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Fun Fact

Shrubs were originally devised in England in the late 15th century for medicinal purposes. By the 17th century, concocting shrubs was a cottage industry in response to high taxes on imported spirits and by the 18th century, shrubs found their way to the Americas. Over time, shrubs evolved into cordials that could be added to cocktail recipes. Like bitters, they are regarded as condiments bartenders can use to fine tune cocktails...to make a drink that resonates with a given occasion, season or cuisine.

— DIFFORD'S GUIDE,
an online cocktail encyclopedia
(diffordsguide.com)

SHRUBS: *Branching out toward more* **CREATIVE COCKTAILS**

| **BY ELYSE GLICKMAN** | The emergence of craft cocktails has provided bartenders greater incentive to replace artificially flavored mixers and flavoring agents with more natural, artisanal solutions. Shrubs — non-alcoholic syrups made with sugar, vinegar, water and fruit, and often enhanced with herbs, spices and other botanicals — are what mixologists are turning to.

In fact, shrubs have been a go-to flavoring in Mexico for years — which means they're ideal ingredients in cocktails featured at Mexican and

Latin restaurants.

"In Mexico, where incredible flavors can only be found during certain times of the year, past generations realized shrubs were the best way to preserve them. There's a new generation of bartenders in Mexico who are remembering their mothers' and grandmothers' recipes for preserving fruits and vegetables all year round," says Alvaro Garcia, bartender at Mexico City's Rayo Cocktail Bar, a venue known for its innovative drink menu. "They are applying them to their bar pro-

grams, rather than relying on flavored liqueurs or syrups. "[The recipes] have been passed down to bartenders who use them to add complexity to any cocktail. This also allows for combinations of flavors grown in different seasons to be mixed any time of year."

Lucas Ryden, lead bartender for San Diego's Realm of the 52 Remedies and founder of Cool Hand Co., says shrubs are particularly well-suited for the flavors of Mexican and Latin American cuisines.

"The vinegar component in a shrub



Cool Hand Co.'s Mexican-inspired Chapala Cocktail with tequila or mezcal, agave nectar, lime juice, and pineapple turmeric ginger shrub

provides a unique and mouthwatering acidity that cuts through spice, fat, and sugar really well,” says Ryden, whose company makes cocktail shrubs. “This acidity also complements all the fresh fruits, chiles, and herbs within this ingredient canon. I think all fruit bases for shrubs are fair game — berries, stone fruits, tropical fruits — [and] I particularly like using chiles and Mexican spices like cinnamon, clove, and hibiscus as a way to add those flavors to drinks with efficiency.”

MAKING SHRUBS

Shrubs, like bitters, can be purchased or pre-made. The long shelf life and the relative ease of preparing them in-house are two reasons they have been embraced by creative bartenders.

According to Garcia, if you’ve infused tequila or vodka at your bar, you have the skills to make shrubs. “I discovered

Tips for In-house Prep

Selecting the wrong vinegar or adding too much of it are two of the most common mistakes bartenders make when crafting shrubs. Industry pros offer several tips that can help mixologists avoid those errors, which can create overpowering vinegar smells and/or flavors.

Pick a method: hot vs. cold.

“Over the years, I’ve learned that different methods depend on what type of shrub you want to create and the experience you want customers to get out of the finished drink,” says Alvaro Garcia, bartender at Mexico City’s Rayo Cocktail Bar.

The hot method yields shrubs more quickly, while the cold method can produce more complex flavors, according to “Making Shrubs,” a how-to article from Edible New Mexico. (ediblenm.com).

“The cold method is mainly

used for herbs and flowers, as adding heat reduces the floral notes and flavors. This process is slower in extraction of flavors, but results are incredible,” Garcia says.

The hot method, on the other hand, allows the cooked fruit’s sweetness to balance out the vinegar’s acidity and helps avoid the problem of the finished product “tasting a bit too much like salad dressing,” adds Lucas Ryden, founder of Cool Hand Co., a company that makes cocktail shrubs.

Philip Ly, bar director at General Lee’s in Los Angeles, recommends macerating, cooking and straining ingredients before adding vinegar — especially when using whole fruits/herbs/spices.

