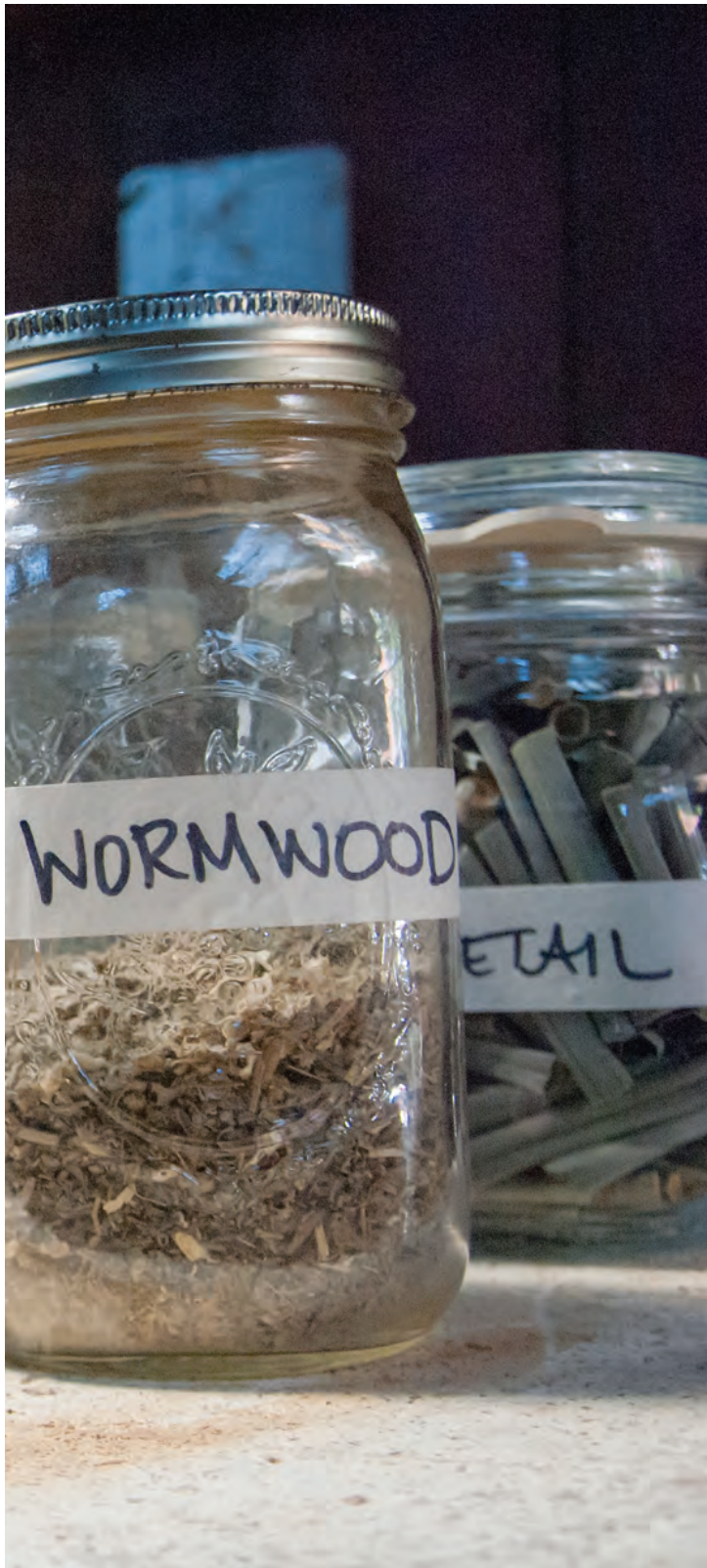




Elderberry, lemongrass, wormwood, lemon zest, and cattail are just a few of the botanicals that can be used in creating unique bitters recipes.
© Andrew Faulkner

EXPRESSING YOUR BITTER SIDE



BY KAT VALENTINA

Another night behind the bar, and in they drag themselves. Servers with bloodshot eyes, quivering hands, and groaning voices, shuffle around the restaurant. “Why did I slam those shots last night?” mumbles one not-so-plucky duckling. Chuckling as I make my 100% effective hangover cure, I place the elixir in front of those skeptical half-closed eyes and instruct, “Here, drink this, but you have to suck it all down at once!” Ten minutes pass and out bounces a bright-eyed employee. “What was IN that? I feel energized, soooo much better!” Again, I chuckle.



These three macerations could be used individually as tinctures, or combined to create a bitters recipe. From left to right—lavender, rosemary, wormwood, hyssop, gentian, and apricot kernels. © Andrew Faulkner

WHERE IT STARTED

The drink was merely a tumbler full of soda water, a splash of spirit, and oodles of bitters. As a youngster in the spirits scene, I associated bitters with hangover cures and old men's drinks. The bottle of Angostura had been behind the bar since it opened (maybe even before) and I had never even read the label. Years later, I wince as I remember my naïve understanding of bitters.

Looking back at the birth of bitters, we notice the original intent. Creating a botanical blend of highly concentrated liquid was crucial in assisting with nausea and other ailments. A medicinal curative purpose was the modest start for this beast of a seasoning tool. A dose of bitters went down with a grimace, but

yielded results. Sure enough, patrons started adding a dash of gin or whiskey to calm down the intense astringent nature. (Flash forward to now, where the script has been flipped and bitters are the seasoning agent, complementing the ample pour of select spirit.)

