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FOOD & DRINK



HOW'S YOUR DRINK?

By Eric Felten

Consider the Trimmings

WALTER GROPIUS, founder of the Bauhaus school of architecture, would not like most cocktails these days. He was always railing against "florid aestheticism" used to conceal "the verities of structure under a welter of heterogeneous ornament." In other words, he was anti-garnish.

A new school of high-end bartending embraces this Bauhaus asceticism. Jackson Cannon, who mixes drinks at Boston's Eastern Standard, isn't opposed to garnish if the trimming can make a case for why it should be in the glass. But absent a compelling reason to embellish, the glass goes unadorned. Mr. Cannon notes that when his bartender friends get together to test new recipes on one another, they rarely add garnish, seeing it as a distraction.

Garnish in cocktails is something of a mystery. After all, no one feels the need to dress a glass of Chateau Lafite Rothschild with stray crudites. And aside from the lime-in-one's-Corona affection, beer is also free from the garniture imperative. But from the first days of cocktails, the mythology of the drink has involved frou-frou. One of the earliest (though no doubt apocryphal) tales of the invention of this distinctively American drink has a patriotic Revolutionary barmaid named Betty Flanagan plucking the tail-feathers from a Tory's prize roosters and using them to adorn drinks in her tavern—thus the name "cock-tail."

When the cocktail came into its own, in the mid-to-late 19th century, ornament was all the rage. Gilded Age drinks were often fancy things, luxuriously draped with boughs of mint and piled high with fruit. But such excesses were stripped away in the 1920s, when two forces intersected. The first was practical—Prohibition made bartending a more utilitarian affair. The second was philosophical—the style of the modern age called for streamlining.

Given those forces, it's a wonder that garnish didn't disappear altogether. I suspect it would have, long ago, if the odd bit of foliage didn't serve some fundamental purpose. Good garnish does accentuate the positives in a glass. But by the same token, bad ornamentation is the death of one's drink. Bar guru Dale DeGroff despairs of the long black, segmented plastic tray with the clear plastic lid that sits behind most bars, containing a room-temperature selection of wizened olives, shriveled lime wedges, and leathery lemon twists. "How many of my icy Martinis have been ruined by a heedless bartender skewering three huge heat-bombs of olives and thrusting them into my drink?" he laments.

Too few bars bother to think about whether the garnishes they are slinging make their drinks better. And all too often, one's drink gets adorned with the wrong thing altogether. A good measure of your bartender's savvy is whether he or she thinks about garnish. The better mixers are scrupulous about the trimmings—when, what sort, or whether at all. For the Bauhaus crowd, that means avoiding garnish unless the drink demands it. But there is a competing school among

the serious crafters of cocktails, what we might call the Farmer's Market crowd.

Big on the West Coast, in cities such as San Francisco and Portland, the Farmer's Market school has flourished where there is ready access to exotic and groovy roughage. At the better bars on the Bay, you're as likely to get candied peels of bergamots or rangpur limes as a plain old lemon skin. Greg Lindgren hosts a monthly original cocktail competition at the San Francisco bar Rye, and he says that many of the contestants aim to wow more with garnish than with the liquid contents of the glass. There was a drink rimmed with white truffle dust; a rum cocktail served with a cube of crème brûlée; and, of course, many glasses garnished with edible flowers. Some swerve into the silly: Mr. Lindgren has seen slices of Snickers bars;

and a tequila Bloody Mary with a jumbo corn chip balanced across the rim, on which was plopped a dollop of guacamole. But such lapses are a small price to pay for a movement celebrating creativity. "Our personal approach is to focus on flavor and simplicity," says Mr. Lindgren of the garnishes he uses, such as the fresh basil leaf that goes in his Basil Gimlet.

Julie Reiner of New York's Flatiron Lounge keeps some 20 garnishes at her bar but insists that a "garnish should always have a purpose," whether it is to accentuate a flavor already in the mix or bring a touch of some other savor to a drink that alters the way you taste the liquid part.

A Martini without an olive is still a Martini. The same goes for a Manhattan without a cherry, or even an Old-Fashioned without fruit of any sort. But sometimes the garnish makes the drink. There are a few rare birds of the cocktail bar that are known by their plumage. Pre-eminent among them is the Brandy Crusta.

One of the earliest "fancy drinks," the Brandy Crusta is distinguished

not by its liquid ingredients—brandy, orange curaçao and/or maraschino liqueur, lemon juice and bitters—but by the sugar on its rim and the large swath of lemon peel tucked inside the circumference of the glass's lip. It's tricky to make—the challenge has made it a favorite of those bartenders who call themselves "cocktail geeks," just as it was for the generation of bartenders who faded away with Prohibition. One of them was a guy named John, working behind the stick at a New York speakeasy called The Log Cabin. Cartoonist Al Hirschfeld found him there in the last days of Prohibition, "an old-timer in the profession," pining for the lost days of glorious garnish: "He'll befriend the first man who seriously asks him for a brandy crusta."

Nowadays, you should befriend any bartender who knows how to make a Brandy Crusta, whatever drink you plan to order, as he's the sort of fellow who knows better than to sink your Martini with an olive heat bomb.



Brandy Crusta

1½ oz cognac
¼ oz orange curaçao
¼ oz maraschino liqueur
1 squeeze fresh lemon juice
1 dash Angostura bitters

■ Shake with ice and strain into a properly prepared glass. Prepare the glass thusly: Moisten the rim of a small shallow wine glass with a piece of lemon peel, and dip it in superfine sugar. Then, cut as broad and long a slice of peel as you can from around the equator of a lemon. Arrange it inside the lip of the glass so that the peel extends well above the rim. The last step, according to 19th-century bartender/author Jerry Thomas, is to step back, admire your work, and "smile."

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