

New Classy Cocktails Crafted With Fortified Wines



It sure must have been one heck of a party. As the story goes, during the presidential race of 1876, New York socialite and wealthy heiress Jenny Jerome held a campaign function for candidate Samuel Tilden at the famed *Manhattan Club*. Jerome, soon to become Lady Randolph Churchill and mother of Winston, requested a special cocktail be created for the event.

What the staff devised consisted of rye whiskey, Angostura bitters and Italian (sweet) vermouth. Like a spark to tinder, the cocktail swept through New York society. The drink that we now know as the Manhattan literally became the toast of the town. It's said that financial mogul J. P. Morgan drank the cocktail every day at the end of trading on Wall Street.

The secret to the Manhattan's enduring popularity can be largely attributed to the natural affinity between spirits and fortified wines. These wines—venerable products such as sherry, port, vermouth and madeira—are imbued with tremendous flavors and lavishly textured bodies, making them incomparable ingredients in cocktails. The annals of mixology are replete with

classic drink recipes that marry fortified wines and spirits and today's practitioners are continuing to explore and redefine the boundaries of this magical pairing.

The explanation for the compatibility lies in how fortified wines are crafted. Back in the days of sailing ships, sending wines across the oceans required vintners to add spirits to their wines to enable them to withstand the rigors of long sea voyages. The spirit, typically a grape distillate, raised the wine's alcohol level to 13% to upwards of 20%. Out of necessity was born an entirely new and delightful genus of potables, namely fortified wines.

"I think using fortified wines in cocktails is a resurgent "lost art," says Jacques Bezuidenhout, bar manager at *Harry Denton's Starlight Room* in San Francisco. "I like incorporating vermouths, sherries, ports into our cocktails as they add tremendous body, depth of flavor and complexity to the drinks. Many of the popular cocktails made with vermouth or other fortified wines are actually classic recipes that have well withstood the test of time."

Bezuidenhout cites as examples the enduring appeal of the **Negroni**—a classic cocktail made with equal parts of sweet vermouth, gin and Campari and the **Americano**, an iced drink concocted with sweet vermouth and Campari.

Vermouth Goes Uptown

Vermouth is the most frequently relied upon fortified wine behind American bars. It is flavored with aromatic herbs and spices according to closely guarded trade recipes. Sweet vermouth—often referred to as Italian Vermouth—is typically made from Apulia and Moscato di Canelli grapes.

After 1-2 years of aging, the wines are blended, filtered and fortified with distilled spirits. Dry (French) vermouth is made from light, thin-skinned Picpoul and Clairette grapes. The wines are aged 2-3 years in oak casks that are exposed to the elements to accelerate maturation. After aging, the wines are infused with botanicals and fortified with spirits.

“There is a huge variance in quality between the various brands of vermouth,” says Matt Rinn, general manager of the *Mosaic Restaurant* in Scottsdale, Arizona. “Suffice to say, the better the vermouth, the better the resulting Manhattan or Martini. There are several brands of California vermouths that are absolutely impeccable.”

To bolster his claim, Rinn points to two Mosaic specialties that rank among the restaurant’s best sellers. The **Oliver Twist Martini** features Junipero Gin from Anchor Distillery and crisp, light Vya Dry Vermouth, which is made by winemaker Andrew Quady of Madera, California. The Mosaic’s **Manhattan BH** is constructed using Jim Beam’s Basil Hayden Bourbon and equal parts of Vya Dry and Sweet Vermouth.

According to Rinn, “The Vya Vermouths are highly aromatic and marry beautifully with the featured spirits in the cocktails. I’ve tasted these drinks made with lesser vermouths and the finished products just aren’t as crisp and lively. The vermouth you choose is crucial.” Andria Herron is the sommelier at Seattle’s elegant *Ibiza Dinner Club*. She, too, is a fan of California vermouth, which Ibiza features in a cocktail named the **King 10 Martini**. The classically structured Martini is made with 1 part Duckhorn Vineyard’s King Elder Vermouth, 2 parts Tanqueray No. 10

gin and capped off with two plump Cabrales bleu cheese stuffed olives. “The vermouth is produced from sauvignon blanc grapes grown in Napa Valley and blended with a special mix of herbs and flowers. It’s a marvelous aperitif and makes a great Martini.”

Duggan McDonnell is the general manager, spirits savant and cocktail authority at *Frissön Restaurant* in San Francisco. One of the city’s popular cocktail haunts, McDonnell tempts the faithful with such specialties as the **Lady Macbeth**, a cocktail featuring Glenmorangie 12 year Portwood Single Malt, Vya Sweet Vermouth and several dashes of Fee Brothers Orange Bitters; and the **Hummingbird**, a classy concoction made with Svedka Clementine Vodka, Quady Essential Orange Muscat—a sweet, tawny-hued aperitif—a splash of Campari, lemon juice, wild sage honey syrup and cranberry juice. The cocktail is shaken and served straight up with an orange fan.

