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Gone but not Forgotten

Obscure Vintage Ingredients Are a Cocktailian's Holy Grail

Story by PAUL CLARKE
Photography by STUART MULLENBERG

Chuck Taggart is ordinarily a pretty cheery guy. Author of "The Gumbo Pages" Web site and a dedicated fan of fine cocktails, Taggart has a taste for the classic, the historic and the obscure. But when he's hankering to mix a drink with something that can't be found at his local liquor store—or any liquor store, for that matter—his patience has limits.

"I don't like being told I can't have something," Taggart says emphatically. While accustomed to the occasional challenge, he says the ingredient that has particularly stymied him is a sweet rum-and-allspice combination known as "pimento dram," made in Jamaica and available almost nowhere else. "It brings such an air of mystery to a drink," Taggart says of the liqueur, which he first sampled at the home of a friend who has an extraordinarily well-stocked liquor cabinet. "It's really very simple stuff, but it has such a complex flavor. I was frustrated that I couldn't get a bottle."

Taggart is hardly alone in his desire to taste hard-to-find cocktail ingredients. Prompted by recent books and driven by Internet forums and blogs, a grassroots enthusiasm has blossomed for spirits and liqueurs that can be all but impossible to obtain. Devotees pursue once-common bar elements that have faded into history, and unique regional flavors rarely found outside their places of origin. What these ingredients share is a common obscurity—but instead of squelching demand, this scarcity seems to fuel it.

"The thing most desired is the thing denied," says Ted "Dr. Cocktail" Haigh, author, cocktail historian and *Imbibe* columnist (read about his own search for the hard-to-find Amaro Cora bitters on page 18). He's the one who introduced Taggart to pimento dram. "The thought that there's a cocktail out there that might be good, and the one reason you can't have it is that there's this strange, lost ingredient that keeps you from tasting this flavor—that drives people like me crazy."

Small liquor companies are showing interest in reviving once-lost spirits, and some mixologists are even replicating these elusive ingredients. This was the path Taggart chose with pimento dram, and it's a course taken by many professional bartenders as well. "By re-creating stuff, I'm getting flavors that people aren't going to find at any other bar," says Jamie Boudreau, bar manager at Vessel in Seattle. "As a bartender, you have a large number of mediums to play with. If you can find more, that's fantastic; if you can find something that no one else has, that's even better."

Attention

A cocktail dating back more than 70 years, the Attention was recently updated for contemporary palates by Jamie Boudreau at Vessel in Seattle.

2 oz. gin
1/4 oz. dry vermouth
1/4 oz. crème de violette or homemade substitute
1/4 oz. Herbsaint, Pernod or other pastis
2 dashes orange bitters
Cracked ice
Tools: mixing glass, bar spoon, strainer
Glass: cocktail, chilled
Garnish: lemon twist

Combine ingredients in a mixing glass. Fill with cracked ice and stir briskly for 30 seconds. Strain into a chilled cocktail glass. Garnish.

Brooklyn

Amer Picon and maraschino liqueur lend this classic relative of the Manhattan an intriguing depth and an engaging bitterness.

2 oz. rye whiskey
¾ oz. dry vermouth (sweet vermouth also works well)
¼ oz. Amer Picon, Torani Amer or homemade substitute
¼ oz. maraschino liqueur
Cracked ice
Tools: mixing glass, bar spoon, strainer
Glass: cocktail, chilled
Garnish: cherry

Combine ingredients in a mixing glass. Fill with cracked ice and stir briskly for 30 seconds. Strain into a chilled cocktail glass. Garnish.

Batavia Arrack

Batavia arrack is the coelacanth of spirits, a liquid fossil from mixology's primordial era. Produced since at least the early 17th century on the island of Java (formerly a Dutch colony known as Batavia), arrack might be the most influential spirit you've never heard of.

"Along with gin and brandy, arrack was one of the most important spirits ever," Haigh says. Distilled from sugarcane and fermented red rice—and distinct from the arracks produced in other parts of the world—Batavia arrack was an ancestor of rum. Crisp, vaguely malty and with an intriguing smokiness, the spirit was commonly mixed with citrus juice, sugar, water and spice in a concoction known as punch, "one of the most important precursor drinks to the cocktail," Haigh says.

