

Critics' pick

Root strength Though there's strong temptation to stick with the peerless mixed drinks at **Fort Defiance** (365 Van Brunt St at Dikeman St, Red Hook, Brooklyn; 347-453-6672), the colorful neighborhood café from former Pegu Club mix man St. John Frizell, the alcohol-free libations possess an equally impeccable pedigree. To wit, egg creams are frothy and light and the tart lemonade is freshly squeezed. But despite the latter beverage's renowned thirst-quenching capabilities, there's an even better concoction for cutting through the late-summer swelter: the gingerade (\$2.50). This heat-beating potion is a textbook example of form following function. Instead of futzing with complex ingredients, Frizell simply fills a glass with squares of mathematically precise ice (from the designer cube machine **Kold-Draft**). In goes two parts amber-hued ginger syrup, once part lime juice and a fizzy blast from the house seltzer tap, custom-tweaked for extra bubbles. Frizell's ginger syrup gets its kick from twice-boiled ginger root, plus the addition of a sachet of peppercorn, clove and bay leaf. From the first sip, the gingerade instantly invigorates. It's by turns spicy and gently sweet, a bracingly balanced assault on dehydration. Can't say that about most cocktails. —*Joshua M. Bernstein*

