

# Taking the bitters WITH THE *SWEET...*

By Hoke Harden

**A**MERICA IS RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF A COCKTAIL REVOLUTION THESE DAYS, AND ALL SPIRITS CATEGORIES ARE BENEFITING AS A RESULT. This isn't simply a coastal thing or a big city phenomenon either: it's everywhere. The cocktail is back in vogue again.

Cordials...whiskey...gin...vodka...rum...tequila...brandy: they are all getting more attention from consumers in one of the best trial formats possible, the bar or lounge near you.

Bartenders — or as some now call themselves, mixologists — are constantly looking for new and daring creative concoctions to tempt their clients. The fever pitch for creativity in spirits is stronger than it has been since the great golden years of cocktailing.

But there's another key ingredient in the cocktail revolution, a necessary addition that can make all the difference in how a particular drink tastes, a crucial component that adds depth and complexity and definition to the drink.

Ask any bartender what that is and he or she will instantly respond: bitters.

That simple response covers a lot of ground though, as “bitters” can mean any number of things. Bitters can, however, be reduced to two general categories.

## **Bitters: Not For Singular Consumption**

Most commercial bitters are produced specifically for adding a few drops into a drink for flavoring, in much the same way that vanilla extract is used for cooking. They originally began as medicinal concoctions, or as condensed flavoring ingredients, and were not intended for consuming separately; generally, a dash or two of bitters will suffice. You wouldn't want to drink several ounces of these, and pouring them on the rocks alone would not be very tasty.

That's a meaningful distinction too. “Not for singular consumption” puts these bitters in a separate category, and in most places under a different rule, since they are not considered alcohol beverages and thus allowed in grocery stores and specialty shops. Usually, these bitters can be found in the spice aisle, along with such basic ingredients as the aforementioned vanilla extract (which also contains a significant amount of alcohol base, by the way). And of course any good package store should have bitters on hand as well, since they are so commonly used for mixed drinks.

There are some old standards in this category, well known and almost universally available, and considered mandatory in a professional or home bar.

**BITTERS:** bi•ter•s (bit'ers), *n., adj.*, a crucial component that adds depth and complexity and definition to the drink.





## Angostura Bitters

The undisputed ‘grandfather’ of all bitters, Angostura was formulated in South America, with production since moved to Trinidad, and remains the world leading bitters brand today. The proprietary formula of botanicals remains a closely guarded secret, known only to a few at any given time.

Angostura is so popular, and so necessary in the current cocktail scene, that a recent shortage of product (because of a lack of bottles) created massive hoarding from fear of running out of such a key cocktail ingredient. One of the key elements in a Manhattan-style cocktail is bitters and, unless it is specified, that bitters will more than likely be Angostura. Angostura also offers their version of Orange Bitters.

## Peychaud’s Bitters

Created in New Orleans by the apothecary and cocktailier, Antoine Amédée Peychaud, a Creole from Haiti, to use in the new drink he created, The Sazerac, Peychaud’s Bitters accompanies Angostura Bitters as standard bar ingredients. Peychaud’s Bitters, with the primary component of bitter gentian, is a trifle lighter, sweeter and more floral than Angostura.

Peychaud’s Bitters were acquired and are now made by the Buffalo Trace Distillery in Frankfort, Kentucky.

## Fee Brothers Bitters

The now multigenerational Fee family concern, begun by some entrepreneurial saloon keepers in upstate New York who saw the benefit of supplying other barkeepers with their necessary bitters, offers retail and internet sales of an impressive range of bitters, from the standard to the exotic. They include Old Fashioned Bitters, Lemon, Orange, Cherry, Mint, Grapefruit, Peach,

Rhubarb, and Whiskey Barrel Aged. They are de rigeur on the bar scene today, both for their quality and their variety of styles.

## Regan’s Orange Bitters #6

Gary and Mardee Regan, husband and wife, had established themselves as eminent writers and critics in the alcohol beverage business when they became so miffed at the absence of good quality orange bitters... they decided to just make their own. The sixth recipe proved to be the charm. Now Regan’s Orange Bitters have become a standard, and remain a byword for quality.

