

A close-up photograph of a glass filled with a pink cocktail. The glass has a salted rim and is garnished with a lemon wedge. A green and white striped straw is inserted into the drink. The background is softly blurred, showing a light-colored surface and a pink object.

the
COCKTAIL
club



A YEAR OF RECIPES AND TIPS FOR
SPIRITED TASTING PARTIES

MAUREN CHRISTIAN-PETROSKY

Photographs by THAYER ALLYSON GOWDY

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Stewart, Tabori & Chang

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For Mom & Dad, whom I can't thank enough. You're amazing.



For Michael, my happiest hours are with you. All my love, always.

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TABLE
of
CONTENTS





Introduction



1

January • Gin



2

February • Hot Cocktails



3

March • Brandy



4

April • Vodka



5

May • Whiskey



6

June • Tequila



7

July • Frozen Drinks



8

August • Rum



9

September • Sangria & Pitcher Drinks



10

October • Beer-Tails



11

November • Liqueurs & Other Spirits



12

December • Bubbly Cocktails



Resources

Acknowledgments

Index of Searchable Terms





INTRODUCTION



Good Drinks, Good Food, Good Friends: Join the Club

When I lived in Atlanta, my coworker, Sarah, started a book club. Results were mixed at first—some people really wanted to talk about the book, while others were just there to catch up. After I suggested we turn our monthly meetings into a wine club, our “book club” took on a life of its own. Work was where we had met, but wine club was where our friendship really grew. As adults, it’s hard to find time to cultivate meaningful friendships. Wine club allowed each of us to rediscover friendship and network all while enjoying and learning about the best-tasting therapy around.

I graduated from the Culinary Institute of America and passed my sommelier certification with the Master Court of Sommeliers, but I learned more about wine in my living room than in any classroom lecture hall. That first wine club was the inspiration for my first book, *The Wine Club*. Although I’ve left Atlanta since the original wine club’s inception, it’s my latest wine club in my hometown of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, that inspired *The Cocktail Club*.

Amy, the liveliest and youngest member of my wine club, is twenty-nine years old and has five kids. She loves wine club (for obvious reasons), but it was a simple phone call from her that inspired me to get out of my wine world and start sipping cocktails. When it was her turn to host, she called me to get some ideas for fun cocktails to serve as guests arrived. We started with an Aperol Fizz, a spritz I had recently become fond of. After that, we kicked off every month with a cocktail. I loved looking for new ideas for that first sip of the night, and after lots of swirling and shaking, I found a new obsession that took my wine club in a whole different direction.

Throughout years of writing about wine, studying wine regions, and visiting wine-makers all over the world, there has always been some cocktail crossover. But never in a million years did I think my wine-loving heart would be craving a cocktail in lieu of my cherished wine. Although spirits were part of my formal training, I am NO mixologist. Full disclosure: Before starting this cocktail club adventure, I was a total booze rookie. In fact, I had never really drunk “brown” booze! But at the end of the day, I couldn’t resist the charming clink of the cubes, not to mention all of the stylish shakes that now dress up my bar.

Every year, our tastes change and our taste buds follow suit. Maybe you and your friends started out as beer lovers and progressed to wine, or perhaps you’ve always been into sipping scotch. Whether you like your adult beverages on the stiff side or prefer something sweeter, *The Cocktail Club* gives you a full year of excuses to get together each month with your friends to learn about the world of cocktails. It’s like starting your very own speakeasy. No more lying about whether or not you read the book or scrounging around for *Cliff’s Notes*; this club is all about enjoying yourself with the company of good friends. You’ll learn there’s a whole world outside of the classic Martini (though you’ll get to try that, too!), but this book isn’t about becoming a master mixologist or even a bartender—it’s about finding out what cocktail suits you and having a great time doing it.

In the process of learning how to make great drinks, my friends and I have laughed our way through finding our own signature cocktails and favorite sips. Let’s be honest: We all know that book club, investment clubs, knitting clubs—whatever you want to call the get-togethers—are the perfect excuse to socialize with friends, share a drink, and learn something along the way. So this year, join me and call it what it is: a cocktail club!

