

The Bitters' Truth—An Aromatic Adventure

Presented by Susan Belsinger

“Bitter is the gatekeeper of adult taste.”

---Naomi Duguid

Long used for their wonderful digestive virtues, bitters have become somewhat of a popular craze in today's mixology scene. Besides the best-known Angostura and Peychaud's bitters, there are presently over 25 small-batch bitters makers and countless enthusiasts who are creating herbal alchemy at home. Bitter herbs and spices are used in preparing these flavoring agents along with at least 80 to 90 proof alcohol and aromatic botanicals are added to make them palatable. The array of herbs and spices, which are available today, has resulted in seemingly endless and inspired flavor combinations. Aromatic bitters are easy and exciting to create at home.

Bitters, defined by *World Book* as certain bitter liquids extracted from herbs, leaves, barks, rhizomes (underground stems), roots, or flower heads, have been used throughout history to cure ailments as well as to please the palate. For centuries, these aromatic flavorings using bitter herbs, barks and roots have been used for everything from cramps and stomach issues to constipation and headaches and hangovers. There have been many recipes for bitters throughout history.

In his article, “Gratitude: bitters and wild American herbalism”, Guido Mase explains “Bitters are part of restoring the diversity that's missing in our diets, and (as with the previous examples), building our wellness. We can feel it when we taste them. The flavor can be challenging at first, but we know the benefits: digestive support, liver support, gentle daily support for our natural detox system, and appetite regulation.

I like the way Kiva Rose in her *Terms of the Trade* so aptly summarizes the action of bitters: “Very simply, a bitter is an herb with a predominantly bitter taste, and the activation of that taste in the mouth stimulates the secretion of digestive juices throughout the body. By necessity then, bitters must be tasted in order work their magic. Bitters stimulate the activity of the digestive organs, triggering or increasing the flow of acids and juices, releasing enzymes and generally improving both appetite and digestion. Many bitters are especially efficient at increasing the metabolism of fats and proteins. However, bitters do not just stimulate digestion, they also tighten/tone the mucosa.”

Digestives (digestifs) were concocted with herbs to aid in digestion. The most popular digestives were alcoholic bitters, which usually included angostura bark (*Angostura trifoliata*), cinchona (quinine) bark (*Cinchona* spp.), bitter gentian root (*Gentiana lutea* L.), and/or quassia chips (*Quassia amara* L.) as the principal component(s). Bitters, as defined by Dick in his *Encyclopedia of Practical Receipts and Processes* in 1872 (at the height of the popularity of bitters) “are considered as tonic and stomachic, and to improve

the appetite when taken in moderation.” The best time is early in the morning, or an hour before meals.

According to Jamie Boudreau of www.spiritsandcocktails.com: “In theory, bitters are composed of three components: the bittering agent, the flavor and the solution. When making my own bitters I always keep this formula in mind.”

The bittering agent is the ingredient or ingredients that add the bitterness. Some bitter agents which I have experimented with are: angelica root, artichoke leaf, birch leaf, black walnut leaf, burdock root, dandelion bark or root, fringe tree, gentian root, hops, horehound, licorice root, quassia chips, wild cherry bark, wormwood, schizandra berries.

The flavoring agents are used alone or in combination to create a distinct flavor. Of course, more ingredients will give a more complex blend of flavors to your bitters; keep in mind that they need to work well together and often, simple is better. There are many flavor agents, here are a few which I like to use: allspice berries, anise or fennel seed, cardamom pods, cassia chips, cinnamon, citrus peel, cloves, coriander seeds, flower petals, lemongrass, rose hips, saffras.

The solution is the menstruum or liquid used in making the bitters and it is most often alcohol. Bitters can be prepared without alcohol, however their shelf life is short. Higher proof alcohol is more shelf-stable, while speeding up the process and extracts more flavor. Use a good-quality alcohol, preferably at least 90-proof or higher: neutral grain spirits like Everclear or Gemclear, Wray and Nephew 126 Overproof rum, vodka, bourbon, brandy, rye or tequila.

Basic Recipe for Homemade Bitters

This is a general guideline for making bitters, however the ingredients will vary hugely depending upon what bitter and flavor agents you add. For example, if you are using rhubarb—that will add a lot of vegetable bulk—or dried fruit will also. You need less if the botanical is dried than if it is fresh. Bitter agents are very strong so you will only need small amounts. Once you work with them you will get to know them better; experimentation is half the fun! Remember how important it is to keep a journal of recipes of your recipes—keep track of dates, processes and ingredients.

Makes about 1 cup; double or quadruple for a pint or quart

1 cup neutral spirits or alcohol that is at least 90 proof
1 to 2 teaspoons of bitter roots or bark, finely chopped
1 teaspoon to 1/2 cup of flavoring agents
1/2 cup water

About 2 tablespoons Simple Syrup (recipe below)

Place the botanicals in a canning jar and cover with neutral grain spirits and seal tightly with a plastic lid. Shake for 1 minute.

Shake the jar vigorously at least once a day. Let the infusion stand in a cool, dark place for 2 weeks; mark your calendar and taste.

If you are happy with the flavor, strain the alcohol through fine cheesecloth into a clean canning jar. Once the botanicals have been strained (this is referred to as the marc), gather cheesecloth and squeeze it to release as much menstruum as possible.

Place this marc into a saucepan and add 1/2 cup of water. Bring to a boil then cover and lower the heat and allow it to simmer for about 10 minutes. Remove from heat, allow to cool to room temperature and strain through cheesecloth. Add this to the original alcohol infusion along with about 2 tablespoons Simple Syrup; taste and adjust.

Seal the jar and allow the mix to sit for a few days; skim off any debris that might be floating and strain again to remove sediment if necessary and pour into a bitters bottle or small decanter with a lid. You might want to add a little more water to taste. Bitters can be stored indefinitely, use vinegar bitters within 6 months or so.

Simple Syrup

Generally, when making simple syrup, you combine equal amounts of sugar and water in a saucepan, bring the contents to a simmer, stir to dissolve the sugar and let cool. It can be stored in the refrigerator for 3 to 4 weeks.

In the excellent book Bitters by Brad Thomas Parsons, he makes a Rich Syrup using 2 cups of turbinado or Demerara sugar to 1 cup of water, which results in a sweeter, thicker syrup.

Makes about 1 1/2 cups

1 cup organic, turbinado or Demerara sugar

1 cup water

Combine the sugar and water in a saucepan and bring to a boil; reduce heat and stir until the sugar is dissolved. Cool to room temperature, pour into a jar, label and keep in the fridge. Lasts for about 1 month.

Sources

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