Arrack punch was served at inns, taverns and gatherings of all types through the 18th century. But as rum became widely available and as stronger, sleeker cocktails displaced punch as the preferred tipple, arrack faded. Even then, arrack's companion liqueur, Swedish punsch (basically a sweetened arrack flavored with ingredients such as lemon zest and tea) remained a useful cocktail ingredient until the mid-20th century, appearing in drinks such as the Have-a-Heart Cocktail, the Volstead and the smoky, rum-based Doctor Cocktail.

Now, Batavia arrack is back. Last year, Eric Seed, a principal at Haus Alpenz—a Minnesota-based company that sources artisan spirits for import and distribution—learned of the demand for these vintage ingredients, and was intrigued enough to reintroduce the spirit in the United States in June. "There's a base of customers that simply wants to dig into traditional recipes that reference Batavia arrack and Swedish punsch," Seed says. He also notes that modern books such as last year's *The Art of the Bar* (written by Jeff Hollinger and Rob Schwartz of San Francisco's Absinthe Brasserie) print recipes for cocktails that utilize Swedish punsch, an ingredient easily crafted by creative mixologists who have access to Batavia arrack. "The inclusion of this stuff in current cocktail guides certainly shows that the audience is willing to seek out these products," Seed says. "I take their guidance seriously."

Crème de Violette

For a product that appeared in minute quantities in century-old recipes, crème de violette has inspired a disproportionate level of devotion among cocktail aficionados. "Whenever I bring up violet liqueur, people immediately have the sense of the fleetingness of a flower," Haigh says. "Before they even taste it, they say, 'Oh, my!' It's amazing, the wonderful beauty that people can extract from little, delicate things."

Flavored and colored with violet petals, crème de violette lends a sense of ethereal mystery to the cocktails it graces. During the peak of its popularity in the 1890s, the purple liqueur—Crème Yvette was a popular brand—was considered a ladies' liqueur, and was typically served in dainty cordial glasses. It was also layered with other liqueurs in pousse-cafés, but it was in the more rugged atmosphere of the barroom that this Gilded Age relic made its lasting impression.

While still made in Japan and Europe—brands include Hermes, Monin and Benoit Serres—crème de violette was unavailable in the United States for decades. This drought ended in June, when Haus Alpenz began importing limited quantities of Rothman & Winter crème de violette from Austria.

Faced with the long absence and continued rarity of violette, many mixologists have chosen to improvise. A common technique is to mix violet syrup with vodka;

Amer Replica

Jamie Boudreau replicates the flavor of Amer Picon using an Italian bitter liqueur supplemented with orange tincture and other flavors.

10 oz. Ramazzotti Amaro
7 oz. Orange Tincture
2 oz. Stirrings blood orange bitters
Tools: jar for mixing

Combine the ingredients in a jar and gently shake to mix. The amer is ready to use right away, but the flavor improves with age.

Orange Tincture
Place 1 oz. dried orange peel (available at tenzingmomo.com) in 1 cup vodka, preferably 100 proof. Soak for two months, shaking daily.

Chuck's Jamaican Pimento Dram No. 3

Chuck Taggart's pimento dram recipe highlights the distinct allspice flavor of this beautifully nuanced liqueur.

2 ¼ cups 151-proof Demerara rum
½ cup whole dried allspice berries, crushed
3 cups water
1 ½ lb. brown sugar

Crush allspice berries in a mortar and place in 1-liter jar with rubber seal. Cover with rum and steep for at least 10 days, agitating the maceration daily. Pour through a fine strainer, pressing on the solids to extract as much liquor as you can, then pour the strained liquor maceration through another strainer lined with a coffee filter (this'll take a while).

Make a simple syrup by heating the water and brown sugar until sugar dissolves, then allow to cool. When cool, combine with the rum maceration and age for at least one month. Decant and enjoy. This will almost fill two 750 ml. bottles.

Boudreau mixes syrup from the French maker Giffard with Citadelle gin, using 4 ounces of syrup for every ounce of gin. "Side by side, you can tell the difference, but in a cocktail it's fine," Boudreau says.

