

Savour the spirit

Skip the sugary syrups and forget the fizzy mixers: a sophisticated new cocktail revolution is in full swing



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So far, it's been an eventful year for London's drinking scene. New bars have sprung up, including whisky den Black Rock near Old Street, The Cocktail Trading Company in Bethnal Green, and the relaunch of The Arts Theatre Club in Soho. Several drinks tomes have hit our shelves, such as Martin Cate's Polynesian recipe book *Smuggler's Cove* (£22.30, Ten Speed Press) and Frank Caiafa's revised *Waldorf Astoria Bar Book* (£18.99, Penguin). But among all this, there was sad news: the loss of the legendary bartender Dick Bradsell. Creator of the espresso martini, the Russian spring punch and the bramble, Bradsell put the West End on the map when he reanimated the cheap, unremarkable cocktails of the 1980s using quality ingredients, and blazed a trail for generations to follow.

Bradsell would be pleased with their current progress. In pursuit of the perfect drink, today's bartenders are looking beyond the top shelf and becoming more like apothecaries, spending hours holed up in laboratories experimenting with innovative techniques to create new ingredients and impart novel flavours and textures to liquid. The result is that cocktails are fast outdoing food when it comes to heady gastronomic experiences.

Take the Bloody Mary, for example. Order one at the Connaught Bar and you'll get an aerated version topped with a feather-light celery 'air', or mousse. At Powder Keg Diplomacy, in Clapham, there are six types to choose from, including one made with lobster bisque, passata and maple-bacon-washed vodka. At Peruvian restaurant Andina, it comes in the form of fresh tomato juice, red vegetable juice (purple cabbage, beetroot and red pepper), chilli-infused pisco and tiger's milk – a citrusy marinade often touted as a great hangover cure. But no one has bettered the challenge offered by Matt Whiley, founder

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of the drinks consultancy Talented Mr Fox (talentedmrfox.com): during his residency at One Leicester Street, he created a clarified version using a distillation of vodka and pigs' blood.

At Duck & Waffle (duckandwaffle.com), head of spirit and cocktail development Richard Woods is also having fun with the classics. His clever creations include the artichoke negroni (Daffy's gin, Campari, vermouth blend and artichoke infusion), and the blue-cheese and chocolate martini (cheese distillate, gin, olive oil and cacao vermouth), which won him the title of World's Most Imaginative Bartender in a Bombay Sapphire competition in 2014.

Despite this obvious showmanship, Woods is passionate about empowering home mixology and happy to reveal the recipe for a Mind Your Peas And Qs gin and tonic infused with sugar-snap peas. 'It's incredibly simple. Take a deli-sized pack of sugar-snap peas, break and crush them, drop them into a bottle of gin and leave to infuse overnight. Strain and serve, topped up with tonic water.' Vibrant, green and loaded with natural sugars, the taste is like springtime in a glass.

Over at East London's Drink Factory (thedrinkfactory.com), former Bradsell protégé Tony Conigliaro says customer tastes have been changing for a while. 'There's a more educated palate, for sure,' he says. 'Twenty years ago,

I remember selling one martini in a year to an American customer. And now, you just wouldn't believe how many we sell.' Among his signature drinks are the Amadeus (porcini-infused amontillado sherry, truffle bitters and champagne), the Initials (a trio of vodka, syrup and bitters, all infused with birch) and, new at his bar 69 Colebrooke Row (69colebrookerow.com), the caper-leaf martini. Made from caper-leaf gin and dry vermouth, it has a verdant, fruity taste with a noticeable lack of brine, resulting in the cleanest 'dirty' imaginable.

'The dirty martini's always been a bit of a bugbear of mine, because it's a disgusting drink,' he says, without a hint of a smile. 'No, it really is. I mean, just adding salty water with a vague taste of olive into a drink is not my idea of a super cocktail. I took it apart many years ago – we centrifuged olives and used the water from that.'

Widely considered a modern successor to Bradsell, Conigliaro is undoubtedly leading the way in his creative research. 'At the moment, we're experimenting with anti-flavours. There's a wealth of interesting off-notes you get in products such as beer and wine – that faint scent of wet paper or even plastic,' he says. 'We've found combining them with more appealing flavours such as jasmine creates an amazing and beautiful result.'

Conigliaro's first book, *Drinks* (Ebury Press, £19.99), contains the fruits of his considerable experimentation, presented as achievable recipes for those with such equipment as a dehydrator and homogeniser. Those simply wishing to stir the perfect Old Fashioned could first try the 1948 classic *The Fine Art of Mixing Drinks*, by David A Embury (available second-hand at abebooks.co.uk). Ever Bradsell's faithful manual, he cited it as his reason for never writing a cocktail book: the best, he said, had already been written. ●