

VINTAGE IN GOOD WOOD

Douglas Blyde meets the men rolling out the barrels to raise spirits

580ml Crown Royal
750ml Cinzano Rosé
750ml Cinzano Dry

OUT:



Despite 'Cooper' being the 32nd most popular surname in the UK, and the expanse of the emblematic oak tree tugging at the damp, earthen floors of the countryside, our island boasts remarkably few barrel-makers today. However, a new generation of barkeeps are backing a trend which could see resurgence in the art of seasoning, then scorching and steaming staves from our shores into the familiar rotund shape of the cask.

I spoke to a glinting and often meticulously-bearded back bar of talents about their enthusiasm for resting cocktails in wood, beginning with Nikhil Merchant. The India-based 'curate' of food and bar menus, food writer, and blogger at nonchalantgourmand.com, believes the modern movement dates from the turn of the century. 'Tony Conigliaro of Islington's 69 Colebrook Row was one of the first to rediscover ageing cocktails when he began resting drinks for varying periods of time to observe flavour development,' he says. 'Conigliaro concluded bottle-ageing can have a significant effect on the taste of the cocktail.' Inspired by Conigliaro's patient exertions in his spirits lab, Merchant says Oregon-based bar writer Jeffrey Morgenthaler busied himself experimenting with putting liquor-forward cocktails, such as the Negroni, into small barrels in his bar at the Clyde Common. 'The results were so spectacular that the drinks immediately went onto the menu, where they remain.'

Pritesh Mody, who established specialist ingredient emporium World of Zing in East London, where he crafts high-end, variously-matured cocktails to vend online, told me he traced the trend of withholding drinks in order to gather a patina of flavour much further. 'Aging drinks - or at least storing pre-mixed drinks - is not new. Jerry Thomas' *Bartenders Guide* features 19th-century records of essence and punch recipes specifically for bottling.'

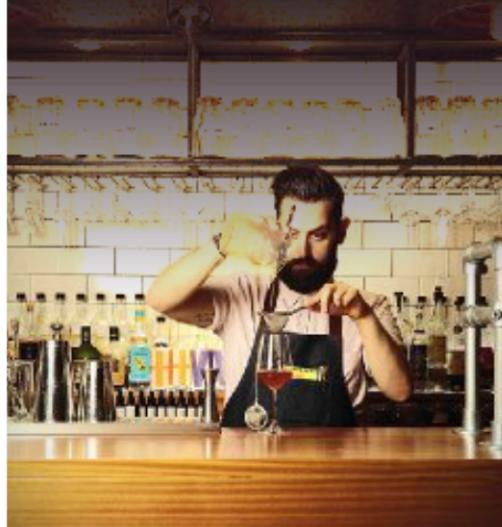
'As bartenders we want to create. We have since the trade started. We mix two spirits together to change the flavour, so why not modify the ingredients further still with wood?'

Possession

I wondered if the rise of barrels on the bar could be emblematic of the desire of the bartender to take possession of their spirits. Unlike a sommelier, whose only choices when it comes to wine concerns its service (point of time to uncork, its temperature and the style of glassware from which your lips meet the liquid) the mixing maestro has always had a more vigorous tally of options. 'Drinking is a recreational activity,' says the suave Merchant. 'It's a social, enjoyable, 'spirited' adventure. A bartender plays the role of a game-changer in what you experience at the bar and can make or break your experience.'

Max Chater, head bartender at Bump Caves in the basement of Tower Bridge's Draft House, agrees. 'As bartenders we want to create. We have since the trade started. We mix two spirits together to change the flavour, so why not modify the ingredients further still with wood? The spirits are just the base.' Benny Locke of Soho's bourbon and slider den, Spuntino, sees it as a positive afterthought, it being, he says, 'the perfect way to refine really great cocktails.'

But are there spirits which indecorously defy wood's character? Chater believes this depends on what service the initially porous barrel saw before. 'Taking a fresh French oak barrel and filling it with Madeira will add certain sweetness to the wood when using it to age a cocktail. Perhaps for a Martinez - the precursor to the Martini - it will give you a different result? Yes please!' Rather than extra flavour, Locke considers the overall semblance of balance. 'Due to its already smoky nature, mezcal or a peaty scotch might be a little too intense for a barrel.'