Frequently found in the company of gin, crème de violette appears in pre-Prohibition cocktails such as the Blue Moon, the Atty, the Attention (recipe on page 35) and the Violet Fizz. Perhaps violette's most significant appearance was in the early Aviation, a mixture of gin, lemon juice and maraschino liqueur. The original 1916 printed recipe includes a teaspoon of crème de violette, and this likely earned the drink its name. The liqueur gives the cocktail an airy appearance evocative of the wild blue yonder that beckoned early aviators.

While flight is now commonplace, the liqueur that gave the Aviation its cerulean hue isn't. With the recent re-introduction of crème de violette into North America, Boudreau hopes the situation will soon change. "There are so many recipes in the old books that call for violette," he says. "There must be a good reason for it."

Amer Picon

The search for Amer Picon can be doubly frustrating. A French bitter aperitif, Amer Picon was commonplace in bars from the 1890s through the mid-20th century. The product disappeared from American shelves in the late 1980s—but more than a decade earlier, the House of Picon reformulated the product, reducing the alcohol content by almost half and emasculating its once-robust character.

"The current Picon has a different flavor," Haigh says. "The original had a singular flavor that is so balanced and so right. Once you've tried that, it's hard not to want it."

Amer Picon contributes a bitter orange flavor to drinks, giving a crisp edge to rye whiskey cocktails such as the Brooklyn (recipe on page 36) and the Liberal. One of the spirit's most popular uses was in a distinctive Basque highball called the Picon Punch. "It's the drink for me on a summer day," Haigh says. "It's just delicious when made with the old stuff."

Fortunately, alternatives are available. Torani produces Torani Amer, a product mostly similar in flavor and alcohol content to the original Picon, and Boudreau is experimenting with a replica that harks back to the original. The replica, which he's planning to use in drinks served at Vessel, "has a little higher alcohol content, and a little more heat" than the current Picon, he says. "In a cocktail, it's indistinguishable in flavor, and it has a stronger character. I really like the way the orange flavor comes through."

Falernum

Like a character in an old melodrama, falernum follows a dramatic arc from a modest origin to a role in one of the 20th century's most famous drinks, and back to obscurity. Originating in Barbados, falernum is a syrup flavored with limes, ginger, almonds and cloves, and usually contains just enough alcohol to rate as a low-amplitude liqueur. In the islands, falernum is a common sweetener for icy Rum Swizzles and also appears in the Corn 'n Oil, a drink combining the syrup with rich Barbados rum.

Had falernum's story ended there, it might be little more than a pleasant oddity. But with the advent of the tiki bar, falernum got its big break. Tiki pioneer Donn Beach utilized falernum in an array of concoctions, including the original 1934 version of the Zombie, his most popular and most imitated drink. Falernum also crept out of the tiki mug and into the cocktail glass in drinks such as the Royal Bermuda Yacht Club Cocktail and the Frosty Dawn.

Falernum is still available, though it can take some dedicated searching. Products include Velvet Falernum, a lightly alcoholic version from Barbados that's billed as the original falernum; and a non-alcoholic version made by Fee Brothers.

Réveillon Cocktail

Pimento dram lends a wonderfully warm tone to the luscious blend of fruity and spicy flavors in this original cocktail by Chuck Taggart of gumbopages.com.

2 oz. apple brandy or Calvados
1/2 oz. pimento dram or homemade substitute
1/2 oz. dry pear brandy
1/4 oz. Punt E Mes
1 dash Fee Brothers old-fashioned aromatic bitters or Angostura bitters
Cracked ice
Tools: mixing glass, bar spoon, strainer
Glass: cocktail, chilled
Garnish: cinnamon stick or star anise

Combine ingredients in a mixing glass. Fill with cracked ice and stir briskly for 30 seconds. Strain into a chilled cocktail glass. Garnish.

Falernum No. 9

Paul Clarke's homemade falernum recipe uses fresh limes and ginger, which give the syrup a bright, natural flavor.

