

COCKTAIL LABORATORY

Carrie Vaughn

We're living in something of an alcohol golden age—dozens of varieties of wine are available from all over the world, the craft beer movement has matured and expanded, and craft distilleries are on the rise, making small-batch and vintage liquors. Vintage cocktails like the Aviation are coming back into vogue, and infused alcohols are expanding what's possible in the world of mixed drinks. What's a budding connoisseur to do, especially when the only drink you've ever ordered is a gin and tonic?

The answer is: Cocktail Laboratory.

This isn't about drinking for the sake of drinking, this isn't about drinking to get drunk: this is realizing that there's a lot more to liquor than rum and Cokes. For almost all of human history, people have fermented or distilled just about anything that was possible to ferment and distill, and the resulting possibilities in flavors and effects are pretty much endless. In a word, this is all about SCIENCE. And fun parties. But mostly science. (That's my story and I'm sticking to it.)

"The difference between screwing around and science is writing it down."—Adam Savage

HOW TO CONDUCT COCKTAIL LABORATORY

- The experiments: Make a list of drink recipes you want to try. This will determine your shopping list of base liquors, mixers, and garnishes. Go shopping.
- The lab bench: Clear counter space near a sink. A big bucket of clean ice for drinking should be handy. There should also be a place to dispose of juiced lemons and limes and other detritus.
- Good tools to have on hand: shakers, jiggers, measuring cups, stirrer, juicer, ice tongs, a grater for garnishes like nutmeg, and a towel to dry up messes. The tools don't have to be fancy, they just have to work. Bowler hat and curly mustache are optional.
- **IMPORTANT:** Plastic shot/taster cups. I first encountered these at a distillery tasting—little disposable taster cups. They're available at many large liquor stores. By limiting portions, you can limit alcohol intake and prevent overindulging when you really do only want a taste. Mix one serving of a drink, split it out among five or six taster cups, and imbibe a fraction of the alcohol you would otherwise. And when you've mixed a drink that everyone ends up despising, you haven't wasted a bunch of ingredients making that drink several times over.

- It's best to have just one or two people involved in the actual mixing—it keeps things neater and reduces the chaos.
- Write each recipe on an index card. On the back of each card, everyone who tries that recipe notes their opinion. This is very important, because this is the whole point of the experiment: what do people like? What do they not like? Which recipes should you throw out, and which should become part of your repertoire, to memorize and take to other parties and impress people during games of stump the bartender? At our first Cocktail Laboratory, we were saved from disaster several times when we flipped over an index card and realized that not only had we already made that drink—everyone hated it. And remember, writing it down means SCIENCE.
- Taking notes also makes this a social activity—participants discuss what they've been drinking, clarify their opinions, argue (politely), and discover that the reason there are dozens of different liquors and thousands of different drink combinations is because there are about that many different palates and tastes. (And if someone doesn't like gin, there is absolutely nothing you can do to it to make them like it. Trust me, I've tried.)
- As always, drink responsibly. Have a designated driver.

VARIATIONS

- Focus on one kind of liquor. Do side-by-side tastings of different labels of rum, gin, vodka, scotch, or absinthe, for example. Choose one cocktail—gin and tonics, vodka martinis, brandy Alexanders—and make the drink with different brands of liquor. You might be amazed at how different the same ingredients can taste when the formulation of the base alcohol is just a little different.
- Choose a theme. Pirate rum punches. 1920s Speakeasy with Prohibition-era cocktails (this is when the cocktail really came into its own—they had to make that bathtub gin palatable somehow). Tiki bar drinks. Cocktails of the future. Have everyone mix their own version of the Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster.
- Non-alcoholic alternatives: Those among us who don't drink alcohol can still have fun, because the varieties of possible non-alcoholic mixed drinks are also endless. Use every kind of fruit juice imaginable, including more exotic varieties like pomegranate juice, guava, and so on. Mix with tonic, club soda, other kinds of soda. With a blender and frozen fruit, you can add smoothies to the repertoire. Discover the joys of ginger syrup, or floral syrups like rose and lavender. Mix ginger syrup with a little club soda and lemonade, over ice, and you've discovered something a character in a fantasy novel might drink. Mix and match, and always take notes so you can replicate your results. Remember, this is SCIENCE.

A FEW RECIPES

Aviation

The story goes this drink got its name from its pale sky-blue color. It was popular in the days of Lindberg and Earhart, when airplanes started getting really sexy. Every one of these I've made has been more lavender colored than blue, but it's still a great, zingy gin drink, an alternative to the standard martini.

- 1 1/2 oz gin
- 1/2 oz crème de violette
- 1/4 oz maraschino liquor
- Juice of 1/2 lemon

Place ingredients over ice in a cocktail shaker. Shake well, strain into glass.

Brandy Alexander

A decadent parlor drink, perfect for conversing around the fire in the dead of winter.