Negroni

So, rather than court contrast, what is complementary? One of the most commonly wood-matured cocktails is the 95 year-old recipe for the Negroni (classically one part gin, one part red vermouth, and one part Campari). Merchant explains why the cocktail works so agreeably when tamed by wood grain. 'It bears the right amount of bitter, sweet and herbaceous flavours which age well in a great barrel and in fact enhance once aged.' Your correspondent only just recalls an evening-into-morning adventure sampling from the standout quartet of versions at Mr. Fogg's bar in Mayfair. There, Filippo Previero and Danilo Tersigni have upgraded the drink, positioning barrels of recipes subtly amended to reflect the four seasons at the bar's heart.

Locke's favourite experiment thus far also happens to be a Negroni variant, Old Pal, which replaces gin with rye whiskey and sweet vermouth with dry. 'Once this mix has been aged for two months in an oak barrel, it really adds a level of depth,' he proudly attests. 'Previous to the Old Pal, I aged two batches of the Perfect Manhattan - Canadian whisky and sweet and dry vermouth. We aged

the first batch for just two weeks as a little tester, and although delicious, it was too soon; too woody. We aged the second batch for two months and it was... incredible.'

But success can be very relative, says Chater. 'I have my favourites but they may not be the favourites of everyone who has tried them. I made a barrel-aged Manhattan which was all based around a particular vermouth and slight oxidization of it in the barrel. I served this with some dehydrated reindeer, which was incredible.' Chater notes that while oxidisation is ordinarily a cause for concern, if one can control the 'off' flavour associated with it, 'you are on to something.'

So how long should a libation slumber in its wooden cocoon? Mody says his first attempt at a Manhattan still needed time to 'mellow' after a fortnight. Regular tasting is therefore key to success. Chater looks at a maturation of 4-6 weeks with a pre-washed barrel. 'The problem with most barrel-ageing in bars is that the bartender doesn't fully understand what is happening within. There is a romance to 'ageing' a cocktail but it takes years of understanding and trial and error to fully appreciate what is happening 'in the wood'. The thing to realise is you may produce something that is fantastic and incredibly balanced, but reproducing it will be next to impossible.'

Controversially, Chater also admits to believing that the size of the barrel 'doesn't really matter'. Instead, 'it's all about the amount of surface area left open to oxygen - you can get some great results using wood staves or chips.' He adds, 'the slight effect and control the alcohol and wood has on vermouth oxidisation is beautiful. Essentially lignin structures in the wood help protect the wine in the vermouth from oxidation and reduction.'

Long live maturation?

Overall, Merchant believes barrel-rested cocktails are here to stay. 'Among people who understand spirits this is an area which can see a rise in popularity. It will take its stand in the luxury sector - barrel-ageing is not cheap - and stand out as an exclusive item on bar menus.' Locke, meanwhile, notes the domino effect on the public on serving them from a small wooden cask. 'Of my customers, those who haven't ordered one have certainly left with a great deal of intrigue. You only get about 12 cocktails from one barrel, so once you tell a customer there won't be any more for another two months, they usually jump right in.' Chater concurs. 'There is a romance to the bartender aging something. Barrels add theatre and provide a good talking point.'

But what will be next in the sphere of the barrel-tinged mingle? Despite my theory that every ambitious bartender not-so-secretly dreams of being immortalised in a cocktail of their creation - a Damascus sip, if you will - there appears very little that is actually 'new' emerging from the twisted spigots of the micro wood barriques. Surely invention can come from ageing? Not according to Mody. 'Cocktails are currently going through a real purple patch, with the disco mixes seen in the '80s and '90s being replaced by a return to classic style concoctions.' But Dariush Afshar-Haghghi, head bartender of The Alchemist in the City, uses Captain Kirk-like rhetoric to acknowledge there can be another way. 'We need to keep learning new techniques - to keep evolving. Like anything worthwhile, the world of spirits and drinks is open to new ideas and to be bold in its approach. And with the nature of our concept we have an obligation to bring new methods to the table...'

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Take cask to task

Bruce Perry of specialist importers Eaux de Vie believes there is no better arena than your home when it comes to small-scale barrel-ageing. 'It's brilliant fun to watch it develop in your kitchen, then rustle up a Manhattan - or bottle it and get the next load going to see you through until it's ready.'