“It gives you a better sense of what everything will taste like, and you can slowly add the vinegar until you hit that sweet

spot before the taste of vinegar becomes too powerful,” says Ly, who grew up immersed in Mexican/Latin American food and culture, which he said has helped shape his palate throughout his career. “Almost half our clientele at General Lee’s is Hispanic, so we are fortunate — we really dig into Latin flavors out of necessity,” he adds.

Learn about vinegars. “After a few sessions of R&D, I realized I was choosing the wrong vinegars for the shrub I intended on making,” says Ly. “Learning more about vinegars — how each one tastes and how acidic it is — helped me choose the right vinegar for the shrub I wanted to make. Stronger vinegars like a balsamic will be harder to work with, so it is best to blend it with like a champagne vinegar or Datu Puti to get the flavor you are looking for without the overwhelming vinegar taste.”

If vinegar flavor is too strong,

let shrubs marinate. Ly has discovered that the vinegar in the shrub starts to mellow after the shrub sits in the refrigerator for a few days. “Early on when I made shrubs, the vinegar came out too strong for my liking and I ended up adding more sugar and fruit trying to balance it out,” he recalls. “But simply letting it sit and marinate for a few days helped balance everything out naturally.”

Have correct tools on hand.

Garcia’s list includes glass jars or plastic receptacles, sugar, vinegar, water, fruits/or vegetables, peeler, tape, marker, pen, and notepad as data is key.

Try everything! “The dos for creating a shrub is to try everything,” says Garcia’s colleague Tito Perez. “Combine flavors, work on your ratios and formulas, and never stop experimenting. Even if you fail, you have some awesome data to go by and things will get easier.”

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shrubs back in 2016 while working at the amazing Gramercy Tavern in New York City, the first place I saw and tasted a shrub," says Tito Perez, Garcia's colleague at Rayo. "I saw how simple it was to make, and that with dedication and patience, you could really expand a kitchen and cocktail menu if used properly. I decided to experiment at home and started making very interesting cocktails. I loved the idea of taking something simple like a strawberry and turning it into something complicated, acidic, floral, and yet still fragile. I was hooked!"

The possibilities are almost endless when it comes to crafting shrubs that harmonize with different spirits. For example, red wine vinegar-based shrubs can enliven sangria and sherry-based cocktails. Apple-based shrubs elevate mezcal and tequila as well as white and brown spirits. Cranberry-pear or cranberry-fig shrubs are not only ideal for holiday season drinks but also lovely partners for Latin American rums. And with the growing popularity of savory and less sweet cocktails, basil, fennel, peppercorns, rosemary, and thyme can be worked into a recipe to temper the shrub's sweetness.

Perez advises bartenders at Latin-focused bars to have a wide variety of ingredients on hand so they can create cocktail-enhancing shrubs year-round. For the holidays and winter months, he recommends using pumpkin, currant, and stone fruits "to really bring out nostalgic flavors." Strawberry, raspberry, mango, pineapple, and beets also are among his favorites. "They combine well with any spirits and also work well in mocktail recipes," he adds.

The benefits of making shrubs go beyond flavor; there's also an aspect of sustainability to the practice, Ly notes.

"I started playing with shrubs earlier this year because I wanted to start focusing on building a more sustainable bar program," explains Philip Ly, bar director at General Lee's Cocktail House in Los Angeles, who features several Hispanic-inspired cocktails on his menu. "California is in a bad drought, and I wanted to be more conscious of waste in our bar. Making shrubs was one of the many creative ways one can use to upcycle fruit/vegetables/herbs that otherwise would be disposed of."

At the Bar columnist Elyse Glickman is a Los Angeles-based writer who specializes in covering the food and beverage industry.

Nana's Pineapple Upside Down Cake Cocktail with Pineapple Five Spice Shrub from General Lee's



Make it a Mocktail

In venues with mocktails on the menu, shrubs can be a major asset. The acidity and kick from vinegar can mimic the heat of alcohol, providing a more interesting experience for your palate than something made with just juices or syrups. The shrub becomes the "backbone" of this experience, something that other nonalcoholic ingredients can't really do.

