

# BOOZEHOUND

On the Trail of the Rare,  
the Obscure, and the  
Overrated in Spirits

Jason Wilson

A stylized sun graphic in shades of orange and brown, featuring a semi-circle at the bottom and several triangular rays extending upwards and outwards. The sun is positioned in the lower half of the cover, partially behind the author's name.

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AND THE OVERRATED IN SPIRITS



JASON WILSON



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## *The Booze Beat*

AS LONG AS YOU REPRESENT ME AS PRAISING ALCOHOL I SHALL NOT COMPLAIN.

—H. L. Mencken

A FEW YEARS AGO, I was at a fancy party with several people who have successful careers in what's commonly called lifestyle journalism. We were drinking special cocktails made with a very special gin that had been infused with cucumbers and rose petals, and mixed with rose water that had been specially imported from Lebanon.

I was chatting with a beautiful, sexy friend who wrote for a magazine that covers luxury spa vacations. She got that job, in part, because she wrote a travel book about bathing culture that one critic claimed “bred a new publishing hybrid, the beauty-travel memoir, Bruce Chatwin by way of *Allure* magazine.”

As we chatted, I shared some good news with her: I had just been hired to write a column for a major newspaper about spirits and cocktails.

“You should really meet my friend,” she told me. “He’s the perfume critic at the *Times*.”

“Really?” I said. “Let me just see if I’m hearing this correctly. The luxury spa columnist would like the spirits columnist to meet the perfume columnist.”

“Yes,” she said, with a beautiful, sexy smile.

“Wait,” I said. “Did you just hear that?”

“What?”

“Oh, nothing,” I said. “I just thought for a second that I heard the sound of the Apocalypse happening.”

I often said things like this in the beginning of my new job. I’d grown up, after all, in a family of men who made their money packing fruit and vegetables—real work. I knew what it was like to wake up for work at 4 a.m., to haggle over crates of cantaloupe at the produce terminal before sunrise. By thirteen, I knew what it felt like to unload a truckload of onions in the July sun; how your arms were ripped up by the fifty-pound red mesh bags. My father mangled his thumb in a machine that stitches together bags of potatoes. I could imagine my grandfather saying, “Spirits and cocktail columnist? Really? I’m spinning in my goddam grave.” At least that’s how my misguided thinking went in those early days.

When I was in school, I’d dreamed of becoming Ernest Hemingway. Now, I travel around and drink and write about my traveling and drinking. Close enough, I guess—though likely closer to the paunchy, boozy, crazy late Hemingway than the younger, dashing one who ran with bulls, drove ambulances in the Great War, and wrote classic novels. It’s sort of like dreaming of becoming Elvis when you’re young, and then actually becoming Elvis years later—because maybe you’ve become the wrong one, the Elvis who performed, sweaty and overweight,

rhinestone jumpsuits. Regardless, it's difficult (not to mention unseemly) to complain when your work entails polishing off tasting flights of special reserve bourbons or single malts or añejo tequilas at 11 o'clock in the morning. I've come to love spirits, and to admire the people who make them and the places they come from. I hope to convey some of that love to you.

When I'm working, I often think of that poor woman, Jig, in Hemingway's classic story "Hills Like White Elephants." Sitting at a bar in a Spanish railway station on a hot afternoon, trying to avoid another pointed quarrel with her boyfriend, she orders a glass of anís at the railway station bar. "I wanted to try this new drink," she says to her companion, in one of the most cynical lines in American literature. "That's all we do, isn't it—look at things and try new drinks?" Looking at things and trying new drinks. That's a pretty fair description of my job. Any given day I might be tasting a *rhum agricole* made with pure Martinique sugarcane or sipping an eau-de-vie distilled from some rare alpine berry, or quaffing an herbal *digestif* concocted from an obscure Milanese recipe, or contemplating the renaissance of American rye whiskey, or comparing sherry-casked Norwegian aquavit to unoaked Danish aquavit. Some friends suggest I should have lived in another century, wandering about town with a cape, monocle, and a stick. Which may be true, but not for the reasons they would likely suggest.

Along the journey, I've learned that booze—like it or not—plays a central role in the history of humanity. There's a reason the word *spirits* came to be used for alcoholic beverages: the ancient idea that liquor was magical and transcendent, and that when one uncorked and imbibed such liquids, a supernatural force would be unleashed. Spirits are cultural touchstones. They mark geography. They mark time. I am struck by how often I open a bottle and am transported to the particular moment when I first tasted this or that flavor or style. I'm also inevitably reminded of the people with whom I'd shared that time, place, and bottle. Thus the booze becomes a part of life, its tastes and aromas becoming intertwined with memory. Drinking, I believe, can be an aesthetic experience similar to enjoying books or art or music. Learning how to taste spirits, then, becomes no different from study in any of the other humanities: learning how to read works of Russian literature or how to look at German Expressionist paintings or how to listen to *Rigoletto*. At least, that's one way of looking at it.

Here's another way to look at it: Critics and scholars poke around inquiring into every aspect of popular culture, from creepy Japanese comic books to successful professional poker strategies to the filmography of the 1980s rap trio the Fat Boys. Entire forests have been pulped so that we can read social histories on the toothpick, the color mauve, and the can of bar. So why not endeavor to study spirits? Let's be honest: As cultural activities go, there are few more popular than drinking. No matter what the moralists, the scolds, or the self-appointed health advocates tell you, drinking can be one of the most fun things in the world to do. Billions of human beings share this opinion. I am covering a fifty-four billion dollar industry that has seen nothing but astronomical growth in the past decade—a 66 percent rise in U.S. sales since 2000.

The reality, however, is that I am a spirits writer from a country and an age in which many citizens remain extremely skeptical of what they call (clinically) *alcohol*. Or (pejoratively) *hard liquor*. Or worse, *hooch* or *firewater*—even *poison*. We're a people still living with the failed legacy of Prohibition. Even today, nearly eight decades after its repeal, fifteen states

continue to ban liquor sales on Sunday. I, perhaps ironically, live in a town where alcohol sales are still banned every day of the week. I have to actually leave town limits to buy booze. The Prohibition experiment sealed off access to many of the wonderful spirits that people once enjoyed, never to be seen again. To add insult to injury, I am of a generation whose baby boomer parents—who'd rebelled against their own parents' midcentury cocktail culture—were largely incapable of teaching us how to drink properly.