6 oz. Wray & Nephew Overproof White Rum
Zest of 9 medium limes
40 whole cloves
2 Tbsp. blanched, slivered almonds
1 ½ oz. peeled, julienned fresh ginger
¼ tsp. almond extract
2 cups sugar
1 cup water
4 ½ oz. fresh, strained lime juice (optional)
Tools: jars for mixing; Microplane grater, sharp vegetable peeler or paring knife; strainer; cheesecloth.

Zest limes with a Microplane, vegetable peeler or paring knife, being careful to avoid the bitter white pith. Dry-toast almonds in a pan over medium heat until light brown and aromatic; let cool. Combine rum, lime zest, cloves, almonds and ginger in a pint jar and seal. Let mixture soak for 24 hours, shaking occasionally. Strain through moistened cheesecloth, squeezing solids to extract the last, flavorful bits of liquid. Add almond extract.

Mix sugar and water in a jar and seal. Shake thoroughly until sugar is entirely dissolved. Measure 14 ounces (1 3/4 cups) of resulting sugar syrup and add to rum mixture. Press juice from several limes, straining pulp using a fine strainer, and add to mixture, adjusting proportions to taste. Refrigerate and use within one month (the shelf life may be extended by skipping the lime juice, instead adding a little to each drink as the falernum is used).

Despite this availability, some mixologists prefer the do-it-yourself approach. "I think they're really artificial tasting," Boudreau says of the commercial versions. "I decided to make my own because I thought it would be an improvement. It's relatively easy and it tastes a million times better." Boudreau uses his house falernum in traditional drinks such as the Corn 'n Oil, but also introduces it into his own creations such as a Chartreuse Swizzle.

At El Vaquero in Eugene, Ore., bartenders have also taken to using housemade falernum instead of the commercial versions. "I think the reason we've been pursuing the do-it-yourself approach is because we'd like to turn the clock back to a time when there were so many more flavors available to mixologists," says Jeffrey Morgenthaler, bar manager at El Vaquero. Morgenthaler found a falernum recipe online (see recipe, left), and has been using the syrup in Rum Swizzles, Corn 'n Oils and other drinks, with a good response from customers. "Nobody's ever tasted anything like it," he says. "People have been going crazy for the falernum ever since we introduced it."

While Ted Haigh helped Fee Brothers craft their falernum, he supports the do-it-yourselfers. "I think the homemade stuff is treasure," he says. "Anytime somebody makes something with their own hands, there is a wonder and a sense of delicacy to it."

Pimento Dram

Issues of availability aside, pimento dram's chief liability might be its name. While the word "pimento" conjures images of a cocktail olive's flaccid red stuffing, in this case it refers to fresh allspice berries. With a deep, voluptuous flavor, pimento dram has been called the most versatile liqueur in mixology.

"You can't name any other liqueur you can add to as many divergent drinks as you can pimento dram, and have all of them remain delightfully palatable," Haigh says. "You can add it to a Bloody Mary, you can add it to a White Russian, you can add it to a Whiskey Sour and you can add it to a martini. It's amazing—it works in all of them. Do I want it in all of them, all the time? No—and you don't need much; it really goes a long way."

Like falernum, pimento dram owes much to the midcentury tiki craze. While the liqueur plays a key role in rum drinks such as Jasper's Jamaican and in the bourbon-based Lion's Tail, it proves its versatility when used in small amounts in tropical-style drinks such as the Nui Nui and the Montego Bay.

Today, pimento dram is rarely found outside Jamaica, but its reputation for versatility inspired Chuck Taggart to replicate it at home (see his recipe on page 38). After fine-tuning several recipes he'd found on the Internet—"It turned into an obsessive quest," Taggart says—he found a version that seemed close to the original.

Haigh, who sampled Taggart's replica, agrees. "The replica is a little sharper—which is good, because it's a sharpness borne of the allspice berries—and it's a little more allspicey," Haigh says. "It's just ample evidence that the stuff isn't that hard to make."

For Taggart, the opportunity to introduce his homemade version to guests—especially in drinks of his own creation, such as the Réveillon Cocktail (recipe on page 39)—is part of the enjoyment. "It's such an unusual cocktail ingredient for your garden-variety American drinker," Taggart says. "I enjoy serving it to guests and seeing if they can figure out what it is. Because its flavor is so complex and nuanced, it's a really fun ingredient to use." ■