

## Resurrecting Spirits

by Camper English, special to the Chronicle

Last year, Erik Ellestad, a cocktail aficionado and systems administrator at UCSF, decided to drink his way through a classic recipe book.

Though he initially considered "The Old Waldorf Astoria Bar Book," he found a cocktail every couple pages that required an obscure or unavailable ingredient, so he chose the easier-seeming "Savoy Cocktail Book" from 1930. On his path to making the book's 750 drinks, he hit his first snag at the second recipe: The namesake spirit in the absinthe cocktail had been banned in the United States since 1912.

"I tried a couple of substitutes (including pastis) that were not very satisfying. Then I received a bonus from work, so I decided to order absinthe from London."

Ellestad has plenty of company: Historically accurate cocktails are a growing trend extending from the classic cocktail craze, with an emphasis on finding tasting the first-known version of a drink. Such cocktails can be a challenge to re-create. Drink recipes from 100 or more years ago require some translation, as they were smaller in size, used measurements such as drachms and gills, and involved processes like clarifying loaf sugar syrup.

But, as Ellestad found, the bigger challenge is that many of the spirits and other ingredients called for in classic recipes are no longer imported, have changed flavor profiles radically, were outlawed or are simply no longer produced. Hunting down obscure spirits involves time, travel, collaboration and sometimes reinvention. Nevertheless, dedicated drink historians (and thirsty mixologists) are working together to bring many of these lost cocktail ingredients back onto the market.

### Outlaw spirits

Absinthe is a spirit flavored with herbs including wormwood, an ingredient believed in the late 1800s and early 1900s to drive people into committing great works of art and/or homicide. (The current theory is that it was more likely the high alcohol content that caused these problems.) Though absinthe is no longer illegal in parts of Europe (in some places it never was), much of what is sold today is made with artificial coloring and flavorings, unlike the absinthes of the Toulouse-Lautrec era of its popularity.

Ellestad was careful to get real absinthe, but had he started his experiment a year later, he wouldn't have had to spend his bonus. This spring, absinthe essentially became legal in the United States again, as modern testing methods are able to determine safe levels of the compound thujone, which caused the health concerns that led to the ban. The brand Lucid, produced in France by Viridian Spirits from a vintage recipe re-created by New Orleans chemist T.A. Breaux, was the first legal "genuine" absinthe available in the United States in 95 years. Many other brands, including one made by Alameda's Hangar One distillery, are now attempting to gain federal approval for their formulations.

Other ingredients may never re-enter the market.

Illegal for health reasons (and banned by the FDA) are tonka beans, the seeds from a legume tree in the Neotropics with anti-coagulant properties, recently found via gas chromatograph analysis to be present as a flavoring agent in the long-defunct brand Abbott's bitters. Bitters are a particular obsession for vintage cocktail enthusiasts, as they are highly flavored and complex agents made from herbs and citrus-infused alcohol, which can significantly alter a drink's flavor profile with just a few drops. Abbott's are frequently cited by name in old cocktail recipes, as are Boker's, Caroni, Secrestat, and other bitters, with only a couple surviving brands (Angostura, Peychaud's) consistently on the market since the old days.

Not satisfied with the minute selection, bartenders began making their own bitters, with a large upswing in the trend in the past year. At least they weren't starting from scratch - recipes for at least nine bitters appear in the earliest known cocktail recipe book, Jerry Thomas' "How to Mix Drinks," from 1862.

Homemade bitters are served in bars and restaurants throughout the Bay Area, including Absinthe, Nopa, Slanted Door and Bourbon & Branch in San Francisco. With that sort of renewed interest, companies began putting more bitters on the market, especially within the last two or three years. While once there was only Fee Brothers' version of orange bitters, now there are also Stirrings Blood Orange Bitters, the Bitters Truth orange (available in Europe), Hermes orange (in Japan), Angostura Orange Bitters (not yet available in the United States), and Regan's Orange Bitters No 6, from a formula developed by Chronicle Cocktailian columnist Gary Regan.

### DIY ingredients

The path of bitters from lost to found is echoed in other cocktail ingredients. Enthusiasts discover a lost ingredient and attempt to re-create it at home; commercial producers or importers take note and the products hit shelves once again.

Take pimento liqueur (also known as pimento dram). The delicious spirit has nothing to do with the mysterious olive stuffing; it is actually a liqueur flavored with allspice berries, sometimes known as pimento berries. Pimento liqueur probably never went out of production in Jamaica and can sometimes be special ordered, but has been unavailable in the United States for some time.



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The liqueur is called for in many old tiki drinks, so much so that in Jeff "Beachbum" Berry's recent tiki book "Sippin' Safari" he includes a recipe for making your own. Locally, Jon Santer of Bourbon & Branch made pimento liqueur using a recipe printed in Imbibe magazine, and Martin Cate of Alameda's Forbidden Island has experimented with several recipes.

Soon they may not need to trouble themselves with the monthlong infusion process. Eric Seed, owner of the small import company, Haus Alpenz in Edina, Minn., is bringing the product back to the U.S. market next year, pending final label approval by the government. The product will be made in Austria, and Seed says he'll call it allspice liqueur to clear up the name confusion with the olive stuffing.