I got my first inkling of how little I'd known about drinking on a cold autumn afternoon back when I was a young and clueless college student. A successful, older mentor took me out for a drink. The reason why is lost to me now, but surely it involved some pointed career advice that I never followed. Anyway, this septuagenarian gentleman—who in my hazily remembered memory wore a brimmed hat and a flower tucked into his lapel and carried a pocket watch—took me to a hotel bar. I was dressed, as usual, in a well-worn flannel shirt, wrinkled khaki pants, running sneakers, and a beat-up baseball cap. As we sat, he announced to the bartender with a wink, "Jimmy, as of today, I'm putting you on official notice. I've switched to my winter drink."

Without a word, the bartender, dressed in white coat and tie, promptly mixed and served me a Stinger. The gentleman laid a crisp hundred-dollar bill on the bar and told me to order so I asked for a vodka and tonic, hoping it seemed more sophisticated than the cheap beer and shots that I normally drank with my fake ID. The gentleman appraised me, my slovenly attire, and my vodka and tonic, and gruffly declared, "That's a summer drink." Then he told the bartender he'd better make another Stinger.

The implication was clear: What sort of adult doesn't know when to switch from a summer drink to a winter drink? What sort of soft generation was this that needed to be told how to drink at all?

"Vodka has no taste," he continued. "It's flavorless."

"But what's in a Stinger?" I asked.

He eyed me skeptically. "Crème de menthe. Brandy. Jimmy has made yours with cognac."

I had no idea what he was talking about. I assumed cognac had something to do with rich old guys and pipes and velvet jackets and slippers and maybe sitting in a plush chair and reading a huge book with gilt edges and some title like *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. I knew cognac was expensive, but what could it possibly be made from? Maybe the sweat of French people? Or perhaps cognac was sort of like those fur coats that patchouli-smelling college kids like me were protesting, the ones made from the soft, soft fur of Persian lamb fetuses? In any case, I sure as hell had never witnessed anyone drinking cognac. And I expressed this to my would-be mentor by scrunching up my nose and saying, "Cognac?" The gentleman gave me a look that suggested he was witnessing the decline and fall of contemporary civilization before his very eyes.

It's been a very long time since I ordered a vodka and tonic. I've made a very long journey from my youth in the South Jersey suburbs to becoming the sort of man who sips a three-hundred-dollar cognac in the morning and calls it work. But it wasn't as if, one day, I switched from vodka tonics to strange foreign libations. I moved slowly, through the years, from vodka to gin, and then on to whiskey. I learned to love bourbon and rye and Irish



whiskey. It hasn't always been easy. When I started my job, I had to admit a dirty secret, skeleton in the closet: I'd never really been a huge fan of single-malt Scotch whisky. I realize this does not rise to the level of, say, shooting a man in Reno just to watch him die. But since I was a spirits writer, it caused me some discomfort. I worked my way through lighter, so-called chick Scotches, and then slowly into peat monsters that received the macho seal of approval from Scotch snobs. Eventually, single malts took their place of pride in my liquor cabinet.

But beyond whiskey, I still wanted to know more. That quest is where this book takes its shape. When it comes to flavor, I am drawn to the Old World. I like liquor with hard-to-define tastes: the bitter complexity of Italian *amari*, the ancient herbs of Chartreuse, the primal maltiness of Dutch genever. And I'm also drawn to the wilder, untamed parts of the New World: the agave bite of real tequila; the earthy, rustic edge to Brazilian cachaça; the strange, dry conundrum of Peruvian pisco. I don't know why—I guess it's the same reason I like stinky cheeses, funky wines, wild game, or yeasty beers. I'm of a similar mind to A. Liebling, who wrote in his classic food memoir, *Between Meals*, "I like tastes that know their own minds." Certainly, whatever it is—this impulse, this search for flavor—is in response to the relatively bland tastes that defined my upbringing.

There is much more going on in the glass when we sit down to drink a particularly profound spirit: a smoky 1928 rum from Fidel Castro's cellar, a cognac that was bottled before the nineteenth-century phylloxera plague destroyed acres of Europe's vineyards, or one of the only vintage Calvados to have survived the German occupation of Normandy. And it's about more than just being rare and obscure for the sake of being rare and obscure.

Perhaps what I'm describing is the exact opposite of what's become the most widely consumed spirit in the United States: vodka. About a year into my job, I looked around and something struck me: people slowly had begun discovering, and getting really interested in, spirits. Readers sent me emails with lots of questions, and it became clear that although many people were game to learn, there were major chunks of cultural knowledge about spirits that had not been passed down. Just like me on that long-ago day with the dapper gentleman and his Stinger, people really didn't know very much about what they drank. So, despite an increased awareness of spirits, people still mostly drank vodka.

Liebling already saw vodka's surge coming in the late 1950s, as it began to usurp whiskey and gin. He, predictably, deplored the vodka trend, writing in *Between Meals*, "The standard of perfection for vodka (no color, no taste, no smell) was expounded to me long ago ... and accounts perfectly for the drink's rising popularity with those who like their alcohol in conjunction with the reassuring tastes of infancy—tomato juice, orange juice, and chicken broth. It is the ideal intoxicant for the drinker who wants no reminder of how hurt Mother would be if she knew what he was doing."

That was 1959. The twenty-first-century American consumer is not content to rest with the standard vodka available then. We've become an insatiable audience for new ways to buy pretty much the same old thing, and vodka has grown into an industry with more than fifteen billion dollars in annual sales. Not a week passes that I don't get an email from some public relations professional extolling the virtues of a new superpremium vodka from A Very Special Place (Latvia, Kyrgyzstan, Idaho) or infused with some wild new taste (energy drink, açai,

berries, bacon) or associated with a celebrity (P. Diddy, Dan Aykroyd, Donald Trump) or tied to a political cause (Absolut Global Cooling, anyone?).

“Does the world need another vodka?” is a question that surely has been pondered by those of us who’ve seen liquor store shelves sagging under the sheer volume of premium vodkas on the market. I can only assume that the development of new vodkas—each in a fancy bottle and with a romantic story—will go on until the world ends in fire or ice. In fact, I have a recurring dream in which the true first sign of the Apocalypse is actually a press release for a vodka that has been quintuple-distilled from the tears of flaxen-haired angels and flavored with the ambrosia of Mount Olympus. And it’s promoted by Miley Cyrus.

