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BAR SNACKS

North African-inspired bitters spice up the Poisson Lem Marrakech at Vancouver's Cafe Medina

Bitters? Sweet!

A new generation of chefs are taking craft-distilled bitters off the bar and into the kitchen

BY LORA SHINN PHOTOGRAPHY BY GRANT HARDER

Chef Caprial Pence was wandering through the bar area of her Bookstore Bar & Café, at Seattle’s Alexis Hotel, when a bottle caught her eye. “Bartenders use bitters the way chefs use soy or vinegar,” she remembers thinking. With this simple idea in mind, she began experimenting with these mixology utility players across her menu, from salads spiked with bitters-infused vinaigrettes to pound cakes baked with orange bitters.

“Sometimes you taste a dish, and you ask yourself, ‘What does this need?’” Pence says of her culinary discovery. “Now, adding bitters is part of my repertoire. There are so many flavors, made with peppers and chocolate and grapefruit. The more I see of them at the bar, the more I’ve played with them.”

Despite their name, Pence says, bitters don’t impart an overpowering flavor. “Sometimes there’s a bit of bitter in the finish, but it’s not acrid or unpleasant,” she says. “There are some bitters in our braising liquid for short ribs, but nobody knows it’s in there but us.”

Fruits, barks, seeds, herbs, flowers and other botanicals are steeped in high-proof alcohol to make bitters. Originally touted as a panacea for everything from headaches and hangovers to indigestion and constipation, the elixir was incorporated into first-generation cocktails in the late 18th century. Peychaud’s Bitters, a key ingredient in Sazeracs, appeared in New Orleans in 1793, while Angostura Bitters, used in Manhattans and Old Fashioneds, debuted three decades later in what is now Venezuela.

For years, these two powerhouses dominated the bitters game. “Now, a bunch of people are making fresh and fine bitters,” says Todd Duplechan, of Austin’s Lenoir restaurant. “When you taste or smell the bitters, you can really taste or smell the ingredients.” Infused with celery, bitter lemon, green peppercorn and coriander, the Bloody Mary Bitters distilled at the nearby Bad Dog Bar Craft complement Duplechan’s ceviche and pickles. “Bitters are kind of like sensory overload,” he adds. “A lil’ dab’ll do ya to impart a lot of flavor.”

While the practice may be new to this generation of chefs, sprinkling bitters into dinner items is a time-honored tradition—albeit one with historically mixed results. Vintage manufacturers’ leaflets and recipe booklets once encouraged bitters-spiked fare, but author Brad Thomas Parsons argues in *Bitters: A Spirited History of a Classic Cure-All* that most “seem like prime material for The Gallery of Regrettable Food.” Think midcentury monstrosities like Fish-in-Foil with Flavor, Baked Meat Ring, Prune Chiffon Melva and Soup-on-the-Rocks (condensed beef broth over ice cubes, with a few dashes of Angostura).

DROP IT LIKE IT’S HOT
Chef Jonathan Chovancek brines salmon in his North African-inspired spiced bitters



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Today’s dishes are decidedly more appealing. At Chicago’s Sepia, for example, Michelin-starred chef Andrew Zimmerman pairs seared scallops with delicate gelee squares made from Bittermens Hopped Grapefruit Bitters. At the Hermosa Inn, near Scottsdale, Arizona, chef James Ducas seasons baby octopus with fennel bitters, adds Meyer lemon bitters to his baby scallop carbonara and pairs roasted duck with mesquite bitters-spiced cauliflower.

Some chefs are going so far as to brew their own bitters. Jonathan Chovancek co-owns British Columbia’s Bittered Sling, where he turns out such seasonal flavors as Zingiber Crabapple, Shanghai Rhubarb and Western Elderberry, many of which include ingredients harvested or grown in the nearby Fraser Valley. At his Vancouver restaurant, Cafe Medina, Chovancek’s Poisson Lem Marrakech features salmon brined in his North African-inspired bitters, while the wild celery variety spices up a snack of warm mixed olives and almonds. “Bitters are pushing forward flavors inherent in the food, pushing them forward on the palate and offering taste counterpoints,” Chovancek says.

Home chefs can also get in on what Chovancek calls the “creative artistry” of bitters: Add a few drops of Bittered Sling’s award-winning Plum & Rootbeer to your next bowl of ice cream for a truly bittersweet experience.