Falernum, a ginger-lime liqueur from the West Indies, was also a challenge to tiki drink makers, as it is popular in Barbados but until recently not available in the United States. In Barbados, Falernum is mixed with an equal amount of rum to make the corn 'n oil cocktail, and it is also an ingredient in the Bermuda rum swizzle.

Cate explained that the Barbados-produced John D. Taylor brand Velvet falernum is now available in the Bay Area thanks in part to cocktail author Dale DeGroff, who pushed to get it imported. Also available is a non-alcoholic Fee Brothers version that was created with the assistance of Ted Haigh, the vintage spirits expert known as "Dr. Cocktail."

Cate says, "(Falernum) sparks a lot of heated debates in terms of what it really should or shouldn't taste like." In his opinion, "Falernum should be thick and cane sugar sweet, with a pronounced flavor of almond and cloves, lightened by the addition of vibrant lime peel. Some excellent falernum recipes also add ginger, which is a nice complement. There should also be the light taste of rum in the background."

Cate uses the Velvet falernum brand in his drinks, though he's also made his own falernum with recipes found online. Nopa's Neyah White has also experimented with homemade falernum but said his wasn't as good as the commercial brand.

Unfortunately, Cate's favored falernum may become lost again. He says the Northern California distributor for the product lost their contract. "I'm actively scrambling to buy every bottle of falernum in the Bay Area," he said during a recent interview. "I've scrounged it off of about 12 BevMo shelves."

#### Foreign imports

Eric Seed's name comes up a lot when discussing lost cocktail ingredients. He's about to bring the allspice liqueur into the country, but has already been responsible for importing two other formerly lost ingredients: crème de violette from Austria and Batavia Arrack distilled on the Isle of Java.

Seed could easily sell himself as the Indiana Jones of lost spirits, traveling the globe to unearth the buried treasures of the ancient cocktail world. Instead, he compares the cool factor of discovering his products to the thrill of finding salt from Zanzibar on the shelf at Whole Foods. "It isn't just about re-creating what was," he says. "The product has to have relevance to the cocktails and gastronomy of today. (The consumer) may not be a cocktailian but may enjoy the taste experience of the product."

Along with the lost ingredients, his company imports walnut and stone pine liqueurs from Austria. He sells Batavia Arrack not only to cocktail enthusiasts, but also to chocolatiers, whose European counterparts use the product as well. Seed's Rothman & Winter crème de violette is a maceration of a Queen Charlotte and March violets in a grape brandy. With its bright floral notes mixologists will likely use it similarly to the recently introduced product St. Germain elderflower liqueur, though in different doses. Seed says the violette has been especially popular mixed with champagne in a version of a kir royale.

One of its uses was originally in the Aviation cocktail, also made with gin, lemon juice, and maraschino liqueur. The Aviation has been popular on cocktail menus in San Francisco this year, but just as crème de violette vanished from shelves, it also seems to have vanished from the Aviation ingredient list. Many recipes omit it, including the one in the "Savoy Cocktail Book." But the earliest known Aviation recipe from 1916 includes the violette. (Erik Ellestad believes the recipe was copied incorrectly into the "Savoy," as the book appears to be a conglomeration of several sources.)

Ellestad, who is tracking his progress on eGullet.org, where he hosts the spirits and cocktails forum, found another use for crème de violette in the "Savoy" that includes a double-whammy of lost ingredients. "My favorite cocktail that I didn't already know about is the Atty. It's basically a dry martini with absinthe and crème de violette. It's a beautiful cocktail that makes you think about the '30s and Art Deco and everything. You have these two ingredients that you think of as overwhelming, that you use in minute quantities and they're like ghosts fighting each other."

In Jerry Thomas' 1862 book "How to Mix Drinks," many of the punch recipes call for Batavia Arrack, now available thanks to Seed after a long absence. Batavia Arrack (as opposed to "Arak" from Sri Lanka or Lebanon) is made on Island of Java in Indonesia. (Batavia is the former name of Jakarta) It is a spirit distilled from sugarcane and fermented red rice, and was spread throughout the world by traders in the days of the Dutch East India Company.

Swedish punch, or punch, is a cocktail made with Batavia Arrack that is also sold as a pre-mixed liqueur in Sweden. It is often listed as its own ingredient in old cocktail recipes. In "The Art of the Bar" by Jeff Hollinger, general manager of Absinthe in San Francisco and Rob Schwartz, the restaurant's former bar manager, Swedish punch is cited as an ingredient, though Schwartz says he was working with a brand brought back from Sweden rather than a product available here.

For the 10-year anniversary party at the restaurant Jardiniere, bar manager Thad Vogler served seven kinds of punch, three of them containing Batavia Arrack. He described it as "pleasantly complicated, with floral to earthy aromas," and similar to a rum agricole from Martinique. His Champagne-enhanced version of Swedish punch is now on the restaurant's drink menu.

