Laborin's having a blast. The jujubes prove this. So do his bar shelves, which he stocks with an abundance of craft spirits that he constantly shares with curious customers. While he has a few big brands on hand, artisanal, small-batch, and booze-nerdy stuff dominate his stash. Each craft bottle he brings on board is a delicious expression that passes his taste standards, but they're also treated like blank canvases. Most of his cocktail ideas integrate craft labels, whether the endgame cues in on the spirit itself or a nuanced flavor within the juice that can be extracted more by adding a specific ingredient. According to Laborin, part of the affinity he has for craft producers is that they tend to share Farmhouse's own "farm to table" philosophy, even if it's done out of necessity. "The small-batch guys don't have big budgets... so they'll usually have to source local, somewhat obscure ingredients to make what they want to produce," he said. "That's a good thing. It helps connect them with the community and builds strong relationships with purveyors. It's not unlike what we do when we go to the market."

"The market" Laborin refers to is the Santa Monica Farmer's Market, the

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weekly open-air market that Los Angeles-area chefs routinely descend upon to source fresh, fun, and funky ingredients to use in the kitchen. It's more pilgrimage than trip; Laborin and Farmhouse Executive Chef Rich Mead dutifully sit through some 54 miles of Los Angeles traffic every Wednesday morning to shop and discover. Sometimes, Laborin arrives ready to hunt down a specific ingredient. Other times, he'll pop random produce in his mouth and spirit-soaked ideas will flood his mind. He'll usually leave with a mix of mainstream goodies and a few offbeat nuggets of deliciousness with unorthodox names (he informs me he picked up the obscure orange varieties *cara cara* and *tango* on his last trip). Whatever he does end up purchasing can land anywhere in the cocktail-making process — aged in a vessel, transformed into a tincture, infused into the spirit itself, or even just a kick-ass garnish.

The weekly excursions obviously play a big role in fueling Laborin's creative streak. As a bartender who sources ingredients like a chef, it also provides him with a perspective that deepens his appreciation and commitment to artisanal spirits even more. "There's a synergy that exists between us and the small-



batch guys that do 'grain-to-glass,'" he says. "If a local label is sourcing the ingredients they need to make their gin or whiskey or whatever, there's a chance that they may be using the same local purveyor we're using to get our ingredients. It's great to be able to step back, realize that, and see that we're all part of the same ecosystem. That produces a certain level of symbiosis that's really cool to support."

Laborin's sentiment is one that should bring a sense of comfort if you're a burgeoning distiller. Yes, we live in a time where the phrase "farm-to-table" is often pulverized into meaningless jargon by marketers. But passionate bartenders and on-premise types — the kind of people you'll likely want to connect with — know the difference between a sincere narrative and a ruse. If you're a true 'grain-to-glass' operation, it can still be an effective selling point for your label. It may even lead your juice to be placed in a jar with jujubes. **AS**

Anthony Laborin is bar manager and so-called "Chef de Swigs" for Farmhouse at Roger's Gardens in Newport Beach, California. For more information visit www.farmhouserg.com.