



## Framboise Manhattan

Franco, 1535 South Eighth Street, 314-436-2500.

By Randall Roberts

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The first night we dined at Franco was during its soft opening. The restaurant's iPod wasn't fully loaded yet, and over the course of a two-hour dinner we heard Beck's glum-rock gem, "Lost Cause," three times at a volume that was a little louder than it should have been. Not the best soundtrack to an opening, though on bad days it does capture the essence of St. Louis: "There's too many people you used to know/ They see you coming, they see you go/They know your secrets, and you know theirs/This town is crazy, nobody cares."


In another setting, the selection would have seemed like a classic jinx: "Baby, I'm a lost cause." But sitting at Franco, it was pretty funny — and we noted as much on our comment card — because even from that first experience we knew that theirs wasn't a lost cause at all; rather, the place seemed to have arrived onto the restaurant scene fully formed, a perfect space with a remarkable culinary aesthetic, one that carries from the food through the wine and onto the cocktail list. (Disclosure: Emily Walker, Franco's manager, is the sister of Drink of the Week's girlfriend.)

And that's what we're here to praise today. (RFT food critic Ian Froeb celebrated the restaurant as a whole in his February 7 review.)

The good thing about Franco's cocktail menu is that it requires you to go back many many times to experience all the good stuff that's available. Most places have a couple of decent cocktails, and once you've found them, it's over. At Franco, located on the first floor of the rehabbed Welsh Baby Carriage Factory in Soulard, you can use your natural curiosity for good drinking as an excuse to become a regular.

First, there's no appletini on the menu, and nary a chocotini to be found. Second, there's a Manhattan, but with a twist. Rather than blend whisky with sweet vermouth, which, along with a dash of bitters, is what makes a classic Manhattan, Franco offers a framboise Manhattan: Maker's Mark bourbon mixed with Bonny Doon framboise and a lemon twist. Served with ice in a lowball glass, the drink's a masterpiece of simplicity. Maker's Mark, though ubiquitous, is one of the great bourbons. It's relatively soft and spicy, with a touch of smoke. A splash of Bonny Doon framboise (raspberry wine with grape spirits and raspberry-juice concentrate) tempers the whisky. The crimson framboise is heavier, and drops to the bottom of the glass, which looks pretty. As you sip, you're treated to Maker's Mark with a raspberry accent, which gradually increases with each taste, until by the end the sensations have flip-flopped, and you're drinking framboise with a touch of bourbon. It's wonderful.

We'd also highly recommended Franco's crushed-cucumber-and-gin cocktail, which contains muddled cucumber, Hendrick's gin, Calvados (a French apple brandy) and a touch of club soda. It's the perfect springtime drink, light without being simple-minded, fresh owing to the cucumber, and complex thanks to the gentle competition between the cucumber and the apple.

 On and on the list goes. The Nico Sidecar blends Maison Surrene Cognac with a fresh citrus blend. The signature Franco martini merges Idol grape vodka — which for our money is richer, and more dynamic, than grain-based vodka — with Lillet Blanc, an aperitif from Bordeaux.

We could devote another column to the other four drinks on the menu, and perhaps someday we will. It's not like we need an excuse to frequent Franco. At this point we can't not go to the city's best new restaurant; the only lost cause is resisting their cocktail list's allure.