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What Goes Well With a Martini

By Wayne Curtis



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Who among us has not suffered from the insufferable craft bartender? You know the type: the humorless young guy with the Edwardian tresses who tells you in painful detail the composition of the artisanal bitters he has just lovingly dashed into your cocktail and then expounds about how a certain rye renders his drink slightly zestier than bourbon. Not that you would notice, he seems to indicate with a shrug as he slides the cocktail over to you, but a more refined drinker might.

When we go to a bar, most of us just want a decent drink and possibly some company. We want to relax. We didn't sign up for a graduate-level seminar, and certainly not an exam to determine if we're qualified to drink there. It's all enough to make one pine for those endangered bartending stalwarts, the goofy grad student and the callow actor between gigs. Yes, their Jack and Cokes were uninspired, but at least they knew how to chat and tell stories.

Ah, stories. Which brings us to the deluge of books about drinking.

Cocktail books, like culinary books, tend to come in two flavors. The most common are recipe collections. This puzzles me, because many simply reprint the same basic recipes for Martinis and Margaritas and Old-Fashioneds. Rest assured, future generations will not go thirsty because the secret of making the Manhattan has been lost.



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be dry and brittle. I mean, which is more engaging? Discussing the role of rum in the colonial rebellions against the Stamp Act or insisting that "cocktail" got its name from the habit of stirring drinks with a rooster's feather?

Gin

By Lesley Jacobs Solmonson

Reaktion, 167 pages, \$17

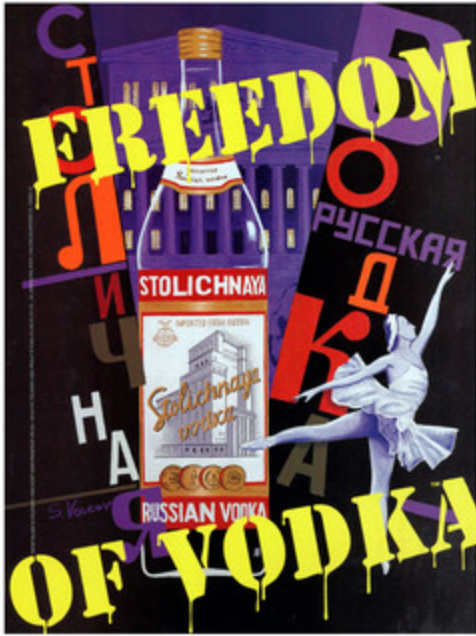
"Pie," "Pancake"—with an endearing earnestness. They published "Whiskey" a couple of years ago, and they have just stocked up their bar with "Gin," "Vodka" and "Rum." The series walks the borderlands between trivia and scholarly analysis quite well. The books are glossy-paged and have lots of colorful illustrations—including plenty of early ads—which are the sort of things that give one tacit permission to lean back and order another drink while reading.

The other flavor of cocktail book is more discursive. It tries to make sense of some larger aspect of cocktail culture—a certain spirit, the folly of Prohibition, the changing social role of the bar. (Full disclosure: I myself have contributed to the flood with a 2006 narrative about the rise and fall of rum.) At a spirits conference a couple of years back, a speaker announced, "Knowledge is the new vodka"—that is, consumers were clamoring for more information about what they're drinking and thirsting for a detailed story behind each drink.

But what kind of story? For years, drinks writers trafficked in glorified lore. Those who researched cocktails did so chiefly by reading labels on bottles and scribbling down comments from bartenders on cocktail napkins. The one question never uttered in a bar was: "What's your source for that?" But cocktail historians are now wringing out fizzy fictions and focusing on the remaining homespun of fact. This effort is not without hazards. Some of what results can

Among the latest wave of books are slim volumes in the well-regarded Edible Series published by London-based Reaktion Books. These small-format books (generally about 150 pages) explore a culinary topic—"Hot Dog,"

So, are these collections of lore and legend or more serious studies of drink? Neither, really. Or both. Or I'm not sure. They tend to skew on the side of the analytical, although not without with some unacademic sloppiness. (The vodka book misspells the name of a prominent contemporary mixologist; the gin book gets the



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Vodka

By Patricia Herlihy

Reaktion, 165 pages, \$17

"Vodka" covers the story of the popular spirit from its rise in Eastern Europe and its ventures well beyond the steppes—how it came to America (relatively late, actually, not becoming popular until after World War II) and eventually became a global powerhouse. Yet this struck me as the least satisfying of the three books. It reads a bit like a Wikipedia harvest, with a lot of stray facts strung along the thinnest of narrative threads. Of course, asking for more may not be reasonable: "Vodka is a postmodern drink," writes Patricia Herlihy, noting that most brands are scarcely distinguishable. "Distillers must find creative ways to 'construct' their branding, projecting real or imaginary qualities through their packaging." It's hard to blame the author for taking a similarly non-narrative approach to her subject.

date wrong on an early cocktail book.) On the other hand, the gin book notes, pleasingly apropos of nothing, that people drank Fag-Co Asparagus Gin for "medicinal reasons" in the 19th century.

Happily, none of the three follow a rigid outline. The authors—a history professor, a drinks blogger and a science-fiction novelist/food historian—have been given room to ramble and explore, following their bottles into whatever corners they may roll. "Rum" gets drawn into early North American history, tracing the origins of the beverage as essentially a byproduct of the West Indian sugar industry and describing its spread through the colonies in creative concoctions like the calibogus (rum, spruce beer and molasses, which even your craftiest craft bartender is unlikely to be making tonight). The book, though, follows a few too many intriguing detours that ultimately lead to dead ends, and the larger story gets lost. It's good to know that there's rum produced in Asia and Australia, but author Richard Foss seems content to put that information out like a buffet dish under a heat lamp—appealing at first, but not so much if just left sitting there.

"Gin" is the most engaging chronicle, perhaps because the spirit has the most varied and interesting history. It took seed as a medicinal product in medieval Holland—it was a sort of sweetened juniper nostrum—but then made its way to England thanks to soldiers involved in one conquest or another and gradually became



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Rum

By Richard Foss

Reaktion, 141 pages, \$17

a quintessentially British product, albeit with much less sugar (hence, "London Dry"). Along the way, other gins cropped up, including Plymouth and Old Tom. (The latter got its name from vendors of illegal wares who would put a "tom cat" sign in the window. "Eager consumers whispered 'puss' and the seller replied 'mew' to confirm that gin was to be had.") Gin's family tree is appealingly gnarled and knotted.

I suspect the clamor for liquor trivia will long outpace the demand for sober analysis of drinking history and culture. Bars are active public markets of unmoored facts (or near-facts), which serve as local currency. A trader will hold up a cocktail glass and announce with authority that it was molded after Marie Antoinette's breast. Heads will nod, followed by a murmur of assent, as in the British House of Commons. Someone will buy the person a drink. The underlying truth is irrelevant; bars are where lore gets forged into Immutable Truth through repeated hammering.

And as irksome as self-serious bartenders can be, I'm thankful that they're among us, mixing up their excellent drinks if at prices a bit dear and at some psychological cost. They're extremists, and like their counterparts in the political realm, they shift the center in their direction, in this case moving all bars toward higher quality. Even bartenders at airport bars now know that a Manhattan requires a dash or two of bitters.

And so it is with the rising tide of cocktail books: whether they err on the side of lore or analysis, they spread a broader understanding—or at least better storytelling—behind what goes into the glass. And that's worth toasting.

—Mr. Curtis is the author of "And a Bottle of Rum: A History of the New World in Ten Cocktails."

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