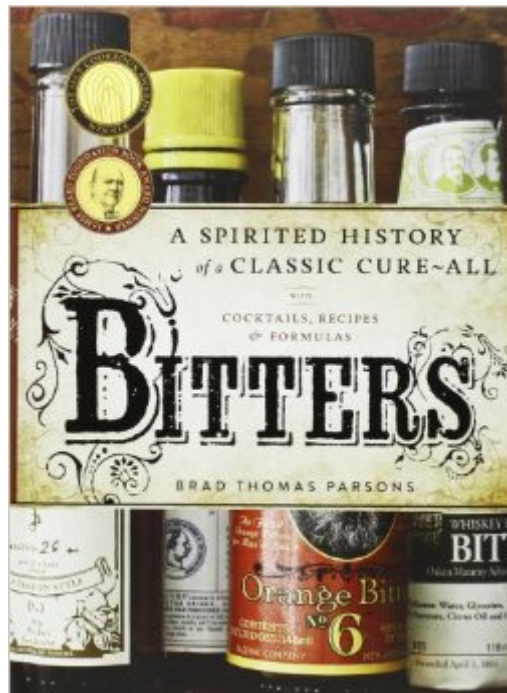


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Bitters: A Spirited History Of A Classic Cure-All, With Cocktails, Recipes, And Formulas



Synopsis

Gone are the days when a lonely bottle of Angostura bitters held court behind the bar. A cocktail renaissance has swept across the country, inspiring bartenders and their thirsty patrons a new fascination with the ingredients, techniques, and traditions that make the American cocktail so special. And few ingredients have as rich a history or serve as fundamental a role in our beverage heritage as bitters. Author and bitters enthusiast Brad Thomas Parsons traces the history of the world's most storied elixir, from its earliest days to its near evaporation after Prohibition to its ascension as a beloved (and at times obsessed-over) ingredient on the contemporary bar scene. Parsons writes from the front lines of the bitters boom, where he has access to the best and boldest new brands and flavors, the most innovative artisanal producers, and insider knowledge of the bitters-making process. Whether you're a professional looking to take your game to the next level or just a DIY-type interested in homemade potables, Bitters has a dozen recipes for customized blends--ranging from Apple to Coffee-Pecan to Root Beer bitters--as well as tips on sourcing ingredients and step-by-step instructions fit for amateur and seasoned food crafters alike. Also featured are more than seventy cocktail recipes that showcase bitters' diversity and versatility: classics like the Manhattan (if you ever get one without bitters, send it back), old-guard favorites like the Martinez, contemporary drinks from Parsons' own repertoire like the Shady Lane, plus one-of-a-kind libations from the country's most pioneering bartenders. Last but not least, there is a full chapter on cooking with bitters, with a dozen recipes for sweet and savory bitters-infused dishes. Part recipe book, part project guide, part barman's manifesto, Bitters is a celebration of good cocktails made well, and of the once-forgotten but blessedly rediscovered virtues of bitters.

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Customer Reviews

From Rowley's Whiskey Forge: It has become a cliché of modern bartending that bitters are to cocktails as salt is to soup. They are the seasoning, the ingredient that can turn merely acceptable drinks into stellar ones. Or, as one Filipino friend explained to another in a turn close to my heart, "Bitters are to cocktails as bay leaves are to adobo." You may or may not be able to pinpoint the taste, but without it, everything has a certain flatness. If you already make your own cocktail bitters, chances are that Brad Thomas Parsons' recent book on the subject holds little new for you. On the other hand, if you're just starting to dabble or don't know where to begin, *Bitters* conveniently brings together a lot of material in one place. With no other bitters manual in print, one might even call it indispensable for the DIY cocktail enthusiast. After some introductory remarks and history, Parsons dives into the meat of the matter with short profiles of some two dozen players in today's bitters boom: Fee Brothers, Bittermans, The Bitter Truth, Dr. Adam Elmegirab's Bitters, Bar Keep Bitters, Scrappy's, and more. Not a bad lineup considering that a decade ago, Angostura, Fee Brothers, and Peychaud's were the three remaining bitters producers that survived Prohibition. He includes recipes for thirteen bitters such as apple, orange, rhubarb, coffee-pecan, and root beer bitters. A substantial collection of cocktail recipes using bitters -- more than half the book -- rounds out the pages. Parsons clearly has spent much time obsessing over bitters; he interviews appropriate authorities and booze pundits, he includes the right companies and products, and he hits the high points of history. He's done his homework. Yet there's a clumsiness about his writing. After going on for some length about sassafras, for instance, Parsons calls for using it in a recipe -- but what part of the plant? The powdered leaves he writes about? The root he mentions? They are as different as ham and bacon. Or consider this entry under Snake Oil Bitters: "Not much is known about this lineup of Brooklyn bitters or their creator..." Really? That's either lazy or disingenuous. The passage that prompted me to bark out in disbelief, though, is this: "Once I've sized up a joint, I'll ask the bartender, 'Do you make your own bitters?' More often than not, the answer is yes." Oh, come on. Laudable as making bitters is, I guarantee you that the vast majority of American bartenders do no such thing. I can only imagine that this is a sampling error stemming from Parsons' preference for places with what he deems "serious bar programs." I like those places, too, but they're far from the only game in town. While there are welcome lists of bittering and flavoring agents, there's no attempt

