

Coquito for a cause

Hook & Ladder's Coquito Wars raises money for Puerto Rico with the help of a traditional holiday cocktail



BY STEPH RODRIGUEZ / stephr@newsreview.com

As a child visiting family in Puerto Rico, Rafael

Jimenez-Rivera recalls closely watching his late grandfather, Monolo, take care in making a traditional Puerto Rican cocktail every Christmas and throughout Three Kings Day called coquito, which means "little coconut."

He says he soaked up the family recipe, which includes a warm blend of grated spices with creamy coconut milk—and his grandfather's homemade moonshine.

While Jimenez-Rivera (general manager at Hook & Ladder Manufacturing Co.) doesn't brew his own moonshine, he still carries on the tradition of his grandfather by making his variation of coquito for the past 15 years.

"It's kind of like eggnog, but we use coconut cream, coconut milk; we're using rum, allspice, cinnamon, evaporated milk, condensed milk. We make a huge batch," Jimenez-Rivera says.

On Dec. 15 in Hook & Ladder's upstairs private dining room, Jimenez-Rivera will host the first annual Coquito Wars, an homage to his grandfather, with six bartenders from Lowbrau, Café Á Côté, Jungle Bird and elsewhere battling it out with their versions of the holiday cocktail. The competition will also raise money for a cause that is dear to Jimenez-Rivera's heart, helping those who are still in need after Hurricane Maria.

"A portion of the proceeds of the tickets that we're selling are going toward people in Puerto Rico," he says. "My mom just got back from there and people are still experiencing rolling blackouts."

"Every year my recipe changes a little bit because I find a new rum or a new spice to add to it."

Rafael Jimenez-Rivera
general manager, Hook & Ladder Manufacturing Co.

Jimenez-Rivera's family in Quebradillas and Ponce, Puerto Rico, were all impacted by the devastating 2017 hurricane.

"I have cousins that we didn't hear from for like two months and it was super scary. They were out in the country and they had no way to get in touch with us," he says. "They had no electricity for months. It was rough."

Although he makes coquito every year for his family and for customers at Hook & Ladder, this year Jimenez-Rivera says he looks forward to tasting what fellow bartenders create. Buddy Newby, co-owner and bartender of Jungle Bird, has made coquito before at his bar and also tasted the cocktail during his travels to Puerto Rico.

"It's more like a Christmas-y pina colada," Newby says. "The hardest part is being able to stay true to the drink without changing it too much, but also being able to put your own personal spin on it."

Newby says a quality rum is always important, as well as a good coconut cream that's not too sweet, but packs good flavor and fresh spices that enhance each sip. For Jimenez-Rivera, it's all about how much love and time you put into the recipe.

"Every year my recipe changes a little bit because I find a new rum or a new spice to add to it," he says. "I have my base that I got from my grandpa and I took that base and made it my own. My recipe is a living breathing recipe and I have my different vintages." □

Witness the first annual Coquito Wars at Hook & Ladder Manufacturing Co., 1630 S St., on Dec. 15 at 7 p.m. Tickets are \$30, visit eventbrite.com/e/coquito-wars-battle-of-the-best-coquito-tickets-83493099107 for more information.

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