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HISTORIC SIPS

BOSTON'S AARON BUTLER LOOKS TO THE PAST
FOR HIS MODERN COCKTAILS

by Chandra Ram

Aaron Butler started out as a history student at Boston College, then fell into making cocktails, both new and classic. That said, he takes a decidedly modern approach to chocolate cocktails at Russell House Tavern in Cambridge, Mass., using artisan bitters to lure guests away from too-sweet concoctions.

How did you get into bartending and making cocktails?

About halfway through school, I got into wine, and started working in wine stores. I hopped around from managing retail liquor stores to working for a distributor for a few years. I wanted to open my own bar, but not go into it blind, so a friend hooked me up with a job to train at Drink [Barbara Lynch's cocktail lounge in South Boston.] I caught on and never wanted to do anything else.

What role does history have in your cocktails?

I studied Elizabethan England history in college, and especially love naval history. So with my cocktails, it's more what I call 'nerd history;' I'll use obscure references for my drink names. One of my most famous cocktails is called The Battle of Trafalger [a famous battle between the British and French navies in 1805]. It has both French and English products in it: a base of Pimm's No. 1, with lime juice, homemade honey simple syrup, St. Germain and Indonesian rum.

Another drink is called the Scottish play, which is what people in theater call *Macbeth*; there's a superstition that you don't say the name "Macbeth" in a theater. The drink is powerful, and not for everyone: Laphroig 10-year-old scotch,



Cynar, Aperol and Drambuie. It's bitter, like a Negroni on steroids. I think there are maybe 30 people in Boston who would like it.

How do you create balance when you make cocktails?

In general, even when doing classic cocktails, I lean towards making about half of them a little bit sweet, even though it's not how I would want them. It's not about me drinking them, it's about having a good range. When I use flavors in drinks, I try to make them work together, not let one outshine the others.

How do you apply that philosophy to chocolate cocktails?

I enjoy chocolate; it's one of my favorite things in the world, but I'm careful with how I use it in cocktails. I like to add chocolate flavor through bitters, so

the drink doesn't become just about the chocolate, then mix it with ports and Champagne to bring out the flavor.

I make a cocktail called against the grain, with Bols Genever, Benedictine, Nux Alpina and chocolate *mole* bitters. It tastes like an oatmeal cookie, without being too sweet. Chocolate is one of the layers of the drink. You pick it up, but it's not the whole thing.

So what do you do when a guest asks for a chocolate martini?

When I have to make a chocolate martini, I use a really intense chocolate liqueur. I add dimension by using a dark spiced rum to bring out the flavor of the chocolate. If you do it well, and you don't make a drink sweet just for the sake of making it sweet like a dessert, you can make a nice dessert cocktail.