This is not to say there is anything pernicious or immoral or wrong about liking vodka. Plenty of good, decent people do, and some of these people I count among my friends. Some of them are even dedicated, enlightened foodies—people who pray at the altar of Slow Food and shudder at the thought of inauthentic cuisine. But when you come by their homes, they will still serve you a drink made with an overpriced vodka and perhaps also an artificial fruit mixer. I always accept their hospitality. Likewise, I try not to be like my hectoring mentor at the bar with his Stinger. Most of the time I am successful. But inside, deep down, what I really want to do is grab people by their lapels—or elbows or throats or whatever it is or metaphorically grabs. And what I want to tell them is this: Try something new. Try something strange. Expose yourself to flavors you’ve never considered before. Taste something—anything—that makes you stop for a moment and pay attention and experience. Hopefully, that is what this tale of my own boozy journey inspires.



# THE OMBIBULOUS ME

THEY TALK OF MY DRINKING BUT NEVER MY THIRST.

—*Scottish proverb*

THE FIRST LIQUOR I EVER EXPERIENCED, as a teenager, was sambuca—the anise liqueur often served after dinner in Italian restaurants, with three coffee beans for good luck. The only reason for this was because, in our house, a lonely bottle of sambuca sat at the back of our kitchen pantry, hidden behind the hodgepodge bottles of Chivas Regal, Canadian Club, and VO. My parents didn't drink whiskey—they were the type of baby boomers who as young adults had eschewed spirits and cocktails for the pleasures of wine—and so they likely kept those bottles on hand solely for guests who liked whiskey. As for why sambuca lurked in a dark corner of our shelf, I have never discovered an explanation. We are not Italian-Americans. It's not as if my parents were jet-setting in Portofino (more like Ocean City, New Jersey). And we'd never hosted a foreign exchange student. Perhaps it was a gift from a guest, someone who believed that my parents might enjoy a bracing, licorice-tasting after-dinner spirit? In that case, it was one of the most misguided gifts of all time.

However, since this bottle of sambuca sat totally untouched and unmonitored, it ended up being the perfect liquor for a sixteen-year-old boy and his friends. My parents were occasionally out to dinner, and so after the police had broken up a keg party in the woods on the eleventh hole of the local golf course and we were suddenly out of Milwaukee's Best, my friends and I would find ourselves rummaging deep in my family's pantry for our now-favorite Italian digestivo.

If we'd had any choice, I doubt sambuca would have been at the top of the list. After all, most American kids grow up calling red Twizzlers "licorice" and picking around the black jelly beans in the jar. My friends thought sambuca was gross, and we mainly drank it in shots. But I kind of liked it. Or at least I pretended to like it. I don't mean to suggest that I had esoteric tastes as a teenager. In reality, I was a rube who subsisted on Gatorade and Ho Ho, gagged on mustard, and scraped the onions or mushrooms off any dish served with them. But I had seen *La Dolce Vita* on VCR tape, and I took on an air of sambuca connoisseurship as if I'd just returned from café life on the Via Veneto, splashing in the Trevi Fountain with Ani Ekberg, and now had a Vespa parked in the garage next to our riding mower.

The reason was quite simple: L., a certain Valkyrie-like girl who'd recently moved to our neighborhood and started hanging out with us. Her mother had an accent, and everyone said they were "European." They had a last name that seemed vaguely Scandinavian or, as some in the neighborhood called it, "sort of Aryan." But who knows where they came from. Regardless, the stunning blond-haired, blue-eyed L. was clearly different from most of the

Jersey girls who went to high school with me. I was smitten, and had spent an entire summer trying to convince her to fall in love with me, but had remained squarely in the friend zone.

Still, I was on the lookout for ways to impress her. One autumn night, a group of us fled a busted party on the golf course. “Sambuca, anyone?” I suggested. Among our friends, L. and I walked to my house, cozily arm-in-arm in the crisp fall air. On that night, I decided to make my move.

The sambuca bottle had one of those plastic pourer spouts. After so much usage—since we didn’t really know how to use it properly and never wiped it off—a sugary crust began to form, making it increasingly hard to pour. As luck would have it, on that very night the crust had finally grown impenetrable; I couldn’t even coax a trickle of sambuca from the spout. “What’s the deal?” my friends wanted to know. “We want shots!” L. joined the chorus. Panicked, seeing my moment slipping away from me, I began hacking away at the crust with a butter knife. When that didn’t work, I grabbed a pencil from the kitchen counter and jammed it, forcefully, into the spout. The pencil immediately broke in two, and the top part somehow ended up floating inside the sambuca bottle.

My friends erupted in laughter. L. did, too. I was eventually able to pour the shots, but by then—humiliated in the way only a love-struck teenage boy can be—I’d lost my nerve and pride. When, later, I embarrassingly, tearfully, professed my undying affection to L., she gently patted me on the head and told me I was “a good friend.”

The only other thing I remember from that night is my mother dragging me to my bedroom by the ear, yelling at me. Apparently, my parents found me passed out in the kitchen in my boxers, and I would be grounded for quite some time. Fortunately (or unfortunately), my brother had earlier stashed the sambuca bottle safely in its regular hiding spot. Years later, well after I’d graduated from college, my mother was clearing out the pantry and found it. She remained puzzled as to why there was a broken pencil floating inside a half-empty bottle.

Soon after, L. began dating a guy in his twenties with a classic Mustang who drove around town with photos of L. in his hubcaps as a sign of affection—pretty much a deal maker in 1980s suburban New Jersey. Of course, I was crushed. This was my first true romantic heartbreak, and its sting was so acute that I can vividly recall the feeling more than twenty years later. What could I do? I was still a boy, and no match for a dangerous older man with a Mustang. Stealing that sambuca, gagging down the overwhelming 80-proof anise liqueur—this was about as edgy as I got in those days.



It’s a curious thing about memorable flavors. They always come back.

When I began writing my column, one of the first big spirits stories I covered was the legalization of absinthe. Until 2007, the mythic, louche liqueur of nineteenth-century Parisian decadence was classified as a dangerous, potentially hallucinogenic, and banned substance by the U.S. government. The reason it had always been verboten was because of a chemical called thujone, the active ingredient in wormwood. Wormwood is the mysterious plant that makes absinthe *absinthe*—the Green Fairy, with its legends of hallucination and belle époque debauchery embraced by writers and artists such as Verlaine, Baudelaire, Toulouse-Lautrec

and Modigliani. By the turn of the twentieth century, absinthe was so popular that the French were drinking thirty-six billion liters of absinthe versus only five billion liters of wine. But then in 1905, some crazy guy in Switzerland named Jean Lanfray, drunk on absinthe, murdered his family—which led to a public outcry against the spirit. One by one, Western nations began banning absinthe. Some historians suggest it was actually the powerful French wine industry, concerned about its eroding market, that helped trump up the Lanfray murder and lobbied for the Green Fairy’s prohibition. Regardless, by 1912 absinthe was illegal in the United States.

