

# a dash of class

HOMEMADE AND ARTISANAL BITTERS ARE SPICING UP SOME OF DC'S MOST INTRIGUING COCKTAILS. BY KATE PARHAM

All across Washington, savvy bartenders are turning to bitters, the ancient distilled mix of herbs, citrus, roots, and flowers, to kick their concoctions up a big, tasty notch. At PX in Alexandria (728 King St., Alexandria; [eamonnsdublinchipper.com](http://eamonnsdublinchipper.com)), owner and bartender Todd Thrasher stocks more than a dozen bitters, many of them house-made, to add to cocktails like The Arsonist Had Oddly Shaped Feet, which has a Scotch and Bärenjäger base. “The Bärenjäger gave [it] too much sweetness and was overpowering the Scotch, so I added apple and pear bitters,” explains Thrasher. “The fall fruit bitters added a spice characteristic.”

Thrasher isn't alone in his love of the once-medicinal concoctions, used for ages as cure-alls for everything from upset stomachs to hangovers. “Bitters are to bartenders what salt is to a kitchen,” says Gina Chersevani, a mixologist and partner of the new Hank's Oyster Bar (633 Pennsylvania Ave. SE, 202-733-1971; [hanksoysterbar.com](http://hanksoysterbar.com)) on Capitol Hill, where her 20-seat bar, The Eddy, is located. “It's the finishing agent, the last step, that last punch of flavor. Bitters should be used in an, Oh—what is that?—kind of way.”

There are two types of bitters: potable and nonpotable. If you're making a bitter-based cocktail, use a potable (drinkable) bitter like Campari or Aperol; nonpotable bitters, like Angostura and Peychaud's, are not meant to be drunk on their own, as they're much more concentrated. These bolder versions are

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—GINA CHERSEVANI



In the 1800s, bitters classics like Peychaud's were created by apothecaries.



PX owner and bartender Todd Thrasher

The Arsonist Had Oddly Shaped Feet cocktail features apple and pear bitters.



PX in Alexandria makes bitters in-house.

*“Bitters are the thing that's going to heighten everything else and make things brilliant.”*  
—ADAM BERNBACH

the types that many local drink slingers favor.

Try Chersevani's Pirate Riot cocktail, made with Rayon Vert Belgian-style pale ale, white pepper, pineapple, and rum. Chersevani finishes it off with Peychaud's drizzled across the top. “There is something in [this] bitter that reacts with the white pepper that is just beautiful, because it makes everything so bright. Without it, it's just okay. With it, it's amazing.”

Adam Bernbach, who recently won the Restaurant Association of Metropolitan Washington's RAMMY award for best bar program at Estadio, agrees, comparing bitters to the

concept of negative space in art. “It's the idea of using the elements around an object to bring attention to the object itself. Bitters are the thing that's going to heighten everything else... and make things brilliant.” And what is his take on making something new from something very old? A cocktail known as Bitters and Ginger and Stuff, served at Estadio's sister restaurant, Proof (775 G St. NW, 202-737-7663; [proofdc.com](http://proofdc.com)), made with Angostura bitters, rum, cane syrup, lime juice, and ginger beer. “It's aromatic and funky,” says Bernbach. Sounds like it's just what the DC cocktail scene ordered. **CF**

## SPICE IT UP

For a festive kick of flavor, try Hank's Oyster Bar's Gina Chersevani's recipe for wassail bitters.

- 1 cup 100-proof vodka (Chersevani recommends Smirnoff)
- 2 whole cinnamon sticks
- 5 green cardamom pods
- 5 pieces of whole allspice
- 5 whole cloves
- ½ cup dried orange peel

In a glass bottle, combine the vodka, cinnamon sticks, cardamom pods, allspice, clove, and orange peel. Let steep for five days, stirring a bit every day. Strain the mixture, and then pour it back into the bottle. Serve with Aperol, pumpkin drinks, or apple cider and rum.

## BITTER HAVE IT

Three bitters that complete any well-stocked bar.

- Angostura (\$14.99): Distilled in Trinidad, this staple is the most versatile bitters around. *Calvert Woodley*, 4339 Connecticut Ave. NW; 202-966-4400; [calvertwoodley.com](http://calvertwoodley.com)
- Bittermens (\$16.99): Boasting many unique flavors, the label is winner of the 2012 American Treasures Award. *Pearson's Wine & Spirits*, 2436 Wisconsin Ave. NW, 202-333-6666; [pearsonswine.com](http://pearsonswine.com)
- Regans' Orange Bitters No. 6 (\$6.99): With orange zest, cardamom, cinchona, caraway, coriander, and gentian, this orange bitters is top-notch. *Potomac Wines & Spirits*, 3100 M St. NW, 202-333-2847; [potomacwines.com](http://potomacwines.com)

