



Are Classic Cocktails Making A Comeback In The United States?

by [Jessica Festa \(RSS feed\)](#) on Aug 4th 2012 at 4:00PM

Gin martini, mint julep, manhattan, old-fashioned, sidecar – these classic cocktail favorites are nothing new in the world of libations. In fact, they've been around since Prohibition, standing the test of time, exemplifying a certain class of drinks that focuses on the spirit in a simple and honest way. While many modern drinks have been invented since then, incorporating exotic ingredients and high-tech machinery into the mixology, there has been a revival of classic cocktails in the last few years. But, how did this quality culture of cocktails begin, where did it go and why is it coming back?



History

According to Derek Brown of the classic cocktail bar [The Passenger](#) in Washington, D.C., cocktails are an American invention.

"There were many mixed drinks before, and these drinks such as Juleps, cups and punches have a very old pedigree, long before the United States," Brown explained to Gadling. "But, the technical definition of a cocktail is first found in 1806 in a New York paper and it states that a cocktail is made of spirituous liquor of any kind, sugar, water and bitters. We exported that to the entire world and, in that way, a cocktail is as American as baseball or apple pie."

That was during a time when Americans were making punches hot and in large quantities. The drinks were essentially composed of brandy, gin or whiskey and a bit of sugar. However, it was Jerry Thomas, often considered the "father of American mixology," who started making individual drinks. He also introduced the notion of adding fruit and ice, helping to define a modern cocktail era. Thomas was the leader of what is thought of as the real golden age of bartending. This was between the 1850s and Prohibition, which is when Thomas wrote the first bartending guide titled "Bon Vivant's Guide" or "How To Mix Drinks," published in 1862.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, cocktail culture in America was really booming and beginning to expand. Bartenders began turning to famous cocktail venues all over the world for inspiration and knowledge. However, in 1920, congress introduced the Volstead Act, marking the beginning of Prohibition and forcing American cocktail culture to go underground.

Where'd They Go?

There are many opinions as to what the main cause of the classic cocktail's decline was. For one, many people correlate the end of these quality craft cocktails with Prohibition. During this time, top mixologists moved out of the country, switched professions or retired. Moreover, the level of skill necessary to be a bartender has also declined in past decades.

"If we look at culinary trends in the United States since the early 20th century, you also see less craft production," says Brown. "Bartenders are no longer making their own ingredients, and bartending no longer requires the high-level of knowledge and skill it had during the golden age. Obviously, this and many other reasons lead to a decline of professionalism in bartending."



Tim Stevens, bar manager of [Seven Grand](#), agrees, although he also believed the 80s had something to do with it, as well. This is when artificial flavoring and sweeteners were introduced, and fresh squeezed juices and class liquors deemed "our Grandfather's booze" were pushed to the side.

"In came high sucrose corn syrup and the fun game of engineering flavoring instead of using the actual source," explains Stevens. "How could the American public fall for this? Well, we were in the middle of embracing convenience, microwave ovens, the first cellphones, and yes, canned cocktails. The faster we could get something became more important than what we were getting."

And while, Edmundo Molina, bar manager at Andaz 5th Avenue's [The Bar Downstairs](#), agrees with all of this, he also cites vodka as a culprit. The spirit even began replacing former classics in well-known cocktails.

"By 1955, 4 million cases of Vodka were sold in the USA, and by the '60s it had surpassed whiskey and gin, to become the country's biggest selling spirit. Martinis were prepared with vodka instead of gin," Molina states.

Making A Comeback

For those looking for high-quality libations, you'll be happy to know classic cocktails are making a comeback. One reason for the revival is a few passionate bartenders who cared about the old days. For example, bartender Dale DeGroof, also known as "King Cocktail," pioneered a method for recreating these timeless favorites and consults with various hotels, restaurants and bars.



Moreover, you can't ignore the fact that there is hardly a city in the United States that isn't currently promoting craft cocktail bars. Is it really a surprise, though? These classics are timeless, hence the name "classic cocktails." They promote the spirit in a very honest way.

"It is like finding out that someone has been lying to you for years. What would you do?" asks Stevens, before continuing. "Rediscover where you were, embrace freshness, adjust your mind and tastes back to your grandmother's cooking and toss the fast food in the trash. It was only a matter of time until Americans revived the romance."