There are also some newcomers to the category, recent additions to the bitters scene that have established themselves for their quality and style. Some of these are now available nationally or regionally, and are becoming steadily more popular. The Bitter Truth/Bittermens, Scrappy’s Bitters, and others can be found in many areas, either in shops or through the internet.

Bartenders are now making their own bitters as well. It’s relatively easy to do if you have access to the herbs, spices, and botanical ingredients that comprise the base aromatics and flavoring, since the most common process is to steep these in an alcohol base so the liquid takes on the characteristics of the botanicals.

## Bitter Liqueurs and Amari

The other major category of bitters comes from liqueurs, and occasionally wines, that contain bitter components along with the sweet. Most of these bitter liqueurs are made by steeping selected botanicals in neutral spirits, but may also use brandy, or rum, or wine as the base. Commonly called digestif or aperitif in French, or aperitivo and digestivo in Italian, these are intended to stimulate the appetite before a meal

(from aper, Latin, “to open”) or to soothe the digestion after a sumptuous meal.

Most of the classic cordials and liqueurs, such as Benedictine, were originally conceived as medicinal or restorative in nature. Some of them were impressively bitter, to stimulate the palate and start the digestive juices flowing; some of them were designed to soothe the overburdened stomach. But it wasn’t long before people began to use them as flavoring ingredients to soften a fiery spirit, or simply to add interesting complexity to a mixed drink.

When gin evolved from a medicine to treat internal ailments and became a popular drinking spirit, shortly afterwards Angostura Bitters were added to provide a bitter burst of flavor, and “Pink Gin” was invented!

When the cocktail began evolving in the 1800s, the classic definition required a base spirit, sugar for sweetness, and some form of bitters to add complexity to the mix. The classic cocktail of New Orleans, the Sazerac, was a mixture of cognac (now rye whiskey) flavored with sugar, an herbal liqueur, and bitters, garnished with a twist of lemon peel.

The classic Martini and Manhattan follow essentially the same model: a base spirit, gin or whiskey; herbal flavorings and sweetness (vermouth); and bitters. The Manhattan retained a bit of sweetness; eventually the Martini lost the sugar and became “dry”.

As the search for flavor in mixed drinks increased, certain liqueurs and cordials began to dominate and are now considered the standards — although new ones are constantly being added to the repertoire.

Here are some of the basic bitter liqueurs currently in vogue with bartenders:

## Chartreuse

Chartreuse began In the 1740s, made by the Carthusian Monks in the Grand Chartreuse Monastery near Grenoble in France. The color chartreuse is actually derived from the particular green color of the liqueur from the chlorophyll in the herb, root and vegetal extracts — 132 in all — that make up the proprietary formula. The original Green Chartreuse has a whopping alcohol level of 55 percent (or 110 Proof); the saffron-tinted Yellow Chartreuse comes in at a much gentler, and sweeter, 40 percent, or 80 Proof.

Chartreuse has an unmistakable sweet, spicy and pungent vegetal/herbal aroma and flavor. It is consumed alone, as an aperitif or digestif, or with soda, and is frequently used in mixed drinks, such as the Chartreuse Cocktail (Green Chartreuse, cognac and dry vermouth); the Bijou (gin, Green Chartreuse, sweet vermouth, orange bitters, served with a twist); or the simple Orange Sunburst (a tall glass of orange juice, ice, and Chartreuse).

## Campari

Since 1860, the secret formula of Campari and its dazzling bright red color have been popular in the bars of Europe. The alcohol strengths vary according to country. But the intensely bitter expression remains the same wherever it is sold. Campari and Soda is such a mainstay in Europe that it is also available pre-mixed in small bottles. The bitterness makes Campari a perfect aperitif and a perfect mixer, although Campari can be too bitter for some palates.

## Fernet Branca

This amaro, a bitter aromatic spirit, has become omnipresent in America in recent years— if only to satisfy the cravings of

bartenders, who have made it a favorite tipple. But the popularity extends to the other side of the bar as well, and Fernet Branca has become the standard bracer after a night of gustatory indulgence (the other is the German Underberg in the tiny single-serve bottles).

Fernet Branca, and its significantly more minty cousin, Brancamenta, can be used with or in lieu of Angostura and other bitters to enhance cocktails. For instance, the Fanciulli is essentially a modified Manhattan, with Fernet Branca instead of the more usual Angostura.

