

Scintillating spirits for the season

Enchanted jingles all the way to Ril's Bangsar to find the most creative and colourful cocktails this Christmas

Christmas is a time of sharing, and what better way to spread Yuletide cheer than to carol with this year's classiest and most captivating concoctions? For the best in the business, we turned to Ril's Bangsar, a charmingly contemporary *chez de cuisine* in the heart of Telawi proper.

Making our way up a flight of stairs and past a velvet curtain, we found ourselves in an assiduously authentic recreation of a stylish yet surreptitious speakeasy from the Prohibition era of America in the 1920s. With the lounge laid out in languid, low lighting, clandestine conviviality and appealing alcoves around, setting the scene for a spectacular showcase of spirits for the season.

Guiding us through the alluring assortment of aqueous ambrosia is Ril's Bangsar head bartender James Barker-Morgan, who cultivated his craft at the Caravan Restaurant, Bar & Roastery at King's Cross in London. Finding himself in Malaysia, Barker-Morgan carefully combines a diverse range of ingredients to create a pleasing portfolio of cocktails, vermouths, amaro, liqueurs and bitters.

At our request, he put together a merry menu of masterful mixes for the connoisseur in all of us. Ritzy revelers can look forward to the following fine fusions to complete their Christmas celebrations at Ril's:

Negroni en Hiver

TRADITIONALLY taken as an aperitif, the Negroni is thought to have originated in Florence, Italy in 1919 when Count Camillo Negroni asked his favourite bartender to fortify an Americano with gin, rather than the usual soda water.

The resulting remedy, garnished with orange peel, was immortalised by an appreciative Orson Welles, who said: "The bitters are excellent for your liver, the gin is bad for you. They balance each other."

Putting a Yuletide twist on the drink, Barker-Morgan's take on the Negroni mixes cognac, Campari, ruby port and cherry brandy on the rocks for a jolly red blend that recalls the colours of the season. Topped with fresh cherry, the *Negroni en Hiver* is the perfect jump-off point for a night of Christmas carousing.

Highland Winter Fizz

FOR a lighter touch on the palate, the Fizz is a variation on sour cocktails that commonly use acidic juices, such as lemon and lime, and carbonated water to create an effervescent tincture. A hometown specialty of New Orleans, the drink was so popular that teams of bartenders were required to accommodate its longer shaking time at the height of its popularity. Ril's recipe calls for Drambuie, thyme honey, lemon, homemade ginger beer and egg white, served in a highball glass and garnished with lemon peel, a sprig of thyme and slice of caramelised ginger. The tones found in the Highland Winter Fizz evoke the windswept moorland of the Old Continent, with the caramelised ginger adding a zesty zing that perfectly complements its underlying citrus accents.

Left from top:
The Caribbean Snowstorm is a simple drink that brings together ingredients that logically work well together

Barker-Morgan's take on the Negroni mixes cognac, Campari, ruby port and cherry brandy

The Christingle Coupette is practically a meal by itself



From top:
The Torino Champagne Cocktail an air of sophistication and elegance

Ril's Bangsar is tucked away in the heart of Jalan Telawi

The Highland Winter Fizz is topped with caramelised ginger for a zesty zing

The Torino Champagne Cocktail adds a tasteful twist to after-dinner conversation



Christingle Coupette

DECEPTIVELY dainty, this particular mixture draws inspiration from the hearty Christmas dinners of yesteryear, bringing together duck fat bourbon, Cointreau, *crème de cassis* and ruby port in a fascinating feast of flavours for festive followers. Served with a slice of orange and a hint of cloves, the Christingle Coupette is practically a meal by itself.

"Duck fat is oil-based, and bourbon is alcohol- and water-based. The two don't mix, so if you put them in a shallow container, you get layers. The alcohol will act as an extraction agent for the flavour, and you then freeze them. The fat will solidify, so you syphon it off and you've got smooth bourbon with a lovely flavour of duck behind it," said Barker-Morgan.

Torino Champagne Cocktail

AN official selection of the International Bartenders Association, the champagne cocktail is typically made with sugar, Angostura bitters, champagne and brandy, with a maraschino cherry garnishing. It conveys an air of sophistication and elegance, even having a cameo in the Sierra Mountains with Michael Corleone in *The Godfather Part II*.

Without straying too far from the classic recipe, Ril's mixes things up with Amaro Montenegro, Chandon Brut and Campari crystals, along with the usual Angostura bitters. Topped with pink grapefruit and naturally served in a champagne flute, it adds a tasteful twist to after-dinner conversation.

Caribbean Snowstorm

"DRINK number five is simple, bringing together ingredients that logically work well together. So we've got Sailor Jerry spiced rum, cinnamon syrup, Xocolatl Mole Bitters, cranberry juice and egg white, and the cranberry foam on top really kills it," said Barker-Morgan.

Underscoring the truism that you can never have too much of a good thing, the Caribbean Snowstorm is also topped with dried cranberries, making it uniquely suited to those suffering from feminine afflictions. A cinnamon stick completes the mixture's presentation.

The Ghost of Christmas Past

THE accounts of our intrepid drink testers became somewhat incoherent after downing this cocktail, which is a recommendation all by itself. All they can recall is that Barker-Morgan's re-imagining of the classic Dickensian character involves ample amounts of Octomore 06.1, Dom Bénédicte and Parfait d'Amour.

Garnished with cinnamon, star anise and cherry, the drink is lit aflame and poured like an infinitely classy *teh tarik*, making it a performance piece as much as a delightful pick-me-up on a cold night. Approach with caution, lest the Ghost of Christmas Past return to haunt you. ■