Additionally, it's hard to ignore the physical proof in terms of sheer numbers and resources.

"There are now thousands of interested bartenders and tens of thousands of consumers interested in better drinks with carefully chosen ingredients and more of a story attached to them," says Jackson Cannon of [Eastern Standard](#) in Boston. "Conferences like Tales of the Cocktail, which had 20,000 plus attendees in New Orleans this year, provide a platform for the like-minded to share information on this restoration of cultural ideals."

And for some, these cocktails never actually left. Instead, the venues to find these quality drinks just became more difficult to find.

"Since the '90s, cocktail bars in New York, San Francisco and London started to make a comeback and helped re-introduce the concept," says Molina. "I think people forgot how amazing a well-made cocktail tastes, and thank God for those mixologists who never forgot about the history of the classic culture!"

Museum Of The American Cocktail

The [Museum Of The American Cocktail](#), which was founded by Dale DeGroff himself, is the world's first museum dedicated to educating the public on classic cocktails and preserving their heritage. Moreover, it also serves as an association of the country's most accomplished mixologists. Visitors will have the chance to take part in mixology seminars, view multimedia presentations, experience rare Prohibition-era literature and music, see vintage cocktail shakers and gadgets and more.



Where To Get A Classic Cocktail In The United States

Want to know where you can try some classic cocktails for yourself? While myriad worthwhile venues exist around the United States, these are some of the best:

[The Passenger](#) (Washington, D.C.)- Says bartender and owner, Derek Brown, "We serve a lot of classic cocktails. That's the base for all the drinks we do. Old-Fashioneds, Martinis, real Martinis with Gin and Vermouth, sours. People love them and, when they have great, balanced drinks, have trouble going back to syrupy crap."



Seven Grand (Los Angeles and San Diego, California)- "We really have the roots on our menu. I refer to them as the Hard Five, an unwavering grip of tradition that stands the test of time. The Rye Manhattan, Whiskey Sour, Mint Julep, Old-Fashioned and the Sazerac," explains bar manager, Timothy Stevens. "These are not only amazing representations of whiskey consumption, but some also date back to 1890, which sums up the point we are trying to make here. Learn from the past, embrace the future."

The Bar Downstairs (New York, NY)- This bar dedicated a full menu page to classic cocktails. They carry a small selection of spirits, carry high-quality ice and make their own fresh juices everyday. "Guests favorites are: East Side, French 75, Sazerac, and of course the Manhattan and Martini," says bar manager, Edmundo Molina. "We love to amaze our regulars with new tips, information and recipes each time they come in, and educate new guests about our classic cocktails and about the NYC cocktail scene in general."

The Cure (New Orleans, Louisiana)- On their website, this bar states, "Inspired by the historical period when cocktails grew out of medicine and home remedies, our idea at Cure is to reintroduce our guests to another time where the experience of having a cocktail and a bite to eat was both healthful and enjoyable."

The Violet Hour (Chicago, Illinois)- This place is classy and tasteful, and goes to great lengths to give you that old world ambiance. Some of their house rules? No use of cellphones in the lounge, no reservations, no Jager bombs or bombs of any kind, no Grey Goose, no Cosmopolitans, no light beer, no Budweiser and no bringing anyone to the lounge that you wouldn't bring to your mother's house.

Eastern Standard (Boston, Massachusetts)- When asked about how their classic cocktails, Whisky Smash, Jasmine, Pegu Club and Pisco Sour, reinforce classic cocktail culture, beverage director, Jackson Cannon states, "They are tried and true and appeal to a wide-ranging palate. Their stories are evocative yet succinct, and they can be ordered in a growing number of fine bars with slight variations to them but still maintain their own obvious identities."

Herbs And Rye (Las Vegas, Nevada)- This dark, leather-adorned bar captures the spirit of a speakeasy and is truly dedicated to making quality classic cocktails. At the top of their menu, they state, "Equal parts quality and simplicity, with a dash of controversy! Every truly classic cocktail is a study in exquisite simplicity, both in recipe and presentation."

Mouton (Columbus, Ohio)- While the city is filled with trendy bars, Mouton delivers a cozier experience that pays homage to Prohibition-era classics. The drink menu has a strong focus on classic cocktails, like Manhattans, Mary Pickfords, Sazeracs, Aviations and Negronis. Pours are strong, smooth and perfectly crafted.