

Bitter Believe It

House-made and store-bought bitters continue to transform cocktails.

A few scant years ago, if a patron strolled into an establishment and asked the barman what types of bitters he carried, he'd have probably been greeted with a look that was quizzical, to say the least. Bitters... were bitters. They came in a bottle with a yellow cap and a squirrely label that was a sight too big. They weren't generally used for much; to dress up a Champagne cocktail, perhaps to quell a case of the hiccups, and maybe, just maybe, they were dashed into a Manhattan.

My how times do change.

The rebirth of cocktail culture has brought many welcome additions to the world's bar scene; the presence of a panoply of bitters being certainly one of the most important. Gone are the days when Angostura was literally

the bartender's only choice when it came to bitters (although if I had to choose only one to use for the rest of my days, that would most definitely be it). Now an impressive variety of commercially available products can be had by nearly anyone. Regan's Orange Bitters No. 6, Peychaud's, Fee Brothers Lemon, Peach, Rhubarb and Whiskey barrel-aged, Chunchu Peruvian bitters, Stirrings Blood Orange, Angostura Orange and the Bitter Truth Celery, Aromatic and Grapefruit, among others, are readily distributed in many markets. Add to that the exponentially growing trend toward house-made bitters and the possibilities are nearly limitless.

Why the renewed interest in production and utilization of bitters?

Our recently embraced fixation with the bartenders and techniques of antiquity has brought us full circle. Not only have we determined that, by definition, a cocktail must include bitters, but we have pored over recipes of yore that called for all manner of exotic bitters and have demanded that we be able to use them. So enterprising businesspeople have brought them back. Those that we can't get, we make. This tinkering with old-timey and mostly defunct recipes, like Boker's, and Abbott's, and cocktails made of such previously unknown ingredients as calisaya tree bark, have led many cocktail folk to get incredibly creative with ingredients and flavor profiles.

Along with the requisite bittering agents like gentian and quinine, today's cocktailians are employing every tropical fruit, exotic herb, heirloom vegetable and esoteric spice they can find, as well as changing up the base spirit from the standard overproof neutral grain to artisanal rums, whiskies, et al in order to give their bitters more depth and character.

Making bitters has become so popular that this year that the annual gathering Tales of the Cocktail even hosted a national home-made bitters competition. The results were both fascinating and delicious. Bitters are essential



● The Apothecary in Philadelphia features bitters-inspired drinks such as the Booty Collins as well as a good lineup of home-made bitters on its backbar.

for bartenders as they are the salt and pepper of the cocktail world. They provide aromatic, spicy finishing notes and when employed correctly tie ingredients and flavors together, without standing out as a unique aspect to the drink. That being said, there is a current movement toward using bitters as either the base spirit or as a large component in certain types of cocktails; a very interesting practice and one with which I recommend all bartenders experiment.

Choosing between store-bought and house-made bitters can be difficult. There is a reason that Angostura, Peychaud's and Fee's have stood the test of time since the mid 1800s. They offer variety, consistency and ease of execution. All one has to do is twist a cap to experience what a range of bitters can do for cocktails. House-made bitters can be of equally high quality but do require a good bit of research, practice and time commitment to perfect and keep in stock. They are generally not difficult to execute,

but the process is time-consuming, generally taking two weeks or so to complete a batch. The major benefit of making bitters in-house is proprietary. By offering one or more selections of bitters that a guest cannot get elsewhere and featuring them in house cocktails, the cocktail bar or restaurant can ensure their patrons will return time and again. They are a boon to the bottom line as well, as most bitters are inexpensive to create, and bar and floor staff will take pride and up sell cocktails that are made with house-made ingredients.

These days, if the aforementioned patron strolled into a reputable bar and posed the "what types of bitters do you carry" query, he'd probably be greeted with a wry grin and be asked if he had a few minutes to spare. Bitter believe it. ●

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