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Bitters Sweet Success

AN OLD ELIXIR
COMES FULL CIRCLE



BY AMY PENNINGTON

I have a penchant for what some call 'food memory.' I can recall quite clearly the night I ate my first avocado—its smooth, nutty flavor rounding out a simple green salad. Or the first time I ate the hard-to-find pineapple guava fruit straight from the tree, which tasted of flowers, bananas and apples rolled into one perfect fruit.

Then there are, of course, the food memories that don't linger in my memory as delightful, but rather have seared themselves permanently as jolts to my system—shock bordering on repulsion. Such was the case when I tasted durian ice cream (a frozen "treat" made from the Asian fruit best known for smelling of feet) for the first (and last) time; or the dinner last year wherein the chef paired cold oysters with warm barbecue pork.

My first sip of bitters, an ingredient found in any traditional bar, falls into a rare category of being both simultaneously off-putting and enjoyable. Without asking, a bartender once served me bitters and soda for an upset stomach and from that point forward, I was hooked. The strong flavor made my mouth pucker, but it was strangely comforting as well. Ultimately, it did settle my stomach. From then on, I considered bitters a miracle elixir and as it turns out, I'm not the only one.

Bitters is an aromatic flavoring agent made from a high-proof alcohol infusion with any combination of root, bark, flowers, seeds, spices or botanicals. Bitters are made by infusing, distilling or steeping such aromatic ingredients for both their flavor and, more traditionally, their medicinal properties. The root from the wild plant gentian is often the flavor base and the plant that causes the bitter note. From there, it is often a matter of preference as to what exactly a bitter tincture should contain.

45% Bitters commonly have an alcoholic strength of 45% ABV and are used as a flavoring in cocktails.

As the popularity of bitters grew, so did the competition and many producers started taking short cuts by using cheap booze and diluting the tonic. "Eventually, (in the U.S.) the government passed the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 and tampered the claims of bitters being a 'cure.' This knocked some American bitters makers off the market," explains Brad Thomas Parson, author of an upcoming book on the subject.

This Act was followed by Prohibition and almost all national bitters were knocked off the market completely, which explains the temporary near extinction of bitters in America. After the clampdown on bitters, (and up until very recently,) only three producers of bitters remained, two of which are based in Europe. In recent years, this made the market for bitters a small one and offered a narrow margin of options in flavors: traditional aromatic bitters and others that are orange-infused.

A NEW CRAFT

Enter now craft bartenders to the mix. Bartending has taken off over the last several years as a serious profession, blending homemade infusions, fresh squeezed juices and a focus on traditional cocktail-making. Bartenders have even coined a new term for their craft: mixology. "I learned about concocting my own flavors and making my own syrups" behind the bar at Serafina in Seattle,

says Miles Thomas, a former bartender turned bitters maker and connoisseur.

Thomas became slightly obsessed with bitters after a friend passed him a basic recipe. He made that first batch and thought he could improve upon it. He taught himself about herbs, their flavors and how herbs work together and eventually settled on a recipe he was excited about. For him, bitters need to be flavor-forward, not the main ingredient in a cocktail.

Thomas decided to start a small bitters-making lab in the basement closet of a friend's restaurant, eventually selling directly to local bartenders under the name Scrappy's Bitters. Working in small batches, he manages to create a unique depth of flavor for drinks and elixirs. At Scrappy's, all citrus is zested by hand and Thomas makes his own caramel (for depth of flavor) from organic cane sugar. Since he started three years ago, Scrappy's Bitters has blossomed into a national company with high demand for the product.

Today, Scrappy's offers nine flavors of bitters and can be found in many bars across the Pacific Northwest and beyond. These bitters are a mix of various extractions that are finessed in a multitude of ways in

order to achieve perfect results.

Thomas is also devoted to using all organic ingredients. He explains, "I am committed and feel it is my duty to use organic goods." Because each of the extractions is so intense, Thomas does not want the spread of toxins or chemicals through his products. He worries about turning herbs and roots that are commercially grown with chemicals into small, concentrated, toxic bottles.

AROUND TOWN

While he has created a successful business, Thomas is not the only bartender to ever explore house-made bitters. Teardrop Cocktail Lounge in Portland is committed to making everything from scratch, including bitters—no small task according to Thomas, who claims each batch can take up to four weeks to produce. At Teardrop, they offer a "dizzying array of bitters and tinctures" in order to respect the quality and character of the spirit found in each cocktail they serve.

In Vancouver, The Refinery (a sustainably built and environmentally focused restaurant) serves seasonal and inventive bitters such as a combination of plum and root beer or corn and vanilla, at their

bar. The recipe creator at The Refinery, Lauren Mote, is also fully committed to using organic ingredients in her specially-crafted bitters, while also working with the seasons. "My bitters contain both organic ingredients and sustainably sourced ingredients, and I work with small growers and fair trade where possible," she notes.

Whether for purity of cocktail, creative ingenuity or miracle-elixir properties, the growing interest in bitters is undeniable. Since 2004, more than 12 small-scale producers have cropped up nationally. The Meadows, a specialty shop in Portland, carries more than 50 flavors of bitters that they sell alongside chocolates and salts.

And what of the cure-all claims that bitters evoke? Each herb and root in bitters has documented medicinal qualities of some kind, so it is only reasonable to assume these beneficial aspects are passed on through the glass. "Cardamom is in an atomizer, so I spray Scrappy's cardamom bitters in my mouth at home—it helps settle my stomach," claims Thomas. He also uses his Scrappy's Bitters in other non-traditional ways. "They are a great breath freshener," he admits, further proving that what's old is new for a new millennium. ☺



IF YOU LIKE LAVENDER

"It's spring in a bottle." The newest craze in the bar scene is lavender cocktails and Scrappy's helps make one perfect. This bitter captures the soul of the lavender flower and brings it to life in your bar.



IF YOU LIKE CHOCOLATE

Organic toasted cacao nibs bring this tincture to life and impart the essence of chocolate into any drink. With just a hint of spices and oak, Scrappy's Chocolate Bitters has become a necessity in any well stocked bar.



IF YOU LIKE ORANGES

Orange bitters have been an essential component to any craft bar for over 150 years. Scrappy's has continued the tradition with this spiced tincture. Finely crafted and infused with the essence of fresh and bitter oranges.



IF YOU LIKE CELERY

This antique bitters uses a secret recipe and invokes the historical flavors of a 19th-century bar. It captures the fresh flavor of celery, brightened with hints of citrus.

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