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## DINING

# Cinnamon, nutmeg, allspice and dread: Pumpkin Spice Malört is here

By Ilana Arougheti

Chicago Tribune • Published: Oct 24, 2023 at 5:00 am



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A bartender pours a shot of pumpkin spice Malört at CH Distillery in Chicago on Oct. 19, 2023. Proceeds from Pumpkin Spice Malört sales will go to benefit Punk Rock Saves Lives, a Denver-based nonprofit promoting wellness events within the punk music community. (Terrence Antonio James/Chicago Tribune)

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Autumn lovers, die-hard Chicagoans and plain old masochists found new common ground this October at CH Bar in the West Loop.

Through the end of the month, Pumpkin Spice Malört is on the menu.

“People who don’t like Malört say this is a little bit better,” said Zachary Jarosz, operations director at Malört producer CH Distillery.



As of Wednesday morning, the distillery has sold about 220 bottles’ worth of the orange tonic, netting around \$18,000. A shot at CH Bar, attached to the distillery at 564 W. Randolph St., costs \$8.

Pumpkin spice Malört at CH Distillery in Chicago. (Terrence Antonio James/Chicago Tribune)



Distillery staff started discussing an official Pumpkin Spice Malört in late August, he said. Jarosz and CH Distillery co-founder Tremain Atkinson essentially distilled

pumpkin spice vodka, then added other ingredients to create the fall-themed Malört. The final recipe includes cinnamon, nutmeg, allspice and cloves.

“Pumpkin spice is sort of the marquee fall event of the year, so it seemed like a great fit to kind of enter the game so to speak,” Jarosz said. “We make Malört, so we should strive to be the best at this.”

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To Jarosz, Pumpkin Spice Malört tastes like pumpkin pie with a bitter finish. Malört on its own has been compared to grapefruit, bug spray, hair spray and “baby tears mixed with gasoline.”

“Malört is one of these things where the more it becomes familiar to you, the more you look for reasons to enjoy it,” Jarosz said. “No psyche damage for me.”

“Malört” is Swedish for wormwood. Most of its flavor profile comes from the bitter herb, also used to make vermouth and absinthe. The 70-proof liquor is a *brännvin*, a Swedish type of schnapps. During Prohibition, it was sold as a cure for stomach worms and parasites.

CH Distillery expected to go through maybe 60 bottles of Pumpkin Spice Malört at first, Jarosz said. Then two more batches of 120 bottles each quickly followed.

The distillery screwed the tops on about 400 bottles of Pumpkin Spice Malört on Oct. 18, which Jarosz hopes will last through the rest of the month. Each batch takes about five days to distill.

CH Distillery has no plans to make Pumpkin Spice Malört available wholesale, Jarosz said. The distillery also won't send bottles to any other Chicago bars to avoid running up against liquor distribution laws, Jarosz said.

However, fans and pranksters can purchase whole bottles over the counter for \$150 each at CH Bar.

Proceeds from Pumpkin Spice Malört sales will benefit Punk Rock Saves Lives, a

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Denver-based nonprofit promoting wellness events within the punk music community. CH Distillery pitched the partnership during Riot Fest.

“They are very big Malört fans and (co-founder Rob Rushing)’s wife loves pumpkin spice,” Jarosz said. “It was a little bit of happenstance.”

CH Distillery took over production of Malört when it acquired Carl Jeppson Co. in 2018. The distillery usually ships out 20,000 bottles per month, Jarosz said.

The distillery imports wormwood from Europe, but uses rye and wheat grown in Kane County to make the base alcohol for Malört, the Tribune previously [reported](#). When Malört production came home to Chicago from Florida, Jarosz and his team also opted to [stop](#) adding artificial coloring.

“I think Chicago is where it belongs,” Jarosz said. “It’s an iconic brand that has very deep roots in Chicago, and Chicago drinking culture.”

Unofficial Malört infusions have long been popular at bars throughout the city. CH Distillery not only condones these acts of mad science, but follows them eagerly, Jarosz said.

His personal favorite: Malört infused with pepperoni pizza-flavored Combos, sold briefly at Heritage Restaurant & Caviar Bar in Humboldt Park.

On the pumpkin spice front, the distillery was beaten to the punch by Nisei Lounge, the fifth-largest [seller](#) of Malört in the city. The iconic Wrigleyville baseball bar sold its first shot of unofficial pumpkin spice Malört in October 2021.

[\[ 43 boo-zy bites and brunches to kick off Halloween in Chicago \]](#)

A bartender garnishes a shot of pumpkin spice Malört at CH Distillery in Chicago. (Terrence Antonio James/Chicago Tribune)

“It didn’t take very long to figure out that if you added pumpkin spice to a bottle of Malört, you would create pumpkin spice Malört,” said Pat Odon, director of beer and baseball operations at Nisei Lounge. “We created three drinks and foisted them on the customers, who bought them once.”

The batch came in three strengths: “Digestible, medium digestible and not very tasty at all.” Nisei Lounge sold about 6 bottles’ worth in 2021. The shots are back this year for \$5.

Nisei Lounge has also dabbled in “super polarizing” garlic-infused Malört, sport

pepper Malört, coffee Malört, mango-habanero Malört and Malört steeped with crushed-up candy canes.

Odon still shudders when he thinks about marshmallow Peeps Malört, “which was awful ... Peeps just dissolve and look even unhappier when put in a bottle,” he said.



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CH Distillery, too, plans to keep tempting fate.

Look out for a cranberry-sage Thanksgiving dinner Malört in November — the team is still debating using turkey fat versus liquid smoke — and Malört with spruce tips in December.

Proceeds from CH Distillery’s seasonal Malörts through the end of the year will be split between Punk Rock Saves Lives, Parkinson’s and Movement Disorder Alliance, and the Vision of Children Foundation, which aims to cure hereditary blindness.

For a festive fall boilermaker, Jarosz would pair the spicy-sweet concoction with a light lager like Wisconsin-brewed Montucky Cold Snacks. Odon leans toward Miller High Life.

If you would rather sip than have shots, Jarosz proposed mixing Pumpkin Spice Malört with maple syrup and soda water, garnishing with a toasted marshmallow.

“It’s kind of bracing and bitter and a little bit of a longer drink,” Jarosz said. “I don’t know if I would double down on pumpkin ... You don’t want to mess with a good thing.”

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