❧ Getting Started, One Sip at a Time ❧

Anyone can start a cocktail club. Novices and experts alike can follow along as we taste-test one type of base spirit or style of drink each month. Whether you’re interested in entertaining tips or boozy trivia, these pages have something for everyone. While I have created guidelines for running a club of your own, feel free to take them as you please. Along with the drinking, of course, you’ll want something to snack on, so we’ve included recipes and snack ideas perfect for chefs or kitchen newbies. Nothing complicated here, just quick and easy hors d’oeuvres perfect for noshing alongside a cocktail. So get your drinking shoes on, it’s time to kick off your cocktail club!

The Guest List

Once you mention a cocktail club, people will come out of the woodwork to join, but I recommend you keep each month’s guest list to no more than ten people. We all love a good soirée, but the purpose of the club is to learn a little while enjoying those drinks, so keep your list limited. Also keep proximity in mind for safe travels at the end of the evening. If you live in a locale that allows

members to take public transportation, then this factor doesn't come into play, but for clubs meeting in the suburbs, you can always call a cab, or simply take turns as the designated driver.

The Set-Up

There are literally thousands of cocktail recipes out there, but I've pared it down to the most popular the classics, and some newcomer cocktails. Each month, you should choose your favorite four or five of the cocktails to taste test. Making these drinks is a big part of the experience, so I suggest you make at least one of the cocktails at your gathering each month to order and the others in bigger batches ahead of time so you still get to cozy up to the shakers, strainers, and other gadgets without being stuck playing bartender all evening. To begin, just sip and sniff during the first go-round, then once you each find your favorite, you can return to it for a full portion at the end.

Portion Control

So how exactly do you taste four or five cocktails each month and actually remember what you're learning about? It's all in the size of the pour. While each month's recipes make one standard-size cocktail serving, for the purposes of the club, each standard pour should be enough to serve three tasters. I recommend tasters be portioned out into shot glasses for ease of serving and sipping. Once you have taste-tested each recipe, club members are then welcome to shake, stir, whiz, or pour up a full-size serving to enjoy while discussing each month's spirit and cocktail tasting.

If you are keeping your guest list under ten, each snack recipe makes enough for guests to have one or two bites of each.



when it's your turn to host

All cocktail club members should be prepared to host at least one month's meeting. When it's your turn to host you should:

Plan Ahead If you plan on following the book for a year of cocktail club, choosing the same day and sticking to it (for example, the first Friday of the month) makes it easy for members to remember the date. When you are the host, send out a quick reminder a week in advance to get a head count.

Here is a checklist of things that you should have on hand when it's your turn to host:

- Water
- Pens and Cocktail Critique sheets (see [this page](#))
- Enough glassware for the number of guests attending, and smaller-sized shot glasses for the tasting
- Snacks (cooked, bought, or assigned to other members)
- A dump bucket for those who don't want to finish their tasters before moving on to the next cocktail. A bowl, pitcher, or empty vase will work in a pinch
- Ice. Make a few trays ahead of time and store the cubes in large zip-top bags until you need it, or pick up a bag or two before your guests arrive

Assign the Spirits & Snacks Some bottles are more expensive than others, so if a bottle is more than \$20-\$30, you may want to have guests chip in to split the cost. Assign snacks to other guests if you'

not up for doing all the cooking.

Conduct the Meeting Typically, it is a good idea to have a buffer of time for guests to arrive and settle in. Then you can clink your glass and get it going. One of your roles as host is to walk your guests through the tasting. Use the example of the critique sheet on [this page](#) to take notes as you swirl, sniff, and judge each concoction as you go. It's normal that conversations will break off as the tasting progresses, so simply clink your glass again to bring your guests' attention back to the task at hand. Once you've tasted all the way through the cocktail line-up, your duties are done and you can join in on enjoying your favorite cocktail from the tasting.

