

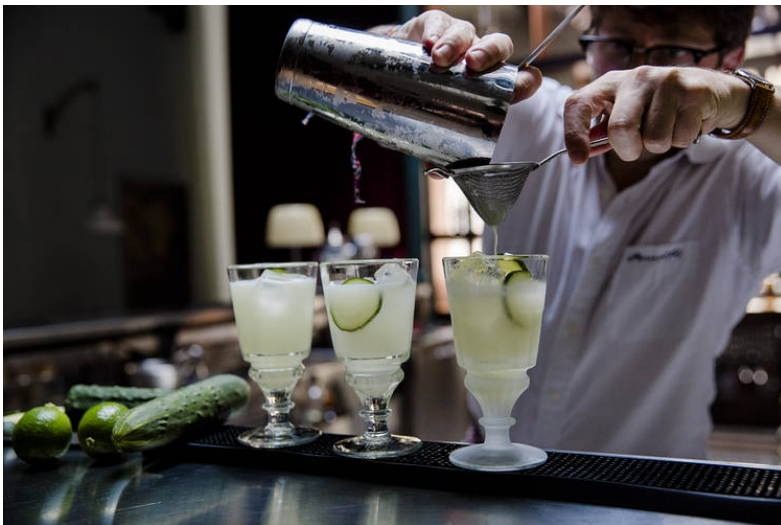
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In 'A Proper Drink' Robert Simonson Tells the Story of the American Cocktail Revival

How a band of bartenders saved our palates.



A bartender making cocktails with absinthe.

PHOTO: BLOOMBERG NEWS

By Rien Fertel

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Let's pour one out for the Cosmo. The cocktail that launched a thousand Carrie Bradshaws has all but vanished. Citron vodka, Cointreau, cranberry juice cocktail and a squeeze of lime: The concoction still entices with promises of sweet, tart, bitter and boozy, but ask a bartender for one nowadays and you'll most likely be shunned as unfashionable, uncultivated and most uncosmopolitan.

Today, gin is in, and once-forgotten dark liquors—rye, mezcal and cask-aged rums—fill our highball glasses. We are unstirred by drinks that the world once thought needed a thorough shaking, while the shelves of home bars are awash in rare bitters.

Thirty years ago, this would have been unthinkable. The 1980s “were dark days for drinking,” writes Robert Simonson, epitomized by the 1988 movie “Cocktail,” in which a young publican played by Tom Cruise sings the praises of slinging “drinks so sweet and snazzy,” like the Sex on the Beach and the Long Island Iced Tea.

How did we get from there to an age where many people can successfully distinguish a shrub and a switchel? All thanks to a band of bartenders who, over the course of the past three decades, saved our palates from the kind of alcoholic abominations Mr. Cruise was serving up.

A PROPER DRINK

By Robert Simonson

Ten Speed, 342 pages, \$27

“A Proper Drink” begins in 1987 at Rockefeller Center’s Rainbow Room, which had just reopened after a two-year hiatus. Bartender Dale DeGroff, armed with a copy of Jerry Thomas’s “How to Mix Drinks,” a then forgotten 1862 masterpiece, filled the menu with

lost classics that often required hunting for archaic ingredients, like maraschino liqueur and falernum, that three decades later can be found in grocery stores. He squeezed fresh juices and garnished his cocktails with hand-cut herbs. A handsome former actor, Mr. DeGroff dressed in a red tuxedo jacket and had a knack for dazzling patrons, who today reminisce about watching him perform his flaming twist trick, a now ubiquitous stunt in which a match-lit citrus rind spritzes its oily essence over the surface of a cocktail.

Mr. DeGroff went on to become the world’s first “startender,” in Mr.

Simonson’s estimation. To have enjoyed a drink during his 12-year tenure tending bar has become the “I was at Woodstock” of today’s craft-cocktail era.

But the Rainbow Room’s hefty prices made Mr. DeGroff an inaccessible outlier in the age of fruit-flavored Martinis, leaving the unlikeliest of sources to herald a new movement: T.G.I. Fridays. At these chain restaurants in the late ’80s, the reader may be surprised to learn, bartenders had to memorize a book of 400 drinks and be able to make 25 of them blindfolded. The Martinis and Manhattans were properly stirred, never shaken, and the sweet and sour mix was made in

house, daily, with fresh eggs and citrus. “There would be no cocktail movement without them,” the author quotes one famous startender who learned to make a proper drink under that familiar red and white-striped awning. “It’s like saying Mussolini made the trains run on time. . . . It’s absolutely true, but you can’t say it.”



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This is a fascinating start to the story, but Mr. Simonson, the author of an excellent history of the Old-Fashioned, never cogently details the leap from a fast-casual restaurant chain associated with shopping malls to artisanal speakeasies in every city. Does the craft-cocktail movement owe a debt to the gourmet-food revolution, so admirably detailed in David Kamp’s now decade-old “The United States of Arugula”? Did spirits distillers—a massively powerful industry largely left out of this book—play a part? Or was the cocktail renaissance solely the work of what Mr. Simonson calls the “mixologiti” (yes, groan), the post-DeGroffians who taught

us the correct proportions for a perfect Negroni (equal parts gin, [Campari](#) and sweet vermouth) but also came up with modernist monstrosities like the squid-ink Martini and the celery foam-topped Bloody Mary?

Aside from the first few chapters, which feature a core group of characters, most of “A Proper Drink” is a structureless narrative that ping-pongs from New York to London to San Francisco and back again (with the briefest of layovers in Munich, Melbourne, Boston, Bratislava and elsewhere), tracing the careers of a hangover-inducing number of bartenders. (The author interviewed more than 200 cocktail insiders for the book.)

A large part of being in a bar is the experience of sitting and enjoying the company of those who make and serve our drinks. Unfortunately, the majority of the men featured in these pages—and they are all, with one or two exceptions, men—come off as faceless entities who are introduced, quoted and swiftly swept aside. The sole exception is the late Sasha Petraske, a quirky genius who opened Manhattan's Milk & Honey on the Lower East Side on the eve of the new millennium. The unmarked bar was the first to introduce rules of etiquette (“Gentlemen will remove their hats. Gentlemen will not introduce themselves to ladies.”) and quickly became the most imitated bar in the world.

But Mr. Simonson's inability to imbue Milk & Honey or its imitators with any sort of atmosphere, combined with his failure to satisfactorily describe the craft that goes into making a craft cocktail, might leave readers with the sense that he spent very little time in the bars he profiles. Never has an alcohol-fueled story felt so sober.

Every trend has a lifespan, of course, and we expect books about cultural revivals to speculate on their staying power. Will the craft-cocktail movement go the way of the nearly extinct wine bar? Mr. Simonson doesn't say. Will our unused Moscow Mule mugs oxidize, clouding the copper with verdigris? Will we ever find a use for those dusty bottles of bask and jenever? Do bitters go bad?

One thing Mr. Simonson does include in his book are 37 recipes, including one for the Cosmo from Toby Cecchini, who invented the drink at the Odeon in New York back in 1988. Here's hoping we can comfortably and unironically enjoy a Cosmopolitan once again.

—*Mr. Fertel is the author, most recently, of “The One True Barbecue: Fire, Smoke, and the Pitmasters Who Cook the Whole Hog.”*

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