But here’s the thing: absinthe was never banned by name. In the United States, the law expressly prohibits any spirit that contains over ten parts per million of thujone. It took nearly a century, but in the late 2000s, someone suddenly had the bright idea to apply a little modern chemistry to the issue. A New Orleans–born chemist named Ted Breaux was creating a new absinthe called Lucid, and he began testing bottles from the late nineteenth century to show that properly made absinthe contained very little thujone. He proved that just about all absinthe, both historical and contemporary, had less than ten parts per million of thujone. The whole thujone scare appeared to be overblown, and the ban existed mainly because, until 2007, there had been no way to prove absinthe’s innocence. The U.S. Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau did similar tests and came to the same conclusion. The ban had been misapplied. Voila! Americans were now free to drink absinthe.

Over the next twelve months, absinthe seemed very much in demand, dovetailing with another new fad for classic, speakeasy-era cocktails. The *New York Times*, in December 2007, announced “A Liquor of Legend Makes a Comeback.” Nearly every lifestyle publication followed suit, championing the obscure, notorious spirit’s return. By the end of 2008, at least a half dozen premium absinthe brands had come on the market, most selling for more than sixty dollars a bottle, including one called Mansinthe created by Marilyn Manson. You knew the inevitable backlash was only a matter of time, but even jaded observers had to be surprised at just how swiftly the cognoscenti gave the official Thumbs Down on poor old absinthe.

The first *New York Times* Sunday Styles section of 2009 declared absinthe “uncool,” with Styles reporter Eric Konigsberg calling it “falsely subversive” and likening absinthe to such fleeting cultural fads as cigar bars, soul patches, women’s lower-back tattoos, brushed-nick kitchen fixtures, and “blogging about one’s bikini grooming.” He wrote, “Once the naughty aura of the forbidden fruit is removed, all that remains is a grasp at unearned sophistication.”

The *San Francisco Chronicle*’s Food section was more blunt, calling absinthe “out” in its 2009 New Year’s predictions. Harsher still: “We liked it much better when it was illegal. Somehow the notion of being illicit overrides the flavor of NyQuil dripping down your throat.”

As I observed this phenomenon, I thought, “Well, duh.” Americans mostly don’t like the taste of licorice. Absinthe is flavored with anise, giving it a strong licorice taste. These two basic truths pretty much ensured that the spirit would never be enduringly popular in the United States. So presenting the sleight-of-hand notion that absinthe was ever “cool” before being reported as “uncool”—essentially hyping absinthe, then twelve months later calling it overhyped—is breathtakingly shallow even by the usual standards of lifestyle journalism.

smacks of high school.

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But maybe this makes sense. There's always been a whiff of adolescence when it comes to Americans and absinthe, a teenage sort of longing to experience something thrilling and subversive—drama followed by the callow need to point out, Holden Caulfield-like, just how phoney it all is.

I can empathize. I first tasted absinthe while on a magazine assignment in the late 1990s, in Barcelona at a dive called Bar Marsella. “An absinthe or two at Bar Marsella” was firmly established as one of the Lonely Planet guide's “highlights” of the city, and the crowd was a typical mishmash of backpackerish tourists from around the globe. Sure, some Moroccan guys tried to sell me hash outside. Sure, the bartender physically tossed two pickpockets out the door. And sure, that bartender was a dodgy, middle-aged American guy named Scotty, a six-foot-two, well-over-two-hundred-pound, red-haired man who wore pink shirts, who referred to himself as “Super Queer,” who claimed to be a former child actor, and who refused to tell me his last name because “as far as you're concerned, I don't have a last name.” Yet for the most part, Bar Marsella was “sketchy” only in a safe, air-quotes sort of way. During my twenties, I'd vaguely imagined myself as some sort of romantic flâneur, a Eurotrash-loving vagabond hanging out in seedy bars, like Rimbaud. In reality, my first sip of absinthe took place when I was a marginally employed twenty-nine-year-old writing an article for an airline in-flight magazine. The letdown was unavoidable.

Had I paid better attention in high school English class, I would have read of this type of anise-flavored disappointment from an earlier chronicler of subversive lifestyle trends, or Ernest Hemingway—once again in “Hills Like White Elephants,” as the quarreling couple finally taste their glasses of anís.

“It tastes like licorice,” the girl said and put the glass down.

“That's the way with everything.”

“Yes,” said the girl. “Everything tastes of licorice. Especially all the things you've waited so long for, like absinthe.”

It may be true. That's not to say that the actual absinthe, in the glass, was bad. It was enjoyable, particularly when you drizzled the water over the sugar cube and through the slotted spoon. But by that point in my life, I'd already experienced enough licorice-tasting firewaters to have an idea of what to expect. Absinthe, in reality, just seemed like a stronger, more bitter, more herbal version of the sambuca I'd snuck out of my parents' liquor cabinet. And by comparison, my old act of stealing the sambuca had its own small but genuine element of subversiveness. No matter how much I wanted to feel edgy or illicit sitting in a seedy bar in Barcelona years later, how could legally purchased absinthe ever compare to stolen sambuca? Even Rimbaud had moved beyond his absinthe-drinking flâneur stage by the age of nineteen: having shocked the bourgeoisie quite enough for one lifetime, he never wrote another line of poetry.

Viewed this way, the idea that you could ever hope to sustain the imagination of adulthood with a sixty-dollar bottle of absinthe becomes absurd. Sure, many will purchase a bottle and try it—once—out of curiosity: Will it make me hallucinate? Will I become a decade

anarchist and write Symbolist poetry? Will I cut my own ear off, like Van Gogh? When none of that happens and they realize they don't really like licorice, they'll shove the bottle in the back of their liquor cabinet, where it will languish for the next decade or so. My advice to these people's future children: if the absinthe bottle has a pourer spout, don't try to unclog it with a pencil.



Perhaps we experience drinks very much like we experience the popular songs of our youth. An ounce and a half of booze, a three-minute song—ephemeral for sure, yet in the right context you may remember it your whole life. We know that no new song—regardless of how well made it is—will ever matter as much the one we heard as a teenager with a broken heart. Similarly, maybe no drink matters quite like the first ones we procure, with our own guile and wits, for ourselves. Only later, as we trudge into adulthood, do we realize that many of the things we wait for our whole lives do indeed taste of licorice. I believe this is why so many Americans end up drinking what they enjoyed in high school or college. Disappointed, people fall back on the visceral experience of memory. Of course memories are important, but as I've gone deeper into the world of spirits, I've been determined to keep new visceral experiences front and center.

