

The new Oxford guide to cocktails is the drinking buddy you've been waiting for

By M. Carrie Allan

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It's the time of year when those who know and love a drinks geek may be starting to ask themselves that question: What do you get the person who already has all the right glassware, a collection of spirits and weird bitters, several vintage punch bowls, random tiki totems, plenty of cocktail picks, enough whiskey stones to commit several biblical adjudications and shot glasses made out of Himalayan pink salt?

How about "all the things"?

Okay, maybe you won't find *all* the bibulous things in the new Oxford Companion to Spirits & Cocktails. Editors David Wondrich and Noah Rothbaum did have to make some choices about what to leave out of the 864 pages and more than 1,000 entries that make up their creation. But a heck of a lot of knowledge about a vast many of the things has been packed into this beautifully illustrated beast of a book that these drinks experts have been toiling over for nearly a decade. Recipes for cocktails famous and infamous, history and types of distillation, raw materials, booze brands and their stories (the real ones), influential people, entries from absinthe to zubrowka, from the Air Mail to the Zoom. (I'm happy to relay that last one is a honey-and-cream cocktail, not the video meeting platform that has tormented us these many months.)

"At some point, we had to stop," jokes Rothbaum, the book's associate editor. "I mean, we're bordering on the limitations of bookbinding at this point."

It was years back that I started hearing that this leviathan of booze knowledge was on the way. When I got a look at the page count on the thing, not only did I finally understand what had taken so long, I wondered where I would possibly keep it. Would I have a bookshelf strong enough?

I tease with a sincere tip of the glass — because, wow, what a pile of riches this volume (out this week for \$65) contains. I wish I'd had it years ago but am glad to have it now.

“I'm most proud of the attempt to widen the story, to bring in the rest of the world that's really not much talked about, to talk about Africa and the Philippines and South Asia and include those parts of the story going way back, as much as we can,” says Wondrich, editor in chief of the book. In that spirit, he notes, they used source materials not just in English, but Spanish, Portuguese, French and other languages, and reached out to scholars and experts around the world for contributions.

And while one of the scope limitations the editors settled on was that no one who started their career in the industry after 2004, around the beginning of what's known as the cocktail renaissance, would get a biographical entry in the book, later arrivals didn't keep contemporary luminaries from pitching in on the book itself: The contributors list of those recruited to help with the writing is a who's who of carefully selected experts.

Wondrich and Rothbaum themselves have each been writing about drinks for years; each has multiple booze books already under his belt. If “Imbibe!,” Wondrich's 2007 cocktail book and biography of bartender Jerry Thomas, didn't officially father modern drinks writing, it at least uncled it. Wondrich has since become a globe-trotting knowledge resource for the drinks industry around the world. He is the senior drinks columnist for the Daily Beast, where Rothbaum serves as editor for the Half Full section, and they co-host the Daily Beast's award-winning podcast “Life Behind Bars.”

In the time they've been working on this book, the spirits and cocktail world just kept growing. That the topic was considered worthy of an Oxford Companion in 2012, when Wondrich first signed on, was itself a sign of the great rebound and expansion underway in the industry at the time. The series has been published by Oxford University Press since before the Second World War, each weighty tome providing an in-depth look at a particular area of knowledge: food, jazz, medicine.

The Oxford Companion to Beer has been out for a decade; the first Oxford Companion to Wine was published in 1994. But 20 years ago, Rothbaum says, there probably wouldn't

have been enough interest or material to support such an in-depth treatment of spirits and cocktails.

Over the course of the years they've been working on the book, Rothbaum says, "it went from worrying, 'You want us to do a Companion — are we going to be able to find enough stuff to justify that?' Then, by maybe 2014, it was like, 'Okay, we got this.' And then from that, over time, to 'Oh my God.' "

That ballooning amount of material, of course, also made for ballooning potential for discoveries, even for two seasoned experts. "We would do research or the contributor would do research and find something that blew everybody's mind, that we had no idea was the history of this drink or this method," Rothbaum says. "That was the most fun about this project ... sometimes the things we thought we knew backward and forward turned out to be totally wrong and there was a much more interesting story."

The story the book is most interested in, its center, is the question "What's in my glass?" "You can explain that scientifically, you can explain it historically, you can explain it from an engineering perspective: This is the kind of still that was used and this is how it works. And we tried to limit it to that. So, for example, we gave prohibition movements very short shrift, because they don't really tell you what's in your glass," Wondrich says, adding — louder, for the people in the back! — "You know, because in that case, nothing is in your glass."

Wondrich's background in comparative literature (he has a doctorate from New York University) has long provided good grounding for his work — and not because writers often like a drink. Well, not only because of that. In traditional comparative literature, "you're basically a safety," he says. "You stand back and let the various fields of literature figure stuff out, and then you try to see what they're missing and what makes it through the holes." That's basically what they did in assessing the global history of cocktails and spirits. "You stand back and say, 'Wait a minute, this is the same here and there, they're doing the same thing. What's the connection?' "

I've already found myself hopping around between entries, looking for those connections,

finding one intriguing tidbit that sends me down the rabbit hole in search of another. My one disappointment is that between the entry on “coffee liqueurs” and the entry on “Coffey, Aeneas” (the inventor of the continuous still), there doesn’t seem to be an entry on “coffee tables, reinforcement of.” So I still have to worry that the boozy behemoth is going to fall and smush our Chihuahua. It weighs more than he does.

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