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# Not Bad for a BEACHBUM

Tiki scholar Jeff Berry burns a torch for a rum-soaked chapter of Americana

Story by PAUL CLARKE  
Photos by PETE STARMAN

**W**hen your life's work is researching a topic that many people consider campy at best and tacky at worst, you have a tough job.

Jeff Berry has a tough job.

But as a self-described “professional bum” who publicly expresses disdain for labor of any sort, Berry would never let you know it. A former journalist, screenwriter and filmmaker, and the author of three books on exotic cocktails and cuisine, including *Beachbum Berry's Grog Log* and *Intoxica!* (a fourth, *Sippin' Safari*, comes out in June), Berry has made it his mission to rescue what he calls “faux-tropical” drinks from the abyss of kitsch, and to restore them to a place of honor in the hallowed halls of mixology.

Berry was first captivated by tiki's mojo in 1968 while visiting Ah Fong's, a Chinese restaurant in the San Fernando Valley. “They had a dawn-to-dusk diorama of an island scene, with waterfalls and a night sky and a little island hut, with tikis everywhere and a canoe hanging from the ceiling,” Berry says. As he talks, his face—normally beatific, with a trim, gray goatee and stylish black-rimmed glasses—becomes animated and expressive, his eyes wide-open in awe as he recounts the experience. “You'd walk in, and the effect was as if you were in the middle of a complete and utterly art-directed Hollywood fantasy.”

The fascination didn't end with the décor. “When we sat down to eat, my mom and dad ordered Navy Grog,” he explains. “Traditionally it came with an ice cone, and a straw poking through the cone. It was this weird, mysterious adult thing that was a part of the whole exotic fantasy world. Other drinks would come with all kinds of elaborate garnishes. It had a huge impression on me, and that became my favorite place to go.”

When Berry fell in love with this tiki paradise, America's passion with Polynesian style was into its fourth decade. The pioneer of the faux-tropical experience was a New

Orleans native named Ernest Raymond Beaumont Gantt, who opened a small bar in Hollywood in 1934, decorated it with nautical castoffs and souvenirs from his South Pacific travels, and called it Don the Beachcomber's. Gantt, who later changed his name to Donn Beach, created an exotic environment—replete with elaborate rum-based libations such as the potent Dr. Funk, the flaming Volcano Bowl and his most legendary creation, the Zombie—that quickly became fashionable among Hollywood's nobility, attracting customers such as Charlie Chaplin, Clark Gable and Howard Hughes. “People with money and position and fame went to Don the Beachcomber's,” Berry says. “There was nothing tacky about it. They'd never seen anything like it, and they'd never seen anything like these drinks, which Donn called his ‘rum rhapsodies.’”

Another person who'd never seen anything like it was Vic Bergeron, owner of a blue-collar restaurant in Oakland called Hinky Dinks. “When Vic came to Don's and saw what was going on, he tiki'd out his place and turned it into Trader Vic's,” Berry says. “It became the gourmet, high-end hotspot in the Bay Area. It had society people, Nob Hill, the big-money crowd. Queen Elizabeth went to Trader Vic's when she went to San Francisco.”

Beach and Bergeron set a standard that, over the next several decades, countless restaurants attempted to follow—the Luau in Beverly Hills, Bali Hai in San Diego and the Kahiki in Columbus. Exotic drinks were a significant part of the appeal, and became what Berry calls “cocktails as conversation pieces.”

Early masters of the tiki drink were as devoted to quality as are today's bar chefs, mixing aged rums and fresh-squeezed juices in imaginative and well-balanced combinations. Drinks such as the Zombie and the Mai Tai became household names, while others—such as the Fog Cutter, the Tiger Shark, the Sidewinder's Fang and the Port au



## LUAU GROG

Look for this recipe and other tiki relics in Jeff Berry's new book, *Sippin' Safari*. This deceptively strong blended grog (pictured above) was a house favorite at Beverly Hills' Luau restaurant circa 1953.

3/4 oz. lime juice, fresh-squeezed  
 3/4 oz. grapefruit juice  
 3/4 oz. soda water  
 1 oz. honey mix (equal parts honey and water, heated until dissolved, then cooled to room temperature)  
 1 oz. gold Puerto Rican rum (Jeff uses Bacardi 8)  
 1 oz. dark Jamaican rum (Jeff uses Appleton Estate Extra)  
 1 oz. Demerara rum (Jeff uses Lemon Hart)  
 Dash of Angostura bitters  
 2 oz. crushed ice  
 Tools: blender, pilsner glass, chopstick  
 Glass: double rocks  
 Garnish: ice cone, straw

Put everything in a blender, saving ice for last. Blend on high for no more than 5 seconds. Pour into a double rocks glass. Garnish. *For the ice cone, pack a pilsner glass with finely shaved ice, run a chopstick through the middle to make a hole for the straw, and freeze the cone overnight.*

Prince—filled menus that sometimes featured dozens of different drinks. These creations were served in specially designed glasses and mugs, adorned with painstakingly prepared ice shells and cones, and garnished with gardenias, lakes of flaming rum and—in one drink at Don the Beachcomber's—real pearls. Trader Vic's and Don the Beachcomber's both became chains, as did the Kon-Tiki, a restaurant that at its peak in the 1960s had more than 20 bartenders behind its Chicago bar, working assembly-line style to create these labor-intensive liquid artworks.