Taste is so subjective, so fickle, and a source of so much insecurity. Anyone who's in the business of sipping or chewing (or, for that matter, looking at paintings or listening to music or watching television) and then passing judgment will inevitably have the experience of his or her taste being called into question: "Why should we trust you?" After a particularly intense stretch of tastings during the first year of my job—my palate seemingly on overload—I found myself asking this very question. Of myself.

So I decided to pay a visit to a guy who'd been doing this a lot longer than I have: F. Pacult, publisher of the influential quarterly newsletter *Spirit Journal*. Over two decades Pacult has emerged as a sort of Robert Parker of the spirits industry. The latest edition of his booze compendium, *Kindred Spirits 2*, the follow-up to his seminal 1997 guide, reviews more than twenty-four hundred spirits and rates them on a one-to-five-star scale. I had not met Pacult before, though I've regularly consulted my dog-eared copy of the first *Kindred Spirits* over the past ten years.

As I drove up to meet him in Wallkill, in New York's Hudson Valley, I worried I'd find the ultimate spirits snob—someone who might unmask me as a fraud. I arrived at Pacult's beautiful home in the morning; he met me graciously at the door. Pacult, with his round glasses, trim mustache, and proclivity toward turtleneck shirts, looks more like a high school music teacher than a spirits guru, with a sort of Ned Flanders-esque demeanor—warmhearted with a subtle tinge of smugness. We sat on his patio, drinking ice water, and looking out over his big, green yard. Pacult is nothing if not a cheerleader for fine spirits. "Americans are growing up again," he said. "We've kind of been children when it comes to our drinks."

Pacult believes we're currently entering a "golden age of spirits" and that spirits are poised at a similar place in the public's consciousness as wine was in the early 1980s. "I think it's been a natural progression," he said. "As our collective palate has grown, suddenly we need more challenge. And spirits are a bigger challenge. From a critical standpoint, spirit

especially when you're tasting ones that have 40 percent alcohol or more, are not easy things to break down."

After finishing our ice water, we went up to his office, where his wife Sue had laid out our morning tasting on white paper. That day, we were to taste three cognacs from Martell: Cordon Bleu (\$85); XO (\$129); and Creation Grand Extra (\$299). Pacult only tastes in the morning, usually beginning around 8:30, and will never taste more than eight spirits in a session. He uses a spittoon and rarely swallows. This surprised me—up until that point, spitting had run completely counter to my own tasting strategies.

As he opened a template for his next issue of *Spirits Journal* on the computer, he said, "It would be the easiest thing in the world to become a complete lush. But I'm remarkably abstemious. It's crucial to our industry, because spirits are already more negatively viewed. At the drop of a hat, temperance and Prohibition could all be back again. In America, things can tip just like that."

We sat together in desk chairs in front of the computer and went through his methodology. First, appearance. We held our glasses up to the light. "Now, this to me is a burnished orange Topaz," Pacult said of the Cordon Bleu. "This has impeccable purity." Pacult writes his newsletters as he tastes, and he said these immediate reactions generally stand as his reviews. For Cordon Bleu, he typed, "topaz" and "impeccable purity."

Next, he held up the XO. "Oh my, is that sediment?" He frowned. "Oh, my, my, my. That's a shame. I love Martell, but it is what it is." He typed, "Pretty chestnut color is marred somewhat by floating debris." Pacult was similarly crestfallen at a bit of sediment in the Creation Grand Extra. Only upon a third inspection could I see a speck of sediment. "Look," he said, "no one would ever notice this except for a maniac like me."

Smell came next, the sense that Pacult insisted is the most important in experiencing spirits. We started again with the Cordon Bleu. "Mmm. First whiff gives me nuts," he said. "Next, I smell dried flowers, almost like in a yearbook." He typed, "Sophisticated scent, mature."

We smelled the XO and Pacult said he got "pears, grapes, and an oily, buttery scent" on this first whiff. And then "cherries, dried strawberry, white chocolate, and prunes." He typed, "Mature yet owns the promise of youthfulness."

By now, I was playing along, and said that I was smelling dates. "Dates!" Pacult shouted and typed, "My friend Jason who's tasting with me says 'dates.'"

Finally, we got to actually tasting the three cognacs. Pacult took the glass of Cordon Bleu, sipped, rolled it around in his mouth a little, and spit. I took a sip and swallowed. He rubbed his hands together, moaning in ecstasy. "Sexy, sexy stuff. I have to say, I would bathe in Cordon Bleu if I could afford it." He typed, "Slow, languid ... with a prune/raisin flavor that's silky and rich."

Next was the XO. "This spirit is a little prickly," he said. "I like that. This is not Mountain Dew. This is supposed to have a little kickback." He took another sip, rolled it on his tongue, and spit. "It's never hot, though. Or even the slightest bit rough." He typed, "Round, luxurious, and slightly coffeelike in its bittersweet approach at midpalate."

He looked up from the computer and began swirling the third glass. "I think I like the



Cordon Bleu better. But jeez, what are we talking about here?"

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Finally, we tasted the Creation Grand Extra. After I took my swallow, I ventured a meek opinion, in the form of a question. "Do I taste bitter chocolate here?"

"Yes," Pacult answered. "You know, I taste, like ... a cocoa pod." He typed, "Conclusion extended, but dry and cocoa bean-like. Superbly satisfying at every step."

As Pacult saved the newsletter file and started cleaning up, he told me that the Cordon Bleu would receive five stars, and that the XO and Creation Grand Extra would receive four or five stars, even with the offending sediment. How was he so immediately sure, I wanted to know. It's just one man's opinion, he said. Of course, this man estimates he's tasted more than twenty thousand spirits over his career. "I don't think I really hit my stride as a taster until about fifteen years into this, tasting every day," he said. "The only reason I can do this at all is that I've built up a library of impressions. Fifteen years of data is in my head. Anyone can do this, provided you're willing to put in the time."