At Scottsdale’s *Jade Bar*, located in the posh Sanctuary on Camelback Mountain Resort and Spa, bar manager Greg Portsche tempts his guests with the **Bolero**, a savory cocktail constructed with dark rum, sweet vermouth, Bristol Cream Sherry and a splash of apple schnapps. For those looking for a cocktail sporting a wee bit more heft, Portsche recommends the **Chancellor**, a specialty made with dry vermouth, ruby port, orange bitters and a bracer of Scotch. “The vermouth and ruby port imbue the Scotch with a discernible Drambuie feel. It is sensational cocktail.”

Marco Recio is the resident master mixologist at *Courtright’s Restaurant* in Willow Springs, Illinois. With decades of experience, Recio often uses fortified wines when creating his bevy of sought after drinks. Examples include the tall, iced **Rancho Contento**, which is made with equal parts of dry and sweet vermouth, a jigger of tequila and a fill with orange juice and the owner’s favorite, the **Port Royale**, an effervescent combination of Taylor-Fladgate Late Bottled Vintage Port and icy cold Champagne.

Sherry’s Supporting Roles

Sherry is a fortified wine produced in the district of Jerez de la Frontera, the famed wine-growing region in southern Spain between Cadiz and Seville. Sherries are typically made from

Palomino grapes. There are principally two styles of Sherry; Fino, which are dry and delicate, and Oloroso, which are fuller-bodied and semi-sweet.

Francesco LaFranconi, master mixologist and director of the *Academy of Spirits and Fine Service* in Las Vegas, frequently relies on sherry as an ingredient when creating signature cocktails for clients. His popular **Capote Martini** was recently featured on the Martha Stewart Show. It's made with LEVEL Vodka, Harvey Bristol Cream Sherry and a small teaspoon of rosemary needles. "Using cream Sherry instead of vermouth effortlessly marries all of the ingredients together, creating a delicate and pleasant nutty taste."

Also high on LaFranconi's hit parade are the **Heirloom Martini**, which showcases LEVEL Vodka and Domecq Manzanilla-Fino style sherry, the **Navan Fizz**, a delectable cocktail crafted with NAVAN Vanilla Liqueur, Harvey Bristol Cream Sherry, apple sauce, fresh lime juice and a pasteurized egg white and the altogether delicious **Pineapple Sherry Mojito**, a libation that has become a specialty of the house at the Wynn Hotel in Las Vegas.

One of popular eateries in Lettuce Entertain You portfolio, *Nacional 27* is a Pan-Latin restaurant in Chicago. Their general manager, sommelier and cocktail authority Adam Seger wows the crowds with cocktails such as the **Amontillado Perfect**, a lavish affair consisting of Amontillado Sherry, Disaronno Amaretto, sweet vermouth, bitters and a splash of grenadine. "The cocktail has all of the complex flavors of a bourbon Manhattan, but with more food-friendly acidity, yet light enough to not overwhelm your palate."

Last year's *Sherry Cocktail Competition* drew entries from across the globe. The finalists of the high-profile event were invited to perform at New York's *Flatiron Lounge* in front of an audience and a prestigious panel of judges that included Steve Olson, Paul Pacult, Dave Wondrich and Dale DeGroff.

The winner of the international competition was Jacques Bezuidenhout of *Harry Denton's Starlight Room* and his cocktail, **La Perla**. The drink is made with 1 ½ oz. each of Domecq Manzanilla Sherry and Gran Centenario Reposado Tequila and ¾ oz. Mathilde Poire Liqueur. The ingredients are stirred gently and served straight up with a lemon twist.

Harry Denton's features several ultra-elegant specialties laced with fortified wines that they've dubbed the *Million Dollar Cocktail Collection*. The repertoire includes the **Heavenly Dram**, a classy offering featuring Macallan 25-year Single Malt, Pedro Ximenez Sherry, lemon juice and honey syrup and the **Angels' Share**, a decadent combination of Remy Martin Louis XIII Cognac, Charbay Walnut Liqueur, Rocha 20-year Port and a splash of Chartreuse VEP.

Runner up in the competition was **Le Jardin Verde**, a cocktail created by Brian van Flandern of *Per Se* in New York City. His award-winning libation featured Sandeman Rare Fino Sherry, Hangar One Kaffir Lime Vodka, cucumber puree, lime juice, simple syrup and an ounce of Moscato D'asti Perrone.