Take them home

World of Zing offers subtle twists on carefully-matured classics; created by gin enthusiast, director of Fluid Movement, and co-owner of The Whistling Shop and Surf-Side, Thomas Aske. World of Zing's entrepreneur founder Pritesh Mody says, 'The subtle aromatics of stewed fruit that we take from an ex-Bordeaux cask lend itself perfectly to the bitterness and botanical nature of a Negroni.' In addition, ...Zing offers 'steel-aged' Bulleit Rye-based Manhattans 'for a more sprightly flavour delivery,' while El Dorado Rum Punch is 'glass-aged' to allow oxidisation 'for a smoother cocktail with properly married flavours.' Every bottle carries seductively bespoke batch and bottling dates. 'Selling them has been easier and more satisfying than I ever imagined,' reports Mody. 'Our cocktails are designed to complement an evening, priced to compete with a good bottle of wine.' worldofzing.com



MARTINEZ

Makes enough for a 2 ½-litre barrel

INGREDIENTS

- » 1125ml dry gin
- » 1125ml sweet vermouth
- » 180ml maraschino liqueur
- » 50ml bitters

METHOD

Wash the barrel to infuse it with flavour - maybe try red wine or Campari.

Add all the ingredients to the pre-washed barrel, and leave for 4-6 weeks.

Strain the contents of the barrel into glass bottles.

Serve in measures of 50ml, stirring with ice to dilute.

Recipe courtesy of Max Chater of Bump Caves bumpcaves.co.uk

OLD PAL

Makes enough for a 1-litre barrel

INGREDIENTS

- » 350ml rye whiskey
- » 240ml Campari
- » 240ml dry vermouth

METHOD

Add all ingredients to the barrel.

Leave for 2 months.

Strain into a glass bottle.

To serve, stir 60-70ml of the aged cocktail over ice, and strain into a frozen martini glass. Finish with a lemon twist.

Note: This will not fill the barrel; Benny deliberately leaves air at the top as a precaution.

Recipe courtesy of Benny Locke of Spuntino spuntino.co.uk

Bruce's Top 10 DIY Tips

Reconsider what the barrel is for. 'I believe 'barrel-aged' is a misnomer: 'barrel-married' is better. Shake it, leap up and down, jump off a building with the shaker, but you ain't going to get a drink as homogenised as leaving it in a barrel for three weeks.'

1 Don't add every ingredient at once. 'You don't need to age every element at the same time. Apricot liqueur, for example, can go in at the last minute, by which I mean two or three weeks down the line.'

2 Be prepared for inevitable initial loss (the 'angel's share'). 'A new barrel is going to soak the stuff up. Of a 2 litre barrel, we lost nearly half in the first few weeks.'

3 Form a barrel club. 'Agree on a date and share your experiments.'

4 If at first you don't succeed... Perry's own success rate at marrying good drinks has risen to 17/20. 'But be prepared to cock it up a few times - if you're not doing that once in a while, you're not trying hard enough!'

5 Have humility regarding what you age. When it comes to single malt Scotch for example, Perry advises, 'it's likely a distillery has already done a rather good job on ageing already - and were not planning on getting any help from you!'

6 Consider the wood's intensity. 'The wood-to-spirit ratio in a small barrel is far beyond anything in a commercial full-sized one where it would probably take two years to get to the colour and flavor you will in a matter of few weeks.'

7 Be cautious of fruits. Although an alcohol content of 62% might be strong enough to preserve them in the first place, once you've added other liquids, it will considerably lessen. And try getting the buggers out of the barrel. Plus your spigot could get blocked.'

8 Waterproof your barrel. 'Fill it with water first of all. If it leaks that's because it's not waterproofed. So leave it on a sink board for a weekend and when it stops leaking it's now waterproofed: the wood's all swollen-up, the spigot nice and tight, and the barrel ready to use.'

9 Finally, appreciate you're not God's gift to ageing. 'If you take the view that you're doing this for fun, then you'll have a lot of fun, otherwise you could be disappointed...'

10. Bruce recommends

Wasmund's 'Mature Your Own' kit which comprises a new, lightly-charred virgin white American oak barrel with two 70cl bottles of rye spirit to fill it with. 'The barrel is re-useable - look after it and you could pass it on to your grandchildren,' he says. £121 thewhiskyexchange.com



Another option

If you feel you are ready for a barrel rather than a helpful kit, Cream Supplies offers 2, 3 and 5 litre options fashioned from new Italian oak, complete with funnel, tap and stand. From £59.99 for the 2-litre version to £71.99 for the largest size creamsupplies.co.uk