

THE BITTER PILL

COCKTAILS WOULD BE NOTHING WITHOUT THE ADDITION OF A SECRET SPICE

WORDS KRYSIA BONKOWSKI

While the origins of the cocktail are as muddled as a good mojito, the earliest reference is generally traced back to New York broadsheet *The Balance and Columbian Repository* in 1806.

“Cocktail is a stimulating liquor composed of spirits of any kind, sugar, water, and bitters,” it says. “It is supposed to be an excellent electioneering potion, inasmuch as it renders the heart stout and bold, at the same time that it fuddles the head.”

And so the entwined fate of liquor and bitters was sealed.

A blend of aromatic herbs and spices bound by an alcoholic base, bitters were first popularised as a medicinal stomach tonic

(which is why so many brands still resemble apothecary’s potions).

Only a few drops are needed, but they play a decisive role in binding ingredients and adding depth, says John ‘JD’ Dimitropoulos of Melbourne specialist retailer The Bitters Lab.

“Bitters are like herbs in a sauce ... without them, you miss out on an entirely different flavour profile,” he says. JD and his wife Sophia stock more than 500 varieties on OnlyBitters.com and at The Bitters Lab.

The old faithful, lemon, lime and bitters, as well as cocktails such as the Manhattan, wouldn’t be the same without bitters.

“If you really want to see what difference a few drops of bitters can make in a drink, make two Old Fashioned cocktails – one

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...without them, you miss out on an entirely different flavour profile

with aromatic bitters and one without,” JD says.

“The one without bitters will taste perfectly okay, but the one with them will have added complexity and be truly elevated.”

Most would recognise the Caribbean bitters Angostura, but these days there’s no shortage of alternatives. Homegrown options include Dobson’s Aromatic Bitters from NSW and Melbourne’s Mister Bitters.

Kevin Peters, head bartender at Melbourne’s Garden State Hotel, makes his own bitters and sources specialist blends



GARDEN STATE HOTEL’S RICHMOND 75



INGREDIENTS

3 strawberries
20ml rosemary-infused Absolut vodka*
10ml St-Germain
30ml fresh lemon juice
15ml maple syrup
1 dropper full Crude Bitters (Hibiscus, Lavender & Oak)*
Champagne, to top
1 rosemary sprig for garnish

METHOD

Muddle strawberries, then add vodka, St-Germain, lemon juice, maple syrup and bitters. Shake and double strain into a Champagne flute. Top with Champagne and garnish with a small rosemary sprig.

*To make rosemary-infused vodka, leave three sticks of rosemary in a bottle of Absolut for three days, then strain.
* Crude Bitters available at onlybitters.com

for his cocktails.

He uses an artisan, floral bitters in his take on a French 75. “Bitters are used in this drink to create a well-balanced drink,” Kevin says. “Not too sweet, sour, or savoury ... Just right!” ✈