to give them Linnaean names or even thumbnail descriptions. When plants' common names vary from place to place and related plants often parade under the same name, specifying genus and species is especially important, a convention one finds in the most useful gardening books and horticultural tomes. The lists entirely omit traditional bitters coloring agents such as sandalwood, Brazil wood, and cochineal. Don't get me wrong; I'm glad to own a copy. If you're into cocktails, you should get one, too, if only to understand this core ingredient better. Even if you have no intention to macerate, infuse, percolate, and use homemade bitters, there's a wealth of recipes for cocktails using commercial examples. It's just that I would prefer to have seen a stronger editorial hand here, a more rigorous historical and scientific review before Bitters had gone to print. If I sound disappointed, it's because the book is merely good; it could have been great.

For a book that bills itself as "A spirited history..." this book is woefully short of interesting historical information. You do get a little, around a dozen pages worth, but even if you discount the early use of bitters in or as patent medicines or tonics, their place in cocktail culture deserves far better research and story telling that this book provides. Taking the case of Abbott's Bitters, which ceased production in the early 1950s, cocktail geeks far and wide have obsessed about the product for years, going so far as performing gas chromatography on samples and talking to surviving relatives of the producers. But the author apparently did none of that and only gives a couple of half-hearted paragraphs about a 1907 trademark lawsuit between the makers of Angostura Bitters and Abbott's before launching into a two-page personal anecdote about a bartender friend making him a Manhattan with the last of his antique Abbott's. In a nutshell, that is either the strength or downfall of the entire book depending on your preference. The book is essentially a collection of recipes for several flavors of homemade bitters and an abundance of cocktails that make use of bitters. But most of the text of the book is a memoir of the author's personal experiences with and paean to the modern speakeasy (high-toned cocktail bar) and its place in today's foodie subculture. On that count, this book is reasonably well done. There is a lot of attractive photography of bartenders making beautiful looking cocktails. The writing isn't bad although it feels more like reading someone's blog than a professionally produced book. As a counter example, I was expecting something along the lines of Jeff Berry's books, where the author's voice is present but fades into the background as he tells the stories of the personalities and places involved in the tropical drink and restaurant fad that began in the 1940s. There the history is the material, not the author's obvious love for the topic. Regarding the actual meat of the book, the recipes, the selection of drink recipes contains something for every taste. I'm sure everyone will find something they think is new

and interesting and fantastic and something they think is undrinkable. The bitters recipes themselves are probably what most people would buy the book for, and they unfortunately suffer from a pretty big flaw. The method used to make the bitters is the same for all of them. Not only does this waste a bunch of space as the same exact steps are duplicated for every recipe, but the method seems to work better for some recipes than others and is susceptible to a particularly strong or fresh ingredient throwing off the desired flavor profile of the batch of bitters. It's also a different method than what many professional bartenders who experiment with making their own bitters do (based on reading their blogs online). All in all, if you're looking for a pretty book full of anecdotes about drinking in hip modern bars with cool bartenders and other foodies then this is a great book. If you're looking for good information about how to make your own bitters or especially if you're interested in the history of bitters, the interwebs are a better place to start.

The title of the book is a bit misleading, because so much more than just some history of bitters and bunch of recipes. Everything from history to setting up your bar and mixology basics. This book is able to cover a wide variety of topics in a way that is surprisingly well focused and concise. The majority of the book is recipes (Bitters, Drinks and Food) and I can't help but to be impressed about the care taken with the them. Each one has a small introduction, with a little bit of history, a personal anecdote, or a little bit of whimsy that really helps the reader connect with the text. Nothing in this book is an afterthought or out of context filler like you see with so many drink books. The book does go into comprehensive detail about the bitters available on the market today. The list is very comprehensive, even talking about fairly obscure Bitters such as BitterCube (Wisconsin). Brad goes out on a limb and makes a recommendation of the 11 commercial must have bitters for your cocktail bar. Once you have the feel for the commercially produced bitters you move on to how to make your own. The book breaks down the recipes into a very approachable format. If I were to have a criticism it's would be that there's only 13 actual Bitters Recipes in the book. However, I think overall the book leaves the reader with more than enough information to continue down the road of making bitters. Who Should Read this Book: Drink Nerds, High Functioning Alcoholics with standards, Home-brewers.

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