By the 1970s, Polynesian style was on its way out. Long before Donald Trump proclaimed tiki “tacky” in 1989 as he banished Trader Vic's—the last surviving tiki chain—from the Plaza Hotel, the aesthetic's star had faded. Ernest Gantt's grand tropical fantasy had devolved into *Gilligan's Island*.

In 1991, though, Jeff Berry was still intrigued by tiki, as was his future wife, Annene Kaye. “When we were a-courtin', I'd take her to Trader Vic's,” Berry says. “One of the first trips we took was to Florida, and we discovered the Mai Kai” in Fort Lauderdale, one of the



last surviving Polynesian *grande dames*. “I said, ‘I’d really like to know what’s in these drinks.’ I’d always been interested in them, but the places started disappearing once I was old enough to drink.”

Aided by Kaye, a former bartender, Berry began reverse-engineering the venerable concoctions he sampled at the Mai Kai and at Tiki-Ti, a Los Angeles bar opened in 1961 by Ray Buhen, one of Beach’s original bartenders, and still operated by Buhen’s son and grandson. Berry also started collecting menus, placemats and coasters from old Polynesian places and searched used bookstores for cookbooks that contained drink recipes from long-shuttered bars and restaurants. He soon met others of a similar stripe, notably cinematographer Sven Kirsten. A self-described “urban archeologist” with a yen for tiki architecture, Kirsten began holding tiki symposiums at his house. “It was a complete geek-out,” Berry says. “I would make a couple of drinks out of the old playbooks, Sven would have a slide show of some tiki safari, and we’d all talk about our own little niches.”

Berry’s research led to a series of books, the first in 1998; his latest and most extensive is *Sippin’ Safari*. “The safari goes back in time, as well as back to classic restaurants where all the drinks were served—in Hawaii, Cuba, Jamaica, Chicago and Hollywood,” Berry says. “We’re going from place to place in the 20th century, looking for lost vintage drink recipes, and looking at the people who created and served these drinks.”

In addition to extensive historical details, the book contains 67 recipes, 46 of which—including Don the Beachcomber’s original 1934 incarnation of the Zombie, the most celebrated (and most badly replicated) drink of the tiki era—have never before been printed. Obtaining these recipes required Berry to pierce a wall of near military-level secrecy, established by owners such as Beach and Bergeron who were intent on keeping competitors from stealing recipes, as well as by bartenders who used their private notebooks of secret recipes—sometimes encrypted—to win jobs at other bars. “That little black handwritten recipe book was what got you your job,” Berry says. “It was the *grimoire*, the holy text that no other man shall know.”

Berry initially had little luck getting veteran tiki bartenders to share their knowledge. Following the publication of *Grog Log*, however, the cold shoulder began to thaw as these bartenders realized that Berry was taking their drinks—and taking *them*—seriously.

Berry’s ultimate success in breaking this code of silence is testament to his enthusiasm for his topic, and his appreciation for these bartenders’ work. “Jeff is one of the more impressive people I’ve met because of his thoroughness, and because of his willingness to take something seriously that few people do,” says Wayne Curtis, author of last year’s rum-fuelled history, *And a Bottle of Rum: A History of the New World in Ten Cocktails*. “He understands that you can learn a lot about the past by taking these people seriously. It’s not just kitsch or camp; there’s a lot there to understand.”

Kirsten agrees. In 2000, he published *The Book of Tiki*, an extensive exploration of the mid-century Polynesian phenomenon; Berry contributed the chapter on drinks. “Jeff’s enthusiasm is infectious,” Kirsten says. “He really loves what he does, and that comes across in his writing. In *The Book of Tiki*, I tried to convey my excitement about uncovering all these great ideas and visuals from the past; Jeff does it with tastes and with concepts. So much of these cocktails isn’t just the taste, but the conceptual side of things. For us, that’s part of the fun.”

Berry, however, wants nothing to do with any implications that he’s a hard-worker, even on something that’s considered fun. “That’s character assassination! I won’t stand for it!” he says. While he finds it gratifying that other people have enjoyed reading about and mixing the drinks he’s uncovered, he claims that the 15 years he’s spent searching for old recipes and interviewing veteran bartenders was prompted by a more selfish need. “I finally have what I’ve always wanted: a way to make all these drinks,” Berry says. “I’m probably the laziest guy I know. The only thing that could get me motivated enough to do all this is the desire to make myself a decent drink.” ■

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