At Houston's *Rickshaw Far East Bistro and Bambu Lounge*, general manager John Cook appreciates the allure of a skillfully crafted cocktail. Among the chic restaurant's best sellers is the **Dirty Pom Pom**, a blend of Osborne Cream Sherry, X-RATED Fusion Liqueur, pomegranate and fresh lime juice. Greg Portsche of Scottsdale's *Jade Bar* prefers a twist on the classic Fino Martini called the **Tuxedo Cocktail**, a straightforward drink made with 3 parts gin, 1 part Fino Sherry and a few dashes of orange bitters. "The Fino Sherry pulls out the distinguishing characteristics of each and every one of the botanicals in the gin," says Portsche.

Port and Madeira as Headliners

Port is a fortified wine made primarily from red wine grapes cultivated in the Upper Duoro Valley district of northern Portugal. Most are shipped from the city of Oporto, located at the mouth of the Duoro River. Ruby Ports are made from a blend of young wines from different vintages, while Tawny Port is a blend of older wines, pale in color with a distinctive amber edge.

One of the signature drinks at *Frissön Restaurant* in San Francisco is the **Bossa Nova**, a cocktail made with 10 Cane Trinidadian Rum, Fonseca Bin 27 Port, Velvet Falernum, lime juice, simple syrup and peach bitters. While at *Ibiza Dinner Club*, Andria Herron recommends a house specialty called the **Mediterranean Sparkler**, a drink that combines 1 oz. of Domaine Charbay

Napa Valley White Port poured in a champagne glass and topped off with chilled Prosecco.

A signature at the *Rickshaw Far East Bistro and Bambú Lounge* is the **Port Of Comfort**. GM John Cook devised the popular recipe using 2 oz. of Fairbanks Tawny Port, a jigger of Stoli Vanil Vodka, a ½ oz. each of Disaronno Amaretto and Southern Comfort and some sweetened lime juice. The concoction is shaken vigorously and served in a chilled cocktail glass.

At famed *33 Restaurant* in Boston, owner Greg Herder promotes several cocktails made with port. The cast includes the **Pomport Cosmo**, which features 1 oz. ruby port, Cointreau, lime juice and a splash of pomegranate. Also popular at *33 Restaurant* is the **Cherry Bomb**, a cocktail made with 10-year tawny port, Effen Black Cherry Vodka and Godiva Dark Chocolate Liqueur. “The tawny port already has a cherry, vanilla and chocolate palate, which ties in all of the flavors quite well.”

Madeira is often considered a sweet dessert wine, but there are dry styles as well. Made in Portugal, the wine is blended and aged in Soleras, similar to how sherries are produced. Madeiras are typically fortified with grape spirits or brandy.

At *Nacional 27* in Chicago, the favorite postprandial specialty is dubbed the **Century Alexander**. Priced at a cool \$55 per, the extravagant dessert-like drink is made with Blandy’s Verdelho Madeira

1934, Camus XO Cognac, Clement Shrub Creole Liqueur and homemade Tres Leches ice cream. “It is one of the most delectable dessert drinks I’ve ever encountered. Our guests love them,” observes general manager Seger.

The **Charleston Chew** is one of two specialties at Scottsdale’s *Mosaic Restaurant* that feature Madeira in their recipes. It combines 2 ¼ oz. Charleston Barbieto Madeira, 1 oz. of Grand Marnier and a ½ oz. Disaronno Amaretto. It is shaken over ice and strained into a frosted cocktail glass. The **Barbieto Bullet** is made with equal parts of Barbieto Madeira, Stoli Vanil, Mozart Dark Chocolate Liqueur and a splash of butterscotch schnapps. The mix is shaken and served chilled in a port glass.

Francesco LaFranconi promotes a cocktail called *Le Colonial*, a sumptuous libation made with Plymouth Gin, Cockburn’s Fine Ruby Port, Cherry Heering, bitters, lime and pineapple juice. The ingredients are shaken and strained into an iced glass. Francesco finishes the drink off with fresh mint and a sprinkle of nutmeg.

Little did the staff at the *Manhattan Club* realize the revolution that they were fomenting when first they laced rye whiskey with vermouth. More than a century later, mixologists are still following suit and crafting timeless classics by pairing spirits with delicate fortified wines. *Viva la revolution!*

Robert Plotkin is a judge at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition and the author of numerous books including the 5th edition of *The Bartender’s Companion: The Original Guide to American Cocktails and Drinks*. You can reach him at BarMedia— 1-800-421-7179 or robert@barmedia.com.

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