"Bars could really elevate their mocktail programs with all the pieces of fruits and veggies that go to waste from day to day," says Tito Perez of Mexico City's Rayo Cocktail Bar. "Shrubs add acidity, sweetness, and tartness to any mocktail. The nonalcoholic sector is a huge one and is one that's been put to the side for too long. Shrub-based mocktails can boost sales and bring in a new type of clientele."

Berenjena (Eggplant) Merlo with Nogada

Recipe courtesy of Giuseppe Merlo, Trattoria Merlo

The Nogada:

250 grams (8.8 oz.) raw percanera walnuts
1 oz. sherry
180 ml (6 oz.) Greek yogurt
¼ liter *crema* or heavy cream
½ apple

Blend all ingredients to make the sauce.
Set aside.

The Eggplant:

1 eggplant, halved
1 T. garlic, diced

After cutting the eggplant in half, sprinkle with salt to remove the bitterness. Wash off the salt. Use a fork to make small holes in the eggplant. Brush lightly with olive oil, bake in oven at 250°C for about 30 minutes. Remove skin, cut flesh into cubes. Sauté with a little olive oil and a tablespoon of diced garlic, about five minutes. Add the walnut cream sauce, stir for several minutes to warm up. Ladle over pasta or chicken.

La Lunita's Nogada

Recipe courtesy of Antonio Porras, La Lunita

60 to 70 grams (2 to 2 ½ oz.) walnuts, soaked in water, peeled and ground
250 ml (8½ oz.) *crema* or heavy cream
15 grams (½ oz.) sugar
Pinch of cinnamon and pepper

Blend all the ingredients. Use to make Chiles en Nogada or other dishes calling for walnut sauce.

Chapal Cocktail

Recipe courtesy of Cool Hand Co. (CHC)

Makes 1 cocktail

2 oz. tequila or mezcal
½ oz. CHC Pineapple Turmeric Ginger Shrub
¾ oz. fresh lime juice
1 t. agave nectar

1 handful fresh cilantro leaves
Shake all ingredients with ice for 5 to 7 seconds. Fine-strain into glass with fresh cubes. Garnish with cilantro bouquet.

Nana's Pineapple Upside-down Cake Cocktail

Recipe courtesy of General Lee Cocktail House, Los Angeles, CA
Makes 1 cocktail

1½ oz. Diplomatico Mantuano
1½ oz. Pineapple Five Spice Shrub (recipe below)
Dehydrated lime and pandan leaf, for garnish

Combine ingredients and shake. Double strain into a Nick and Nora glass. Garnish with pandan leaf and dried lime.

The Pineapple Five Spice Shrub:

1⅔ oz. cinnamon
1 oz. star anise
1¼ oz. clove
10 g. fennel
1¼ oz. red Sichuan pepper
2 qts. pineapple chunks
500 ml apple cider vinegar
1500 ml white vinegar

Toast spices in a pan. Heat the pineapple and add spices and sugar. Stir to incorporate. Strain out solids and add vinegars and reduce by 20 percent.

Let cool and refrigerate. Good for 1 month.

Bartender's Note: "The cocktail is essentially a riff on a pineapple daiquiri. The addition of a pineapple five-spice shrub adds an extra layer of depth, spice, and acidity without an overbearing amount of sweetness found in most daiquiris."

Pepe el Toro Cocktail

Recipe courtesy of Rayo, Mexico City

Makes 1 cocktail

1¾ oz. Chivas 13
½ oz. Nixta (Mexican liqueur)
½ oz. lime juice
1 oz. Piña y Agave shrub
Soda to top off
Large ice cube

Combine liquors, lime juice and shrubs in a mixing glass and stir or shake gently. Pour into a tumbler glass with a large ice cube and serve.

La Ofrenda Cocktail

Recipe courtesy of Rayo, Mexico City

Makes 1 cocktail

1¾ oz. mezcal
¾ oz. lemon juice
1½ oz. pumpkin shrub
3 dashes Angostura Bitters

Combine all ingredients in a mixing glass and stir or shake gently. Pour into a glass with a large ice cube. Garnish and serve.