Establish Ground Rules

- Be sure to have your designated driver or mode of safe transportation home in place before you start the evening. Leaving this task 'til late night will prove to be a bad idea.
- One-to-one rule: Make sure to drink one glass of water for each drink.
- Don't drink on empty. Always have a little nibble before you start taste-testing.
- Unless you are the designated driver, you must try all of the cocktails, even if it's just a teensy sip.
- You should wait until you have tasted and talked about each cocktail before pouring yourself a "real" drink (a full serving of your favorite sip from the night).
- You can serve your cocktails in any glass you have on hand, but try not to serve in ceramic mugs or paper cups to avoid lending off flavors to your drinks.
- Avoid perfumed lipstick, heavy perfume, or cologne in general.

the critique

Cocktail Critique Sheet:

Type of Base Alcohol:

Cocktail #:

Color:

Aroma:

Taste:

Body:

Finish:

First Impression/

Overall Notes:

- **Color.** What color is your drink? Is it appealing to look at?
- **Aroma.** Similar to wine-tasting, swirling and sniffing your spirits will lead you to all sorts of different aromas. Try to identify herbs and spices, fruits, and flowers.
- **Taste.** Often your drink will taste the way it smells, but sometimes bitter or sweet flavors may surface once it hits your tongue.
- **Body.** This is also called "mouthfeel," and it's exactly that—how it feels in your mouth. Is it crisp and refreshing? Smooth or cloying? Cocktails can range from light-bodied and austere to rich and full-bodied.
- **Finish.** Does the drink linger in your mouth (a long finish), or is it gone immediately after you swallow (a short finish)? Are the flavors that stick around pleasing or harsh?

- **First Impression/Overall Notes.** Do you like it or not? Is it appealing to the eye? Would you drink again? Sometimes two or three sips are needed for your palate to adjust to new flavors, so don't judge on the very first sip.

the initial investment

Through sheer trial and error, I've found that so much of what makes a great cocktail is often the finery accoutrements that grace the glass. While you don't need anything extravagant to get started, here's a list of items you may want to purchase for a well-stocked bar:

The Essential Ingredients

- Bitters. Angostura definitely, Peychaud's if you're ready to branch out
- Club soda or seltzer water
- Fresh lemons, limes, and oranges and other garnishes, such as maraschino cherries and olives. See the Garnish Guide on [this page](#) for how to prepare them
- Ice, cubed and crushed
- Mixers. Ginger ale and an assortment of juices are good to start. See [this page](#) for tips on making your own mixers
- Simple syrup (see recipe on [this page](#))
- Triple sec or Cointreau
- Vermouth, both sweet and dry

Bar Accessories

- A cocktail shaker. This is the first piece of equipment you should acquire, so if you haven't already be sure to grab one (or a couple) before it's your turn to host. To make your own out of two pint glasses, use a large glass with a wider mouth and a slightly smaller glass that the larger glass can fit over top of when inverted.
- Bar gear. There are many fun and functional bar builders out there. Some of my favorite go-tos are wine opener, zester, paring knife, muddler, Microplane grater, jigger, strainer, cocktail spoon, swizzle sticks, citrus juicer, absinthe spoon, cutting board, Boston shaker, peeler, and pour spouts.
- Glassware. An assortment of tall (highball or Collins) glasses, short (rocks) glasses, and champagne flutes are fine to get you started. The glass makes a difference in how you experience a drink's flavors and aromas, and, lucky for us, an assortment of reasonably priced barware is now available in most home stores. I like the look of mismatched glasses, so I pick up odd glasses from yard sale, the Salvation Army, or vintage shops so I always have a nice assortment on hand. If you're stuck without the appropriate number of glasses, call it BYOG and have your friends bring their own.

A NOTE ON GLASSWARE CARE

While I love my dishwasher, I always wash and dry my glasses by hand. Dishwashers can leave behind soap, which may cause funky aromas. In the case of spritzzy drinks such as beer, Champagne, and sparkling wine, residual soap can also reduce the bubbles, thus reducing the body.

Adequate drying is also important. Glasses that have been through a dishwasher can come out streaky or spotty due to air drying. It's a total bummer to be served a drink in a seemingly dirty glass. Using a dishtowel to dry your glasses might leave lint or off aromas in your glass, so stay on the safe side and stick to lint-free options like paper towels for perfectly polished glassware.

the techniques

These are the basic techniques you'll need to know to whip up the cocktails for each month ahead:

Stirring: Usually drinks composed of only spirits just require a stir. Stir gently for a few seconds, keeping an eye on the outside of the glass or shaker. Once it's frosted, you're finished.

Muddling: Any fruit or herb that is to be muddled should be washed first. To muddle, add a small amount of simple syrup or your spirit to your fruit or herbs in a glass. Then press lightly with a spoon or muddler to release the ingredient's aromas and flavors.

