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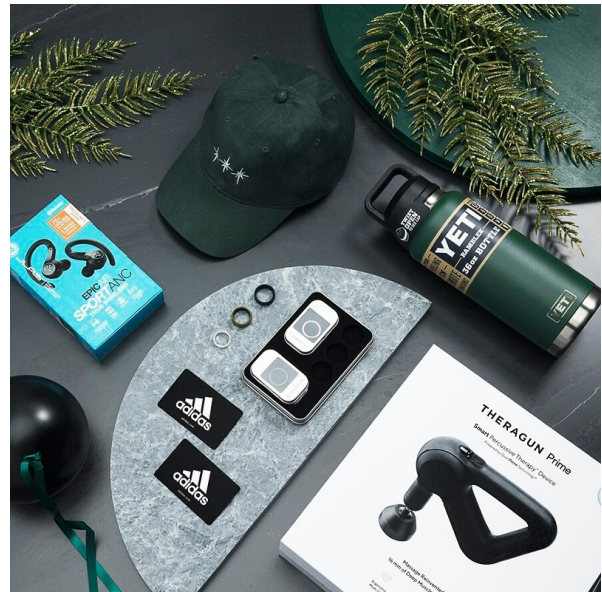
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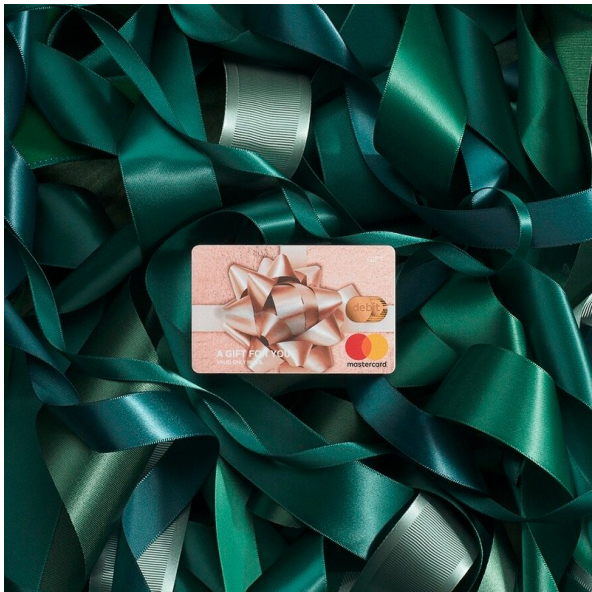
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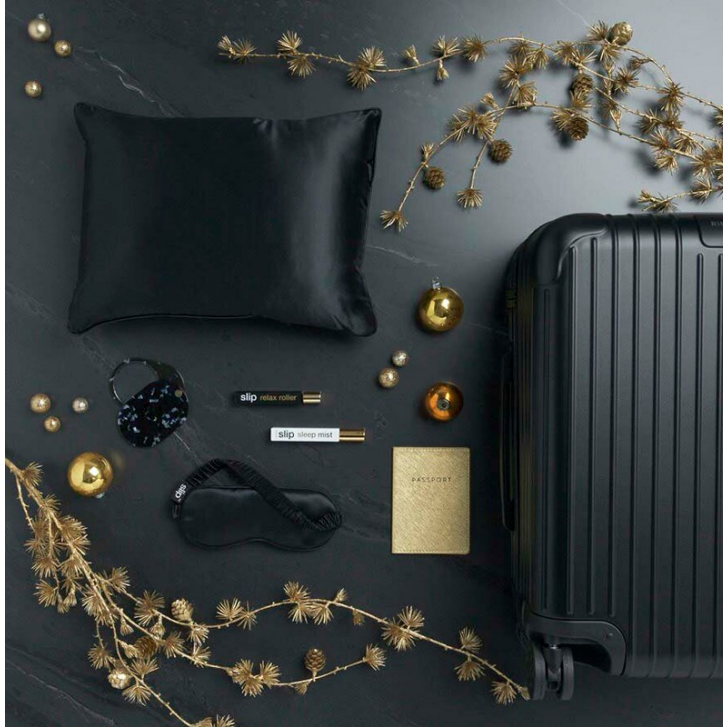
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EAT & DRINK

LEFT TO RIGHT Spring cocktails include Sour Lemonade, Lemon Berry Fizz, The Emerald, Strawberry Basil Margarita and Tangerine Mojito.

SPRING SPIRITS
Five Favorite Artisanal Cocktails to Celebrate the Season

As the Santa Inez Valley shakes off the cold, it's time to embrace all that blooms in spring. The cocktail menu at Rocio's features wintry ingredients for the citrus and berry flavors of the season. This is Ramiro Covarrubias' first spring at Rocio 246, but he's a seasoned bartender who has served at both the Buffet and Willows during his three years with Chumbe enterprises. Ramiro shares his Top 5 spring spirits for the season.

In honor of St. Patrick's Day, Covarrubias recommends the Sour Lemonade. Bushmill's Irish Whiskey, lemon, lime, a splash of grapefruit and citrus bitters, simple syrup and dry vermouth make for an unusual whiskey sour, but Covarrubias said this cocktail's true uniqueness is found in its subtlety. "With no flashy colors or crazy garnishes, you get a flavorful drink that is citrus forward and enjoyable to sip."

For his next selection, Covarrubias introduces the Lemon Berry Fizz. With Absolut Citron Vodka, lemon juice, strawberry, blueberries, raspberries and blackberries, this drink is a perfect combination of tart and sweet. He said that in the springtime, customers "want a refreshing drink they can sip on and relax — with this cocktail, you get exactly that."

Next up is The Emerald, made with a generous combination of Hendrick's Gin, St. Germain and spring flavors. Covarrubias said, "The floral flavor from the gin and elderflower liqueur, combined with the light and crisp flavors of mint, cucumber and lime, mesh really well and don't overpower the palate."

Most Californians would agree that springtime is margarita time, and the Strawberry Basil Margarita is sure to quench that thirst. Santa Barbara County is known for its plump and flavorful strawberries, and Covarrubias uses them here to enhance the Uña Mas Extra Añejo Tequila and agave nectar. He completes the concoction with basil, lime and orange liqueur for the perfect finishing touch.

Covarrubias' final pick for the warmer months is the delicious Tangerine Mojito, which consists of a fine blend of Bacardi Tangerine Rum, lime and orange juices, mint and soda water. "It has a very nice citrus flavor with a refreshing bite of mint to it," he said. ■ CHARLOTTE NAUERT

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