After the tasting, we sat out on the patio while I drank another glass of ice water, then bid him adieu. I wasn't exactly drunk—I'd been very careful, since I had several hours' drive home. But I was really hungry. The only thing I could find on the way to the highway was a McDonald's, and so I followed my expensive cognac tasting with a five-piece Chicken Selection with barbecue sauce and a large fries. As I ate inside my car, in the parking lot, I did the math on how much catching up I'd have to do before I'd be able to duplicate Paul Pacult's memory library of twenty thousand spirits. I am nowhere near an abstemious person, and so I shuddered to imagine that I actually might die before I even came close to drinking twenty thousand spirits.

No, no, no, I thought. I'd have to find a different way of going about this. It's all fine and well that Pacult can confidently make a split-second distinction between a four-star spirit and a five-star spirit. But what does it mean to most people that a spirit is "prickly" or "silky and rich" or that it tastes of "Danish and black raisins"? If I tell people that a cognac is "mature yet owns the promise of youthfulness," will they now understand what I mean? Do they understand what that means? No, this was no way to change people's hearts and minds and introduce them to the wide world of flavors. This was too much like the language of wine, and so many critics had already ruined the enjoyment of wine. I wasn't going to be an accomplice in that sort of thing when it came to spirits.

No, I needed to go out into the world and taste. I needed to continue the journey that began so long ago in my parents' kitchen pantry.

## **A Round of Drinks: Old-Time Tastes**

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It seems patently unfair—rude, in fact—to have started talking about booze without actually fixing any drinks. So allow me to break this narrative for a moment, step behind the bar, and offer you, dear reader, both a cocktail and a few thoughts. If you're going to make it through two hundred-plus pages with me, you'll probably be needing a few more cocktails. Consider these chapter-ending interludes as sort of like big, boozy endnotes. (And if you happen to

need a bit more cocktail-making advice, on anything from stocking your bar to glassware (the proper way to garnish with a citrus peel twist, be sure to turn to the [appendix](#).)

Since the Stinger is the first real cocktail I ever enjoyed, with that dapper gentleman in the hotel bar, it is the first drink I will pour. Years after that day, I learned that the Stinger is traditionally served straight up and not on the rocks. This means, of course, that my mental model was wrong. But no matter. I still take my Stinger on ice.

Sometimes, I'll even add a dash of absinthe to the mix. I mean, now that I've spent more than sixty dollars on a bottle (and realized that Toulouse-Lautrec and I do not share the same taste in spirits), I've looked for ways to utilize it. Anyway, with a dash of absinthe it's called a Stinger Royale. That's how Reginald Vanderbilt liked his, which is probably why the Stinger has always been considered a high-society drink.

A 1923 profile of Vanderbilt (quoted by historian David Wondrich in his entertaining book *Imbibe!*) describes the Stinger as “a short drink with a long reach, a subtle blending of ardent nectars, a boon to friendship, a dispeller of care.” I would add that the Stinger, with or without absinthe, is the perfect drink for after dinner, after lunch, or after breakfast. It always amazes me how much I like this drink, because it uses one of the most cloying and loathed liqueurs in the bar: crème de menthe (always white, never the yucky green stuff). The cognac, however, is key.

## **STINGER ROYALE**

*Serves 1*

**2 ounces cognac**

**½ ounce white crème de menthe**

**1 dash absinthe**

**Lemon peel twist, for garnish**

Fill a shaker two-thirds full with ice. Add the cognac, crème de menthe, and absinthe. Shake well, then strain into either a chilled cocktail glass (if you like being correct) or into an old-fashioned glass with 3 or 4 ice cubes (if you like a nicer drink). Garnish with the lemon peel twist.

Cognac remains a mystery to most, even though it had its run of popularity in the mid-2000s, driven primarily by hip-hop culture. Remember Busta Rhymes's “Pass the Courvoisier”? Remember cognac being referred to as ‘*Nyak*’? Remember Crunk Juice, the blend of cognac and energy drinks like Red Bull that rappers like Lil Jon were always raving about? (I don't blame you if you tried to forget about Crunk Juice.)

Even during cognac's pop cultural moment, most people still couldn't tell you what it was. Quite simply, it's a brandy produced in the Cognac, France, Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC) following a three-hundred-year-old tradition that calls for at least 90 percent Ugni Blanc, Folle Blanche, or Colombard wine grapes to be distilled in copper pots. So, what's an AOC? It's a designation that ensures a wine or spirit (or certain other foodstuffs) adheres to quality standards in agricultural and production processes, but most importantly has its origin

in a specific geographic area. Basically, a brandy produced outside the cognac AOC, or by a different method, cannot be called cognac.

Most cognacs are created by blending numerous vintages and ages. The alphabet stew of cognac classifications—VS, VSOP, XO—seems confusing, but trust me, it really isn't. VS means "very special," with the youngest eau-de-vie in the blend no less than two years old. VSOP means "very superior old pale," with the youngest eau-de-vie at least four years old. XO means "extra old," with the youngest eau-de-vie at least six years old. Yes, the real good stuff can be prohibitively priced. Most of the cognac sold in the United States is either VS or VSOP. A decent VSOP will set you back forty to fifty dollars—and this is what I recommend in a Stinger.

I'd also recommend a VSOP cognac in another old-school drink, the Sazerac, created at Antoine Peychaud's pharmacy in early-nineteenth-century New Orleans. The Sazerac (named after a then-popular brand of cognac) may actually be the origin of the word *cocktail*. Peychaud served it in an egg cup called a *coquetier*, and legend has it that a mispronunciation of this word stuck. It is also now the official drink of New Orleans, made so by a vote of the Louisiana legislature in June 2008. These days, most people use rye whiskey in a Sazerac, but I like the original nineteenth-century version, with cognac. And, of course, always use Peychaud's bitters.

## **SAZERAC**

*Serves 1*

**1 sugar cube**

**3 dashes Peychaud's bitters**

**1½ ounces cognac or rye whiskey**

**¼ ounce absinthe**

**Lemon peel twist, for garnish**

Take two old-fashioned glasses. Pack one with ice to chill it. Combine the sugar cube and bitters in the other, with a splash of water; muddle until the sugar dissolves. Add the cognac and an ice cube or two; stir to mix well.

Discard the ice from the packed old-fashioned glass; add the absinthe and swirl just to coat the chilled glass, pouring out any that remains. Strain the cognac mixture into the chilled glass. Twist the lemon peel over the drink, rub it around the rim of the glass, then use it as a garnish.