Shaking: You can shake with or without ice (dry shake). If you are shaking with ice, be sure not to overdo it—you are looking to chill the drink and slightly dilute it, not water it down completely. The key to the shaker is to give it about five good shakes. Keep an eye on the outside of your shaker; once it is frosty you are finished shaking.



Stirring



Muddling



Shaking

Floating/Layering: To successfully float an ingredient, it is helpful to use a spoon, preferably a flat bar spoon. Gently pour the liquid over the back of the spoon and let it slowly disperse or float on top of your other cocktail ingredients. If you just pour straight from the bottle, the ingredient's weight and speed of the pour may prevent it from floating, causing it to sink.

garnish guide



There are a few basic garnish cuts that we'll be using throughout the year. From left are washed and picked herbs for muddling or garnish, lemon slices or wheels, orange peels for twists, and lime wedges.

❧ The At-Home Mixologist ❧

Since cocktail creations are so much more than slinging drinks, bartenders have become “mixologists” much the same way that cooks have become “chefs.” This book has no intention of teaching you how to become a mixologist; it’s simply here to help you navigate from top shelf to your shelf. If you like to dabble in the realm of DIY, here are some key how-to recipes for you to add homemade mix-ins to your bar repertoire.

how-to

INFUSE YOUR OWN SPIRITS

The hardest part of making your own flavored or infused spirit is choosing which flavor you’d like. After that, it’s a very simple and fun little DIY all your cocktail-loving friends will enjoy.

First, start with a neutral vodka, rum, or silver tequila. Stronger alcohol draws out flavors faster, so in this case you want the highest proof you can find. If you can actually get something higher than 80 proof, you should tame the heat by adding water after you’re all finished infusing. The easiest place to start looking for flavors is with fresh herbs or vegetables like peppers, fennel, and cucumber. You can also use fresh fruit, but be sure it is ripe, not overripe. Some tips for infusing 2 cups (480 ml) of alcohol:

- *Hot peppers should be diced and seeded first; start with ¼ cup (60 g)*
- *Dried peppers are best soaked whole; start with ¼ cup (60 g)*
- *Avoid fine powders like ground cumin or cinnamon because they will make your infusion cloudy*
- *Take fresh herbs off their stems to avoid bitterness, about 6 sprigs*
- *Split vanilla beans lengthwise; 1 split bean is good*
- *Wash and leave berries whole; ¾ cup (175 g)*

First, choose a clean, airtight jar (mason jars are great for this). Wash your ingredients, if needed, and add them to the jar, fill it with about 2 cups (480 ml) of the neutral spirit, and put the lid on.

Place your infusion in a cool, dark place such as a cabinet or a closet. Don’t place your jar on a heater, on top of your fridge (because the motor can cause that spot to run warm), or in the sun. Gently shake and test the mixture every day. In somewhere between 3 days and 1 week, you’ll achieve the flavor you’re after and know when to finish it. If you begin to taste bitterness, you’ll know you went too far. Bitterness will only increase the longer your mix infuses, which is exactly why you are starting with only 2 cups (480 ml)—you can always start over without too much loss! Trial and error is the only way to learn what works best for your taste buds.

Once you've achieved your desired flavor, you should remove any large pieces of flavoring and then strain your infused spirit through cheesecloth or a coffee filter. You can either enjoy your creation right away, or store it as you would any other spirit.

MAKE YOUR OWN MIXERS

Store-bought mixers are laden with artificial flavors, sweeteners, colorings, and weird preservatives to make them shelf stable, so instead of waking up your cocktails, they drag them down. Homemade mixers instead lend fresh, bright flavors to your drinks.

SOUR MIX

MAKES ABOUT 4 CUPS (960 ML)

1½ cups (300 g) sugar

1 cup (240 ml) lime juice, freshly squeezed and strained

1 cup (240 ml) lemon juice, freshly squeezed and strained

The key to this recipe is to balance the sweet and sour components. In a small pot, heat 1½ cups (360 ml) water and the sugar until the sugar dissolves completely. Remove it from the heat and let the simple syrup cool until it reaches room temperature.