#### Power of collaboration

Some ingredients have changed formulation so much over the years that mixologists resort to cocktail archaeology to re-create them. Jamie Boudreau, a bartender at Vessel in Seattle, had a particular obsession with Amer Picon. The product, a bitter orange digestif, is called for in drinks such as the Picon punch and the Amer Picon cocktail. The product is available in France, where it is often mixed with beer, and is rarely imported to the United States. Even when so, the formula for it changed twice to a much lower alcohol content, and the product changed names to Picon Biere. In the United States, the Torani syrup brand makes Torani Amer, but some mixologists say it's not an appropriate substitution.

Boudreau was able to track down a bottle of the current Picon, and set about trying to approximate the recipe of the previous version working with what he knew. He produced a recipe using Amaro Ramazzotti (an Italian bitter liqueur), an orange tincture, and Stirrings Blood Orange bitters. He brought a sample of this creation to the Tales of the Cocktail event in New Orleans in July, where he sampled it with Ted "Dr. Cocktail" Haigh of Los Angeles, Robert Hess of Seattle, a cocktail expert who runs the site DrinkBoy.com, and LeNell Smothers, a Brooklyn liquor store owner who coincidentally was carrying a flask of original formula Amer Picon. Together they discussed the differences between the original ingredient and the approximation, and Boudreau adjusted his recipe.

This online and in-person collaboration to re-create or re-import lost cocktail ingredients has spread beyond cocktail professionals. Several classic cocktail books are now available as reprints, including the "Savoy" and the "Old Waldorf Astoria Bar Book." Some copyright-expired volumes like Jerry Thomas' "How to Mix Drinks" and "Cups and Their Customs" by Henry Porter and George Edwin Roberts are available on Google Books, and scans of yet others are accessible online to members of the Museum of the American Cocktail.

Inspired by another cocktail blogger's photography contest, Los Gatos bartender Jimmy Patrick is organizing a homemade bitters exchange through his blog, Jimmy's Cocktail Hour ([lightguild.blogspot.com](http://lightguild.blogspot.com).) Participants can use old or new recipes found in cocktail books, online, or invented. "Everybody wants bitters right now and there aren't that many of them out there," he says. "And when you make a batch of bitters you get about 3 gallons of it and you only need about four ounces."

The Web site TheSpiritWorld.net has begun a project called Raiders of the Lost Cocktails, in which they hope to repopularize old cocktails using available but obscure ingredients such as Strega, an Italian herbal liqueur. Lauren Clark of the Web site DrinkBoston.com launched Project 1919, "A mission to make lost and rare cocktail ingredients readily available to the home mixologist," in the Boston area.

During the year of Ellestad's "Savoy" project, he's encountered numerous lost ingredients to study in order to make each drink before moving on, but luckily during that time several lost ingredients have become newly available. With more than 150 recipes down, he's still working on drinks starting with "C." That leaves slightly less than 600 cocktails still left to make, and many more lost ingredients left to be rediscovered.

#### Lost-ingredient resources

Here are some of the Web sites that offer information on lost-cocktail ingredients:

Erik Ellestad's "Savoy" project: [links.sfgate.com/ZBFV](http://links.sfgate.com/ZBFV) Amer Picon replica: [links.sfgate.com/ZBFX](http://links.sfgate.com/ZBFX)  
Falernum: [links.sfgate.com/ZBFZ](http://links.sfgate.com/ZBFZ) Pimento dram: [links.sfgate.com/ZBFW](http://links.sfgate.com/ZBFW)  
Roundup of bitters recipes: [links.sfgate.com/ZBFY](http://links.sfgate.com/ZBFY)

Information about lost-cocktail ingredients: [CocktailDB.com](http://CocktailDB.com) and [DrinkBoy.com](http://DrinkBoy.com)

#### Atty Cocktail

Makes 1 drink, From the "Savoy Cocktail Book," adapted by Erik Ellestad

- \* 3/4 ounce Noilly Prat dry vermouth
- \* 1 1/2 ounces gin (Boodles, Aviation or Beefeater recommended)
- \* 1 teaspoon Rothman & Winter creme de violette
- \* 1 teaspoon spoon Lucid absinthe
- \* -- Lemon twist

Instructions: In a mixing glass 2/3 full of ice, add the vermouth, gin, creme de violette and absinthe. Stir well and then strain into cocktail glass. Squeeze a lemon twist on top and drop it into the drink.

#### Swedish Punsch

Makes 1 drink, from Thad Vogler, bar manager at Jardiniere in San Francisco

- \* 1 1/2 ounce Batavia Arrack
- \* 1 ounce Demerara rum
- \* 1 ounce lemon juice
- \* 3/4 ounces Martinique syrup (or substitute 3 parts good raw sugar to 1 part water)
- \* -- About four strokes freshly grated nutmeg
- \* 1 1/2 ounces Champagne

Instructions: Combine the Batavia Arrack, Demerara rum, lemon juice, Martinique syrup and nutmeg in a cocktail shaker. Shake well and pour into into a sherry glass and top with Champagne.

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