- 1/2 oz crème de cacao
- 1/2 oz brandy
- 1/2 oz heavy cream

Shake with ice, pour into glass. Garnish with freshly-grated nutmeg.

Jack Rose

This has become one of my favorite kick-back-at-the-end-of-the-day indulgent drinks. It's tangy, fruity, and packs a bit of a punch.

- 2 1/2 oz applejack
- 3/4 oz lemon juice
- dash of grenadine

Shake with ice.

Green Russian

I'm not a fan of straight absinthe, but the possibility of making mixed drinks with absinthe was a revelation to me. It turns standard cocktails into something weird and intriguing.

- 3 oz heavy cream
- 1 1/2 oz vodka
- 1 tsp absinthe
- 1 tsp sugar

Mix gently in a highball glass, add ice, and garnish with mint leaves.

Ginger Syrup (non-alcoholic)

I love this recipe, because it tells you how to make any kind of syrup. Add a few teaspoons of ginger syrup to a glass of club soda to make your own ginger ale. Even better, coat the ginger slices you strain out with sugar to make candied ginger for garnish.

- 3/4 cup peeled and thinly sliced fresh ginger
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 cup water

Add ingredients to a saucepan, then bring to a simmer over medium to low heat, stirring frequently, until sugar is dissolved. Simmer, uncovered, for thirty minutes. Strain out ginger. Let syrup cool. Store syrup in a glass container and refrigerate. (To make simple syrup, a common drink ingredient, just boil the sugar and water.)



IRISH COFFEE (AKA: How to create an Irish Coffee Bar) LARRY NIVEN

You wouldn't think it would take much effort would you? Irish coffee has only four ingredients! Serving only Irish coffee is work for an idiot, if others are doing all the work except pouring.

The first Irish coffee bar opened on Sunday night of the 1985 LosCon. I offered because I thought it might be fun. Emotionally I was prepared for failure. Nobody had tried this before. Subsequent LosCons have featured an Irish coffee bar on Saturday night. Oddly enough, it changes nothing.

In a pinch you can always go to hotel coffee. We almost did. I brought my Bunn coffeemaker, and remembered to bring all the other stuff: filters and filter cones and pots and all that (though not plates and spoons.) Then I cut the cord on the coffeemaker by slamming it in the lid of my trunk! Committee member Bob Null repaired it on the spot.

Quantities were guesswork. I poured by hand, and tasted often, trying to get the proportions right. Hic. Excuse me. I've had to do that every time, because the Committee keeps changing the size of the cups on me.

I learned of another problem the first time I tried this outside LosCon. Is the kid old enough to drink? Did I offer to bartend in order to tell a reader and fan what he can't have? I did not. The woman who helped me out in Dallas and Houston was tough enough to do that part of the job for me. In Los Angeles I've had to refuse two or three customers; but we had to insult scores of them in Texas. Then again, those were comic conventions . . .

What follows is my recipe for Elsewhere-Cons. If I can drive, I have another list; I can bring some of my own equipment. You should consider doing the same.

The proportions were developed by experiment, after I realized that I can mix bigger quantities in a nice stable measuring cup and then pour into whatever cups the committee have brought me. Proportions are a matter of taste. Feel free to fiddle.

I like stable cups that don't tip over when I pour. I never get them, but that's what I want. The whipped cream should not be too stiff to flow; you want it to melt a little on the coffee. Brandy or rum work as alternatives to Irish, but use less sugar. Don't add sugar if you're using liqueurs instead of Irish, and resign yourself to not using very much until the Irish runs out or the line thins, because you have to keep explaining what it's for.

The two most important rules are these:

1) You should run out of booze first. You'd feel like an idiot running out of whipped cream or ground coffee or sugar or cups when there's two bottles of whiskey left. (Once or twice the Committee has had to search a darkened city for whipped cream or cups.)

2) The booze should run out before the bartender collapses. Rather than staggering off to bed after spilling too many drinks in a row, you should be forced to quit while there's still time to join a party or a filking group.

Why bother? Put it this way. You've worked your tale off to become a well-known author. If you came to a convention, you came to be admired, like the rest of us. It gives you back your motivation. You'll work better afterward.

But they make you scintillate wherever you go. They stop you for autographs and pop quizzes on your work, in the halls and at parties and even in the restaurant! Anyone who ever stood in an autograph line thinks you should remember his name. Enough of that can wipe the smile off your face and make you forget how to string words together . . . and they still expect you to be witty.

What can you do at a convention, in public, that will take you off the hook for a while?

This was one of the brightest ideas I ever had. Nobody expects me to scintillate. They expect me to pour; nothing else. When the Irish runs out, then I'm ready to scintillate again.

Irish Coffee Requirements for Elsewhere-Cons

Proportions

- 1/4 c Irish whiskey
- 3/4 c strong coffee
- 1 heaping T sugar

First time: stir like hell, then taste, then adjust. Keep it sweet. Pour cups half-full