

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

BURLESQUE BEAUTIES *** BACKYARD CHICKENS, **
*** & HANDMADE BITTERS **

A FIELD GUIDE TO THE NEW AMERICAN ROOTS MOVEMENT

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"A fantastically thorough handbook. . . . Reighley proves that old is the new new and that fringe interests will blend into the future, making the mash-up of the now." — FAYTHE LEVINE, AUTHOR OF HANDMADE NATION: THE RISE OF DIY, ART, CRAFT, AND DESIGN

Miles Thomas, maker of Scrappy's Bitters, had been bartending at top-notch Seattle restaurants when, to distinguish his drinks from the competition, he began making his own infusions,* liqueurs, and bitters. It wasn't until he was invited to a bitters exchange in early 2009, where twenty local mixologists got together and swapped their handmade wares, that he decided to sell his bitters commercially. His first week in business, he sold through his entire stock.

Scrappy's basic line includes seven main varieties, including grapefruit, chocolate, celery, and Thomas's signature blend, lavender. He experiments with new flavors, such as cola and *amère* ("a bitter caramel orange"). His root beer bitters have been especially well received. Customers began pulling out their wallets and offering big bills in exchange for tiny, half-empty bottles. Scrappy's Bitters reflects prevalent foodie concepts like locality and being in tune with harvest cycles, too, through seasonal offerings (a limited-edition apricot bitters) and a commitment to using only organic or wild harvest herbs.

Having all those flavors at the fingertips opens a world of possibilities to the bartender, explains Thomas. "If you were a painter, and the bar was your color palette, you'd want as many colors as you can get." Sure, celery might seem like an odd shade to throw into a cocktail shaker—but try putting a dash in your next Bloody Mary or martini, and Thomas's kaleidoscopic attitude toward bartending makes a lot more sense.

Making bitters can be a time-consuming pursuit,† but it isn't necessarily difficult. There are plenty of recipes online.‡ Don't be thrown off by the esoteric-sounding ingredients in older ones. "Oftentimes an ingredient looks like something that doesn't exist anymore, but in reality there's another name

* An infusion is a spirit imbued with other flavors by soaking or steeping additional ingredients—herbs, fruits, nuts—in the base liquor. Ginger vodka is a popular example.

† For several years, Hess has been trying to replicate the formula for Abbott's Bitters, which ceased manufacture some time around World War II. He's even gone so far as to compare his own version with some vintage Abbott's using gas chromatographs.

‡ There are nearly twenty to choose from at www.artofdrink.com (look for the tab marked "Bitters").

for it," says Thomas. Prickly ash berry, for instance, is just a highfalutin alias for Szechuan pepper. Membership in a coven isn't required to find cinchona bark and gentian. A visit to an apothecary or herbalist should suffice.

Putting the "Art" Back in Bartending

The resurgence of interest in classic cocktails dovetails neatly with the general public's increasingly refined culinary sensibility. Like a fine dining experience, a number of variables come into play in that cocktail shaker. Consider the martini. The patron has his or her choice of gin and vermouth, as well as the ratio between the two. With or without bitters? Olive or twist?

Whether you're calling out for a PBR tallboy at a local dive, or ordering another bottle of Australian shiraz, we're conditioned to expect uniformity from beer and wine, but cocktails are supposed to vary, from place to place and even bartender to bartender. "Say you go to a restaurant and see something on the wine list and something on the entrée list, and have that pairing," says DrinkBoy's Robert Hess. A week later, at another restaurant, you might order the same two items. The wine should tickle the exact same taste buds it did before. Otherwise the bottle is off. "But the entrée had better taste different, because the chef is participating in some fashion."

Great mixologists stake their reputations on personality, and an ability to earn customers' trust. A. J. Rathbun compares the relationship between a top-notch bartender and his or her patrons to another old-fashioned bond. "It's the same as the way you'd go to a specific record store, because the clerk knew what music was new and interesting."

No matter how piercing his gaze, the bartender won't be able to stare into your eyes and discern that a Dark & Stormy is just what the doctor ordered. But that doesn't mean you have to order your standard or choose one of the specials on the menu. Even if you don't have an expansive knowledge of cocktail culture, you can communicate what you want, to a degree, even without a specific name. Just keep these guidelines in mind: