

# Cocktails-to-go a potential tool for restaurants to stay afloat

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Cocktails-to-go could be another tool that restaurants can use to stay afloat during a capacity-limiting pandemic that restricts indoor dining.

The bill, which is circulating the Capitol for cosponsors, would allow a “Class B” licensed retailer — most commonly taverns and restaurants — to sell a cocktail or wine by the glass for consumption off-premise. The restaurant or bar would have to seal the container with a tamper-evident seal before the cocktail is removed from the premises.

A version of to-go drinks is currently permitted in 33 states and Washington D.C. in response to COVID-19, according to bill cosponsors Sen. Mary Felzkowski, R-Tomahawk, and Rep. David Steffen, R-Howard.

Currently, the only option is for restaurants to get a cocktail mix ready and sell a factory-sealed bottle of liquor separately as a kit. Then, patrons make the drink at home. It’s not necessarily the same quality drink as the one you get when it’s mixed behind the bar, explained Wisconsin Restaurant Association President and CEO Kristine Hillmer.

The cocktail-to-go bill would allow restaurants to make the entire drink, place it in a container and put on a tamper-evident seal.

“This is a very common practice with craft brewers and growlers — this extends this

practice for mixed drinks,” Hillmer said. “In the case of a growler, there is a plastic seal placed over the cap, then heat treated to seal it making it evident when the seal has been broken.”

She noted other containers on the market that restaurants can use to seal, such as individual cans or pouches. A D.C. deli has called the Capri Sun-like pouches of cocktails “Fauci Pouchy.”

For wine, it would allow the restaurant to sell a single glass of wine in a sealed container, versus having to sell the whole bottle.

“Ultimately, this practice has better margins for restaurants, greater flexibility in what they can offer, and more choices for consumers,” Hillmer said.

Chris Wiken, WRA chair and second-generation owner of Milwaukee’s The Packing House Restaurant, said he envisions the cocktail to be just like you’d get it in a glass, but in a bottle that would show evidence of tampering. It could come on the rocks or not, depending on the customer’s willingness to risk having a watered-down drink after arriving at home.

The Packing House already uses such bottles in a variety of sizes for catering events and its cocktail kits that include drink mix and booze in separate containers.

“We rely on higher-margin bar sales to counter the higher cost of food and labor,” he said. “The carry-out part, that’s great ... but then what we miss is serving those cocktails. That’s where a good part of our overall profit comes from — it’s not on the fish fry, it’s the folks having an Old-Fashioned or two with their Friday night fish fry.”

The bill would not change current in-person purchasing requirements. Sales would be face-to-face, giving bars and restaurants the opportunity to check IDs.

“I’m glad that Wisconsin is finally taking this up. I think we’re a little bit behind in coming up with this idea,” Wiken said. “This will definitely help Wisconsin restaurants — one more piece to bring revenue into their building to help them survive through this.”

*-By Stephanie Hoff*

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