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goodspirits



**Bottles and Books**

*Pull these corks:* New and lightly priced are **Nine Vines'** Australian Shiraz-Viognier, Grenache-Shiraz Rosé, and Viognier; **Placido's** Chianti, Chianti Riserva, Pinot Grigio, and Rosso di Montalcino; and Tableaux, a Syrah-Cabernet blend from the Languedoc. *Turn these pages:* **The Billionaire's Vinegar**, on the so-called Thomas Jefferson wines; Eric Felten's cocktail tour, **How's Your Drink?**; **Whisky Tales**, a veteran's serving of Scotch lore and learning; and the 2008 **Wine Enthusiast Essential Buying Guide**.

## Mixed Reviews

If you're springing for top-shelf gin but filling half the glass with past-its-prime bargain-bin tonic, it's time to reconsider your cocktails. For higher-quality highballs, upgrade to premium mixers or, better still, make your own. / **By Bill Marsano / Photography by Adam Voorhes**

**I**T'S WARMING UP THESE DAYS, WARMING GLOBALLY and otherwise, so let's refresh ourselves. "Hydrate" yourself with water if you like, but I'm going for a lovely Tom Collins. It's one of the classic coolers and a snap to make. Simply combine gin, lemon juice, sugar, and club soda with a whacking great dose of chill-factor, and Bob's (as some Britons still say) your uncle—i.e., easy as pie, piece of cake, walk in the park.

Would that it were so, Thirsty Reader. Of course anyone can throw or kick together various grades of those ingredients and, given enough ice, pour something nearly palatable. Barmanship, however, is not the stuff of Tom Cruise movies but a craft and a discipline. Here I fix on the Collins to show that even the

simplest of cocktails deserves your full attention.

One sticking point is the spirit, on which the world divides in twain. Some demand "only the best"—Plymouth or Bombay or Tanqueray Ten, even a "craft" gin on the order of San Francisco's Junipero or Chicago's No. 6. Others say "Pshaw! Money down the drain!" and use cheap stuff sold in hardware stores. There's no objective truth here. You must experiment at several price points to find your way.

Other less-prominent ingredients involve fine distinctions. For example, *ixnay* on table sugar, which dissolves poorly in cold liquids, and confectioner's sugar, whose teeny granules clump and sink. *Bar sugar*

is, as Goldilocks was wont to say, “just right.” It’s rare by that name, even online at outrageous prices (plus shipping), but abundant in supermarket baking aisles, where it’s labeled super-, extra-, or ultra-fine sugar.

Squeeze your lemon only after rolling it on the bar, pressing firmly with your palm, to maximize yield. (I’ve heard of—but never tried—10 seconds in the microwave.) But first: Is it a fresh lemon? If its rind is dry and stiff, its color a bit tired-looking, toss it.

Finally ... “What? Even the soda?” you cry. Yes, even that. After all, it’s half the drink or more. Take it seriously.

Club soda is lightly salted carbonated water. Although 8 ounces contain less than 4 percent of the U.S. daily allowance of sodium (about 6 of the British), most sodas are now sodium-free, salted with substitutes like potassium bicarbonate (which is also

highly regarded in fire extinguishers). Seltzer, when it is not the Queen City of Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, is carbonated water period—but read the label: In these days of ►

shifting values and corroding institutions your correspondent finds some bottlers adding salts willy-nilly, resulting in club soda, not seltzer.

Freshness counts. Store-bought stuff in plastic jugs has a shelf-life of about 90 days. Moreover, consumers usually buy bargain-priced superjugs in forklift quantities to last the summer. False economy, friends.

My colleague Eric Felten, whose witty new book *How’s Your Drink?* is named for his cocktail column in *The Wall Street Journal*, says the best bars use 6-ounce glass “pony” bottles, enough for one drink apiece, because mixers stale quickly. Lesser bars, he says, resort to what’s called *the gun*, a hose that dispenses bulk mixers from large canisters. If you see that, he suggests upgrading to another saloon.

Upgrade your home bar, too. Normally wielded on film by the Three

Stooges and their slapstick kin, a home soda siphon can make a quart or a liter of fresh seltzer full of fine, elegant bubbles in no time. And do it for pennies, so you won’t be tempted to save any that’s left over.

There are several brands. The popular Penguin is sleek and elegant but unfortunately requires special bottles, so I use an Austrian make that’s self-contained if inconveniently named—*iSi*. I believe it’s meant to be pronounced “easy” because the process certainly is: Fill with cold water, screw on the top, and screw in a CO<sub>2</sub> cartridge (or charger). The *sssss* of gas tells you to shake the thing three times—and Bob’s your uncle all over again.

Thus armed you can tackle other mixers, notably ginger ale and tonic water. Now whyever would you do such a thing?

Again, because the mixer is most of your drink. Or you don’t think one size (or even two) fits all, and consider Canada Dry and Schweppes too sweet, too shy of the crisp snap of ginger, the sting of quinine. Stirrings, Q (tonic only), and especially Fever Tree are excellent alternatives, but they’re boutique brands, expensive and hard to find.

In short, in some evil hour when you must fend for yourself, a siphon will be the saving of you, especially if you’re not afraid of the kitchen. For ginger ale and tonic water, a kitchen is a necessity.

Recipes? The Internet is littered with ’em. Here’s one now:

**Ginger Syrup** / Mix  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup peeled, finely chopped or shredded ginger root with  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup sugar and 1 cup water. Bring to a rolling boil; then reduce heat and simmer, about 20 minutes or until it thickens to syrup. Strain into a jar containing the juice of one lime and one lemon. Stir; let cool to room temperature before use.

Mix ginger ale one glass at a time, starting with 1 ounce of syrup to 6 of sparkling water, tasting as you go. When you achieve perfection, strain the syrup again, dripping it slowly through a coffee filter this time to remove absolutely all solids. Then you can mix the syrup and