As time passed and Prohibition choked out most bitters companies, we saw a disappearance of the healing remedies. Angostura and Peychaud's held on though, vehemently claiming just that: Bitters are medicinal, not an alcoholic substance! Many years beyond the time of alcohol suppression, there is now a movement into a conscious place of creating cocktails with purpose, sourced from authentically *good* ingredients. It is no wonder the industry

is alive with variations of the famous digestives to complement the current theme of the industry.

Enter the bitters renaissance. As I became more immersed into the cocktail culture, it was enthralling to observe the use of bitters and their subtle influence. New labels started popping up, with distinctive twists on old recipes. Most craft cocktail bars now create homemade bitters, and small companies emerge with unique flavor combinations.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Preparing bitters is a gentle task. Although there are several production

continues on page 97

formats, a simple maceration process offers less focus on technical alchemy and more emphasis on the creativity of flavor pairing.

To begin, let's discuss the herbs. The choice on what to use is personal, and will dictate the base of the bitters. Wormwood, hyssop, cassia, cinchona bark, cascarilla, dandelion and gentian root are a few choices for the bittering component. Choosing the aromatics is the time to be bold. Fruits, vegetables, spices and herbs all play well together in this realm; think beyond the ordinary. Also, pay attention to how you are macerating ingredients. With dense items, slice or chop ingredients for best results. Delicate herbs or leaves can be torn or left as whole for maceration.

With many different recipes available, the following is a mix of opinions added to personal experimentation.

Start with two glass containers with tight lids for macerating. One container holds your selection of bittering herbs, combined with a high proof NGS (Neutral Grain Spirit OR any other neutral spirit). The other container will hold the aromatics and NGS. Using separate containers offers two benefits. The first benefit is to ensure the appropriate amount of bittering herbs within your finished product.

Getting familiar with how strong the choice bittering herbs are can be a process. This way, once you have the two fully macerated jars of both aromatics and bittering herbs, carefully add the bittering herbs to the aromatics until the desired level of bitterness is achieved. Secondly, having a large jar of macerated bittering herbs on hand is lovely for multiple uses with various aromatics selections.

While always sticking to high proof NGS for the bittering herbs, I do play around with different spirits for the aromatics. Adding a batch of savory botanicals to a fabulous gin is a smooth move. Spiced or aged rum, full of warm



Labeling your creations helps make recipes that can be accurately reproduced and modified. © Andrew Faulkner

botanicals, adds a lovely texture to aromatics.

Two rules: First, let your creativity get the better of you; second, measure what you create. Be bold in how you combine your concoction, but make sure you write it down for future macerations

or even for adjusting the current batch. With so many recipes just a Google search away, precise measurements might serve to stifle creativity. So, here are a few guidelines to get you started down the path to creating your own unique bitters.



Left—Hyssop, and most other botanicals, can create very different flavors and mouth feels, depending on whether they are used fresh or dry. © Andrew Faulkner

Above—a collection of botanicals awaits the addition of neutral spirits to begin an infusion for aromatic bitters. © Andrew Faulkner

Jar #1 (bittering herbs): Fill about a third of the way with chosen ingredients. Fill the remainder with NGS. Let them relax over the next few weeks, shaking daily for maximum absorption.

Jar #2 (aromatics): Gauge the amount of ingredients by their nature.

When analyzing the ingredients for blending, use common sense. Roots, nuts, dried fruit peels, larger seeds and dense spices will take longer to release full flavor into the spirit and offer stronger influences. Fresh fruit and

vegetables will add water in the initial macerating process. Floral petals and delicate herbs need only a few days for absorption and require a larger quantity for optimum flavor release. Build the aromatics jar with this knowledge.

Want a hint of peppercorn? You probably need only a small amount to bring in this flavor, but will want the maceration period to last over a month. A strong lavender flavor is desired? Using a copious amount of this delicate herb is in order, although the time needed

is much less than for peppercorns. You can add or remove ingredients at varying times with this knowledge.

After jars have been tightened and placed in a cool, comfortable place, there are two requirements: Shake daily with vigor, and taste regularly. Maybe those peppercorns are becoming overwhelming after week one. Scoop them out and let the remainder of ingredients take over the concoction. Adjusting and constantly re-creating is part of first time bitters production experience.



Above—Lavendar, mint, hyssop and other fresh garden herbs await maceration to make aromatic bitters.
© Andrew Faulkner



Right—Neutral spirits are poured over aromatic botanicals to begin the maceration to create one of the elements in an aromatic bitters recipe. Later, the infusion will be combined with other components to make a balanced recipe.
© Andrew Faulkner

Once jar #1 and #2 are complete, strain out the ingredients and filter the liquids through a cheesecloth or coffee filter into clean jars. Many recipes call for the addition of water and sugar. The water aids in bringing the ABV down while the sugar takes the edge off and creates viscosity. Bring several cups of water to boil with the extracted aromatics and the desired amount of sweetener; then cool and filter liquid into a third jar.

You have three separate containers

to be blended; the original aromatics are now your base. Add bittering herbs to create desired bitterness, then supplement with sweetened herb water for the desired level of sweetness or ABV. Once you have alchemized your perfect bitters, pull out the Sharpie and masking tape, and slap a creative name on that masterpiece!

An alternate way to create a similar result is to remove the step where water and sugar is added. Using fresh ingredients mixed with dry ones can

offer varying levels of flavor strength while adding organic sugars and water. Also, as mentioned above, using other spirits that are not so high in proof can naturally decrease your overall ABV to the desired level. The choice of preparation method is yours.

Bitters are a blast. From creating them to imbibing with them, options are limitless. Go forth. Be bold. Bitter to your heart's content. ☺