Add the citrus juices and stir until they are evenly combined. Use immediately or store the mix in the refrigerator until needed. It will last for up to 1 month. Try putting your own spin on this by using different citrus flavors like orange or pink grapefruit.

GRENADINE

MAKES ABOUT 1 CUP (240 ML)

¾ cup (180 ml) pomegranate juice

¼ cup (60 ml) simple syrup (recipe below)

2 to 3 drops of orange flower water (optional)

Grenadine is a pomegranate-flavored syrup used in everything from Shirley Temples to the Singapore Sling. Put the juice, syrup, and flower water (if using) in a container and shake. It will last in a sealed container in the refrigerator for 2 weeks. If you substitute ¼ cup (60 ml) of the pomegranate juice with ¼ cup (60 ml) of PAMA liqueur, it will last for up to 6 weeks in the refrigerator.

SIMPLE SYRUP

MAKES ABOUT 1½ CUPS (320 ML)

1 cup (200 g) sugar

1 (240 ml) cup water

In a small pot over medium-high heat, bring the sugar and water to a simmer and stir until all of the sugar has dissolved. If you are going to infuse it with fresh herbs or other

flavorings, add those ingredients before you simmer, then remove or strain them out once the sugar syrup cools. This will last for 3 weeks in the refrigerator.

MAKE YOUR OWN BITTERS

MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS (480 ML)

Not necessarily bitter in taste, bitters are more like a bartender's salt and pepper, used to season your drinks. Today it's not unheard of for bars to carry several flavors, and the real enthusiasts are making their own. Making your own bitters is sure to add to any cook's or cocktail enthusiast's repertoire.

The process of making your own bitters isn't hard, but tracking down some of the ingredients may prove difficult. There are three parts that you'll need: the bittering agents, like herbs, roots, or botanicals (these are easily found online); the agent that provides your main flavor; and the base spirit. Just as when you are infusing your own alcohol on [this page](#), using a higher-proof base spirit will speed up the process. High-proof vodka, bourbon, tequila, or rum will all work when making your own bitters, though their respective flavors will alter your final outcome.

Making bitters can take up to a month from start to finish. This recipe is a good base recipe that I've adapted from the bitters expert, Brad Thomas Parsons. You can finesse this basic recipe to add your own favorite flavors like root beer, coffee, or grapefruit.

2 tablespoons dried orange peel
Zest of 1 orange, sliced into strips
¼ cup (42 g) dried cherries
5 green cardamom pods, cracked
2 cinnamon sticks
1 whole star anise
1 vanilla bean, split lengthwise and scraped out (keep both the pod and the seeds)
¼ teaspoon whole cloves
¼ teaspoon cinchona bark
½ teaspoon cassia chips
2 cups (480 ml) rye whiskey
2 tablespoons rich syrup (1 part water plus 2 parts turbinado sugar, heated until sugar has dissolved and cooled to room temperature)

Put all of the ingredients except the rye whiskey and rich syrup into a large mason jar and pour in the rye to cover. Place a tight-fitting lid on your jar and put it away in a cool dark spot for two weeks. Shake your jar daily.

Strain the liquid through cheesecloth or a coffee filter into a clean jar. Cover this new jar and set aside.

Place the solids in a small saucepan and cover with 1 cup (240 ml) of water. Bring to a boil. Lower to a simmer, cover the saucepan, and cook on low for 10 minutes. Remove from the heat and cool. Once this is cool, add to a second clean jar, cover, and store in a cool dark place for 1 week, shaking daily.

Strain the liquid in the second jar (discarding the solids) and combine this liquid with the original rye mixture. Add the rich syrup and cover and shake to combine evenly. Keep at room temperature for 3 days. After 3 days, skim the top of any debris and strain once more through cheesecloth or a coffee filter and use in your favorite drinks.

You can fill smaller jars and gift to friends or keep it all for your home bar. This will last indefinitely, but it's at its best in the first year.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TINCTURES AND BITTERS

While both bitters and tinctures are used sparingly to boost flavor or add a different dimension of flavor to your cocktails, there's one main difference: Bitters are made from a combination of many flavorings and a tincture is made from a single flavoring. Bitters are also typically diluted with water or a sweetener, whereas tinctures have a very concentrated flavor at a much higher proof.



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