Finally, perhaps my favorite use of cognac and absinthe—as well as a spirit called Dubonnet—is in the Phoebe Snow, named after one of the most famous advertising mascots of the twentieth century. Phoebe Snow was a fictional woman in flowing white who extolled the virtues of the "clean" anthracite rail travel on the Lackawanna Railroad: "Says Phoebe Snow/about to go/upon a trip to Buffalo/'My gown stays white/from morn til night/upon the Road of Anthracite.'" Why someone named this particular drink—which is brownish red—after Phoebe Snow is anyone's guess. With its French ingredients, perhaps it's what our bartender imagined a sophisticated lady, dressed in white, would sip in a dining car on the Lackawanna Railroad.

*Serves 1*

**1½ ounces cognac**

**1½ ounces Dubonnet**

**½ teaspoon absinthe**

**1 dash angostura bitters**

Fill a mixing glass halfway with ice. Add the cognac, Dubonnet, absinthe, and bitters. Stir vigorously, and then strain into a chilled cocktail glass.

So what exactly is Dubonnet? Obscure spirits become obscure for many obscure reasons. But there may be no bottle more enigmatic than this fortified wine. Its strange journey from popularity to obscurity begins with malaria; involves the French Foreign Legion, the Queen of England, and Pia Zadora; and ends with it languishing on the dusty bottom shelves of your local liquor store, usually next to the vermouth.

Luckily for us, malaria hasn't been endemic in the United States in decades. If it were, we might be better acquainted with Dubonnet and its category of wine-and-cinchona-bark-based aperitifs called *quinquinas*. Long before the days of modern medicine, a cinchona bark extract called quinine was the only weapon against the deadly mosquito-borne parasite that causes malaria. And so, by the nineteenth century, pharmacists were continually mixing up ways to mask the bitter taste of quinine in a drink. British colonials began drinking gin mixed with quinine-rich tonic water in South Asia and Africa for prophylactic reasons.

During the French conquest of North Africa in the 1830s, the government offered incentives to anyone who could create a recipe that would help make quinine more palatable to the soldiers. Not long afterward, Dubonnet was born, created in 1846 by a Parisian chemist named Joseph Dubonnet. Its "infusion of sensual flavors" (according to the bottle) "won world-wide acclaim after Madame Dubonnet began serving it to family and friends." A silhouette image of Madame's cat remains the brand's logo. Dubonnet's distinct port-like flavor is spiced with cinnamon, coffee beans, citrus peel, and herbs (a secret formula, of course), but the quinine is what creates its slightly bitter edge.

Dubonnet reportedly is a preferred tippable of Queen Elizabeth II and was favored by the late Queen Mother. "I think that I will take two small bottles of Dubonnet and gin with me this morning, in case it is needed," the Queen Mother once wrote to her butler in preparation for an outdoor lunch (this handwritten note was sold at auction for £16,000).

Dubonnet even had a sort of moment in the late 1970s and early 1980s when Pia Zadora starred as the "Dubonnet Girl" in television commercials. Those might be among the cheesiest liquor ads of all time: Zadora plays sensually with ribbon and peers out between gauzy curtains while her Continental lover approaches by motorcycle—wearing a helmet, tuxedo, and white scarf—for their rendezvous. Excellent, really, if you're a connoisseur of Eurotrash as I am. It may help you forget for a moment that, these days, Dubonnet is actually made and bottled in Bardstown, Kentucky.

Dubonnet comes in either Rouge or Blonde, and let me be clear about one thing: the white

is to be avoided at all costs. It has an unpleasant aftertaste and a god-awful cat-pee smell (perhaps channeling Madame Dubonnet's feline?). Dubonnet Rouge, on the other hand, makes an excellent mixer, particularly with gin. It doesn't have a million applications, but the few that do stand out and make it worthwhile. Case in point: The Dubonnet Cocktail (the Queen Mother's drink) is a mix of equal parts gin and Dubonnet that's simple and wonderful, an early-twentieth-century classic. Add a dash of orange bitters to the mix, and it might give the martini a run for its money. It's the perfect drink to share with the Queen. Or with Pippa. Or with Zadora. Or if you happen to be sent off to the French Foreign Legion. Or if you're relaxing at home and want to be super-certain that you remain malaria free.



# FLAVOR AND ITS DISCONTENTS

ALL OF LIFE IS A DISPUTE OVER TASTE AND TASTING.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

WHEN WE TALK ABOUT FLAVOR, we must make a simple distinction. First, there are actual tastes that grow out of a place, a tradition, an artisan method; then there is Flavor™, which is conceived in a conference room, developed in a lab, and validated by focus groups.

With that in mind, I feel the need to say a few words about the explosion of flavored vodkas. Well, maybe just two words: totally ridiculous. No, that is perhaps too harsh, too strident, and ungenerous. So maybe a few more. I mean, I can understand the impulse behind, say, a basic citrus vodka, and maybe even vanilla. But is there any earthly justification for the existence of a lychee-flavored vodka? Or coconut vodka? Watermelon vodka? Green grape vodka *and* red grape vodka? Cherry *and* black cherry vodka? Huckleberry vodka? Kaffir lime vodka? Blood orange vodka? Pink lemonade vodka? Organic cucumber vodka? Sweet tea vodka? Cola vodka? Root beer vodka? Sake-infused vodka? Protein powder-infused vodka? Dutch caramel vodka? Espresso vodka? Double espresso vodka? Triple espresso vodka? So-called mojito mint vodka? Bubble gum vodka? Yes, even if one of these vodka flavors has sat on a liquor store shelf, and this list represents only the tip of the iceberg. In 2003, there were about two hundred flavored vodkas on the market. Today, there are more than five hundred.

The liquor store has swiftly come to resemble those Jelly Belly stores that sprung up when I was a kid in the 1980s. I can remember the first time my brother Tyler and I were let loose on a family vacation, to scoop our own half pounds of jelly beans from dozens of varieties. You were allowed to taste all the beans as you scooped, and we went nuts, bingeing our way into a sugar overdose. “Cotton candy! Dr. Pepper! Green apple! Chocolate pudding! A&W root beer! Piña colada!”

“Can you believe this jelly bean tastes like buttered popcorn?”

“Taste this one! It’s like cheesecake!”

“Toasted marshmallow!”

There was certainly no pretense of *real* flavor. The idea of *authenticity* was rendered utterly irrelevant—I mean, all the flavors came from freaking identically shaped beans! They were a food engineering marvel and it was absolutely awesome ... at least when I was, um, eleven. You know what else I liked when I was eleven? Garbage Pail Kids, Mr. T, parachute pants, snapping Jenny Bellamente’s training bra strap, and building forts in the woods. These days, I go to the liquor store for a slightly different experience. (Although ironically, in the summer

of 2010, Jelly Belly introduced several “adult” flavors as part of their new Cocktail Classics line: Mojito, Peach Bellini, and Pomegranate Cosmo among them.)

Flavored vodkas follow the same flavor fads that sports drinks, fruit snacks, and sugary cereals follow. A flavorist for Givaudan, the world’s largest manufacturer of flavorings, explained the development of these trends in a 2009 article in the *New Yorker*: “You are trying to sell a flavor. It’s not like you are getting judged on how close you are to the real fruit. At the end of the day, you are getting judged on how good the flavor tastes.”

With that sort of calculation, it’s no surprise that flavor trends seem to work a little like high school. One day, the cool kids—usually the people with suspicious job titles like “flavorist” or “cool hunter” or “trendspotter”—wake up and decide that, say, pomegranate will be the next big flavor. There’s usually talk of antioxidants or benefits to the urinary tract, but everyone knows the popularity is really all about the crimson-purple color. Suddenly, everywhere you turn, they’re putting pomegranate into everything. How did we ever live without the sweet-and-sour nectar of the pomegranate? So you welcome the pomegranate into your life. Then, without warning, you’re told that pomegranate is so, like last year. Pear is the new pomegranate. Hadn’t you heard?

Yeah, well, me neither. When I first began writing about spirits—basically before I learned to ignore 99 percent of the emails I received—I got this from the Pear Bureau Northwest: “Pears Make a Splash as Fresh Drink Trend for 2007.”

Okay, so pears were the New Black. This, of course, made total sense ... if I just could overlook the fact that pears have been cultivated and enjoyed by humans since about 5000 BCE. But I kept receiving the same message. In another breathless news release, a spokesperson for Absolut vodka declared pear to be “the next big flavor.” Said the spokesperson, “We constantly have flavorists on the hunt for all the new scents, flavors, and tastes, and pear was ‘ripe’ for us.” Not surprisingly, Absolut was, at precisely the same moment, launching a new flavored vodka, Absolut Pears. Within weeks, Grey Goose unveiled its own pear vodka, La Poire.

Now, anyone who understands lifestyle journalism knows that three of anything is a certifiable trend, and so by early 2007 we were getting dangerously close to the tipping point on pear vodka. When I tasted the two new pear vodkas, what struck me immediately was how differently each company interpreted pear flavor. Grey Goose had a delicate, sort-of-natural-ish pear bouquet. But the mild flavor was so subtle as to be nearly lost in the mouth. Absolut Pears had a strong candy scent and an assertive, “fruity” taste that no pear in nature could possibly convey.

So what was one supposed to do with pear vodka anyway? That is a very good question—one that I ask myself every time I see those two three-quarters-full bottles that sit in the back of my liquor cabinet. No one else seemed to know, either. This post on the industry site Webtender was typical: “I work at a rather nice upscale restaurant in Manhattan and our bartender recently ordered Absolute [sic] Pear. After we all tasted it in several drinks we decided to make a few drinks based around it for our signature drink list. We aren’t having much luck.” Or this, regarding La Poire, on the website Chowhound: “I don’t get it personally. I’d rather drink poire eaux-de-vie.” Or harsher still: “I tried it straight and would’ve rather of [sic] drank warm piss through a dirty sock.”

I kept waiting, but a year or so went by, no third pear vodka ever appeared, and the pear vodka trend came and went with a whimper. But no matter. By then, people had moved on to sweet tea or bubble gum or some other ridiculousness. People, people, people.



By “people,” of course, I mean the vast majority of spirits consumers. The largest liquor companies in the world haven’t launched more than five hundred flavored vodkas because no one wanted to drink them. Of course, whenever a vast majority pursues any kind of macrotrend, there will always be a backlash from a smaller group who vehemently resists the mainstream. Which means that, as usual, we’re right back in high school. In the world of spirits, these vodka rejecters might be called cocktail connoisseurs or aficionados. But since high school continues to be a useful metaphor here, let’s just call these people what they are: cocktail geeks. I must confess that I usually sit at the cocktail geeks’ lunch table.

What the cocktail geeks’ rejection of the most popular spirit wrought was the alternative trend of the so-called classic cocktail, culled from the dusty pages of antique drinks guides like Jerry Thomas’ 1862 *Bar-Tender’s Guide*, or Harry Johnson’s 1882 *New and Improved Bartender’s Manual*, or William T. “Cocktail Bill” Boothby’s 1908 *The World’s Drinks and How to Mix Them*. These classic cocktails called for more challenging, forgotten spirits like rye whiskey, applejack, maraschino liqueur, Old Tom gin, and crème de violette—spirits with more assertive, unclassifiable flavors that can be a shock to a modern palate weaned on the likes of Jelly Bellys.

The classic cocktail trend led to the rise of faux speakeasy bars, which began in places like New York and San Francisco but soon enough trickled down to most other cities. Certain conventions of the faux speakeasy quickly became universal (and soon thereafter risked cliché). There’s usually no sign, and often some kind of “secret” entrance: through a phone booth in a hot dog shop (PDT, aka Please Don’t Tell, in New York); through a side entrance of an Irish fish-and-chips shop marked by a blue light (PX in Alexandria, Virginia); below street level through a black unmarked door under a sign that reads “Liquids” (Franklin Mortgage & Investment Co. in Philadelphia). The speakeasy bartender’s uniform is an old-timey vest and tie and maybe sleeve garters; beards and tattoos and maybe a man-bun; and possibly a waxed mustache, depending on how much pre-Prohibition role-playing is going on. Some ironically retro rules (“Gentlemen must remove their hats”; “No roughhousing, horseplay, tomfoolery, or high jinks”) will usually be listed on the menu. Other, nonironic rules, like “You can’t stand at the bar” or “You need to be on the list” will be enforced by a hipster in skinny jeans at the door. Most importantly, at the faux speakeasy you will find almost no cocktails with vodka. Your cocktails will be handcrafted and wonderful, but they will also sport double-digit price tags.

Now, I love many of the bartenders who work in faux speakeasies across the country. Many are my friends, and speakeasy bartenders such as Jim Meehan at PDT, Todd Thrasher at PX, Derek Brown at the Columbia Room in D.C., and the guys at Bourbon and Branch in San Francisco make some of the best cocktails you can find. Their obsession with the pre-Prohibition era is genuine and logical. The cocktails of that era are revered for a reason: Prohibition basically destroyed the craft of bartending, making the profession illegal and



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