

Bartenders shake and stir their way through cocktail history

Camper English, Special to The Chronicle

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Because of their proximity to sticky liquids, well-used cocktail books often don't hold up over time, which may be why vintage cocktail books from the 1860s through the 1940s are rare and highly collectible.

These books hold more value than the recipes inside or their resale value, however. Modern cocktail enthusiasts use them to rediscover how and what people were drinking when the books were written, what bar life was like in the beginning of the last century, and the history of bartending as a profession.

Josey Packard, a bartender at Alembic in the Upper Haight who also studies recipe history, earned her master's degree in editorial studies at Boston University, during which she became interested in books about classic cocktails. She initially made drinks that she read about in newspapers, including the mojito and cosmopolitan, which lead her to try more gin-based and other complex drinks like the Corpse Reviver, Mary Pickford and Gansevoort fizz not widely made in bars at the time. "There was a point at which I realized I was more disappointed than delighted when going out for cocktails," she says. And thus began her career as a bartender.

John C. Burton, owner and instructor of the Bartenders' School of Santa Rosa, owns more than 400 volumes dating back to 1862's "How to Mix Drinks" by Jerry Thomas, the first known cocktail recipe book. He owns not just the first edition of the book, but all the subsequent editions as well.

"How to Mix Drinks" is not only the first recipe book, it's probably the most influential. In the mid-1980s then-bartender Dale DeGroff turned to Thomas' book in an attempt to create a classic bar in New York. DeGroff went on to write his own influential tome, "The Craft of the Cocktail," and trained several generations of younger bartenders who run some of New York's most respected watering holes.

The current cocktail trend of using fresh ingredients in drinks instead of premade sour and other mixes is both a throwback to Jerry Thomas' era, and also an attempt to make drinks of the highest quality. With Prohibition wiping good drinking off the map, there were very few respected cocktail books made between the 1930s and 2000s, so the old books are not just classic, they inform today's cutting-edge cocktails in San Francisco and throughout the world.

Burton's books, and those of many vintage cocktail lovers, don't have many opportunities to collect dust. By studying his books, Burton has become an expert on the history of bartending, and often consults with other experts, including Robert Hess of DrinkBoy.com, cocktail writer and historian David Wondrich and members of the United States Bartenders' Guild, of which Burton is the California chairman.

Though Burton studies bartending and bartenders through his books, other researchers track topics like defunct cocktail ingredients, classic bar tools, the history of ice and glassware. Others study recipes as they change over time through these books, such as the creme de violette that was dropped from the Aviation cocktail from one book to the next, or the martini's transformation as it called for sweet, then dry, then almost no vermouth.

David Wondrich wrote an entire book - "Imbibe" was released last week - about an older cocktail recipe book (see "New books dedicated to old drinks").

Burton cites his most useful book: "For me in teaching it would be the 1900 Harry Johnson ('Harry Johnson's New and Improved Bartenders' Manual'). His rules that applied then still apply today for master bartenders. I think that he produced the first how-to bartending book." (One such directive not always observed today states, "The first rule to be observed by any man acting as bartender in our business, is to treat all customers with the utmost politeness and respect.")

The earliest cocktail books simply listed recipes like the Rumfustian, Non-Such Punch and Brandy Champerelle, with little in the way of instruction on how to prepare them. This is because bartending was a trade taught in apprenticeships, and early books were technical manuals. Burton considers the Johnson book the beginning of a new category of books that include practical bartending advice, along with recipes.

Though Packard owns a few antique cocktail books, and found a copy of "How to Mix Drinks" for the Alembic (pictured), most of her classic collection consists of reprints of copyright-expired books. These reprints are an affordable way to access the content of vintage books without paying the collector's price. A few books, including the Mr. Boston bartender's guides and the "Savoy Cocktail Book" have been updated with new recipes every decade or so, and are easy to find in bookstores. Burton has typed up some of the texts in his collection including "World Drinks and How to Prepare Them" by "Cocktail Bill" Boothby (1930), and sells them on eBay.

A signed, limited first edition of the "Savoy Cocktail Book" from 1930, one of the most collected cocktail books (not only are the recipes well respected, it's got great Art Deco illustrations), was recently listed by a United Kingdom seller at \$5,232.89 on the Web site AbeBooks.com. Antiquarian bookseller Philip K. Reynolds of Bath, Maine, who specializes in cocktail books, said some of the prices listed online may be "wishful thinking."

He says there aren't a huge number of collectors searching for cocktail books, but, "the fervent collectors will kill to get them."

Burton says he's never killed anyone in his pursuit of cocktail books. "But I've come close," he says. "There's a great competition. We're all great friends, but we all want that edition."

Scans of many old texts are available for download on the Web at sites including Google Books and Archive.org for free, and a few more are accessible to members of the Museum of the American Cocktail on the group's Web site. Still other books have been posted in their entirety on personal Web sites and as individual pictures of pages on photo-sharing Web sites.

As collectors like Burton have become reference librarians for the information inside the books, students of cocktail information have started to become collectors of the first editions. "I look at this as a lifelong project," Packard says. "I intend to replace the reprints with originals."

The best classic cocktail books

Most of these books, chosen by Josey Packard of San Francisco's Alembic bar, are available as reprints on Amazon.com or as full text versions at Google Books and Archive.org for free. A few more are accessible to members of the Museum of the American Cocktail on the group's Web site, museumoftheamericancocktail.org.

How to Mix Drinks, by Jerry Thomas (1862)

The Old Waldorf Bar Days (reprinted as the "Old Waldorf Astoria Bar Book"), by Albert Stevens Crockett (1931)

The Savoy Cocktail Book, by Harry Craddock (1930)

The Stork Club Bar Book, by Lucius Beebe (1946)

The Gentleman's Companion (republished as "Jigger, Beaker and Glass"), by Charles H. Baker Jr. (1939)

The Fine Art of Mixing Drinks, by David Embury (1948)

Harry's ABC of Mixing Cocktails, by Harry MacElhone (1919)

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