## Averna

Fernet Branca is a bit stark for some. Averna is the amaro of Sicily and its softer, gentler tone is a trifle sweeter and smoother, with a distinctive cola or root beer flavor. and it has established quite a devoted following in America, both as an aperitivo and a digestivo; but it has become a standard flavoring ingredient in cocktails as well, with the intense herbal flavors softened by cola and root beer-like nuances.

## Cynar

It may seem odd, at first, that there is a bitter liqueur with the primary component of...artichoke? But then again: why not? Artichokes are a popular food, and they do have a characteristic vegetal/herbal aroma and taste that is pleasing to many. Artichoke is the prime component, but there are twelve other herbs or roots involved in the Cynar formula.

This Italian aperitivo has emerged from relative obscurity in this country to grace quite a few backbars, and bartenders have found many uses for its particular appeal in their creative cocktails. Two favorites are the Cin Cyn (gin, sweet vermouth, and Cynar in equal parts) and the Thistle (vodka, orange juice, Cointreau, and Cynar).

A good bar or lounge will likely have most — if not all — of these bitters, bitter liqueurs, and amari, as will a well-stocked home bar. And there are many, many more not listed here; it’s becoming quite a crowded field these days. After all, there is a revolution going on, and if you’re going to make some of the amazing new cocktails, or the old classics, bitters are a necessary ingredient to have on hand. ♦

# Some Classic Drinks Using Bitters

## Old-fashioned

The Old-fashioned is a classic whiskey cocktail that has been served since around 1880 at the Pendennis Club in Louisville, Kentucky and is (disputedly) the first drink referred to as a cocktail. It is the perfect ideal of what a cocktail should contain: a spirit, a sweet, a bitter, a sour and water. Typically, the Old-fashioned is made with bourbon, however you can experiment with other types of whiskey for an equally excellent drink. Have a light old-fashioned with Canadian whiskey or one that’s more sour with a Tennessee whiskey. Club soda is often used to top off this drink, but this is not a traditional method.

**Prep Time:** 2 minutes

**Total Time:** 2 minutes

**Yield:** 1 Drink

### INGREDIENTS:

- 1 sugar cube
- 2-3 dashes Angostura bitters
- 2 orange slices
- 3 oz bourbon
- Maraschino cherry for garnish

### PREPARATION:

1. Place the sugar cube at the bottom of an old-fashioned glass.
2. Saturate the cube with the bitters.
3. Add one orange slice.
4. Muddle these ingredients.
5. Fill the glass with ice cubes.
6. Add the bourbon.
7. Stir well.
8. Garnish with a second orange slice and a Maraschino cherry.



## Sazerac Cocktail

It all began for the Sazerac cocktail in the early 1800’s when Antoine Amedee Peychaud mixed Cognac with his Peychaud bitters. In 1859 the drink was the signature drink of the Sazerac Coffee House in New Orleans, where it received its name. The exact reason for the substitution of rye whiskey for the Cognac is unclear, but the whiskey base is used today. The cocktail also originally used absinthe, which although making a comeback, is difficult to find and can be substituted with Herbsaint, Pernod or Absente.

**Prep Time:** 2 minutes

**Total Time:** 2 minutes

**Yield:** 1 Drink

### INGREDIENTS:

- 3 oz rye whiskey
- 3/4 oz simple syrup
- Peychaud bitters to taste
- Absinthe or absinthe substitute
- Lemon twist for garnish

### PREPARATION:

1. Chill an old-fashioned glass by filling it with ice and letting it sit while preparing the rest of the drink.
2. In a separate mixing glass, muddle the simple syrup and Peychaud bitters together.
3. Add the rye whiskey and ice to the bitters mixture and stir.
4. Discard the ice in the chilled glass and rinse it with absinthe (or substitute) by pouring a small amount into the glass, swirling it around and discarding the liquid.
5. Strain the whiskey mixture from the mixing glass into the old fashioned glass.
6. Garnish with a lemon twist. Traditionalists will say that the lemon twist should be squeezed over the drink to release its essences but that the twist should not be dropped into the glass itself.

