“Full of Jersey Lightning.” Spiritual Histories, Cocktail Tastings, and Creative Outreach

About Our Collection

The History of American Cocktail Collection is a subset of Virginia Tech Special Collections’ larger history of food and drink collecting area. It includes cocktail manuals and bartenders’ guides, books on social activities and entertaining, and a variety of items documenting the history of cocktail ingredients, creation, and consumption, as well as resources on individual spirits, the medicinal and alcoholic history of bitters, temperature/prohibition, and advertising. Currently, the History of the American Cocktail Collection contains more than 165 books and about a dozen manuscript collections.

Outcomes to date

So far, the main effect of the events has been attention for the collection, the department, and for me. Not surprisingly, cocktails get you noticed! By engaging with the university community, I’ve been recognized at other events, opening a door for a larger conversation with people who wouldn’t otherwise know what Special Collections is and why we are of interest.

The pilot event for people in University Development helped them better understand and reconnect with Special Collections. It has even led to the donation of at least one new collection unrelated to cocktails and culinary history because development officers remembered us and reached out to connect us to donors.

Advice for creative outreach

• Take a chance and think outside the box (or bottle): Food and drink history is a GREAT hook for colleagues, visitors, alumni, and others to learn about your collections. In the past, the department sponsored edible book contests and brought culinary history materials to events on campus.
• Know your legal limitations, options, & requirements: Virginia Tech is a state agency, so we can only spend money from specific accounts on alcohol. I’ve also had to become familiar with which circumstances call for a license to serve alcohol from the state and which don’t.
• Have 1-2 goals (rather than 5-6): Making the event focused on fewer goals makes it more enriching. For example, concentrate on teaching people about a specific collecting area and sending them away with one new piece of knowledge they didn’t have before. Yes, you also want to build relationships with potential donors, faculty, students, or researchers, and teach them about the awesomeness that is archives and special collections, but use your event as a way to start building relationships. You don’t have to build every aspect of those relationships at once.
• Plan, but expect the unexpected—be flexible and ready to adapt as needed: You can plan everything in advance, but it’s never going to go perfectly. I’ve had to corral crowds, answer surprising questions while pouring, mix additional drinks on the fly, be able to rattle off the list of homemade bitters for an allergy concern, and even change the format of the event when it was obvious that mixing, talking, and pouring (even with a helpful assistant) wasn’t going to work.
• Have a resource/research tool/outreach channel: You may (or may not) get questions, but it’s helpful to have a tool or resource you can share with people that they can revisit later. This can be as simple as making sure you have business cards on hand, or a more creative approach like an item they can take home to remind them. For our pilot event, we 3-D printed some cocktail stirrers and gave them away as prizes for answering trivia questions. We also have a blog devoted to culinary history (including cocktails) and a LibGuide on cocktail history resources.
• Most importantly: Have fun!! For all the planning you’ll do for your guests, it’s also important YOU enjoy hosting an event. I hope you attend, I’ll see it and the enthusiasm will spread (like a good anchovy butter!). Cocktails have become a personal, as well as professional interest for me, so I love answering questions, rattling off recipes in response to requests, talking about techniques, and sharing bits of trivia about cocktail history.

The Gin Rickey (serves 1)
In a thin medium-sized glass put one lump of ice, the juice of half a lime, one jigger gin, fill the glass with soda carbonic water; drink while effervescent.

from Modern American Drinks, George J. Kappeler, 1915

Tis love that makes the world go round. Whisky will also accomplish the same result.

From postcard from the Cocktail Ephemera Collection, McB2013:027

Our programs to date

Since May 2012, Special Collections staff have hosted four events that each included a lecture and a historical cocktail tasting:

• Two programs (in May 2012 and May 2014) were for an internal library audience: one featured a talk on the general history of food and drink collecting area, followed by a tasting of four different cocktails; the second was a talk specifically about the History of the American Cocktail Collection, two years old and something we were making efforts to promote, followed by a tasting of three cocktails.

• In the summer of 2014, we were planning an event in conjunction with a football game on campus. Due to some hitches, we were not able to hold the planned event, but we were able to turn it into a pilot event in October 2014, inviting staff from the university’s development office.

• In winter 2016, archivist Kira Dietz (me!) was approached by colleagues in the women’s leadership group on campus to host a tasting. This event ultimately consisted of a crash course on the history of the cocktail in America, an overview of the cocktail, and a tasting of three historic cocktails, plus some bonus items.
• Each event has been a little different, depending on the audience and intention, but the predominant (& most popular) feature is the tasting itself. The cocktail recipes come from books in our collection (I’ve concocted syrups and bitters from scratch for recipes that date from 1862 to the modern age, and am still working on a “Hokie” inspired cocktail for the future). Drinks are mixed in batches and poured in 1oz. shots to make preparation and service easier.

Klondyke (serves 1)
1 oz applejack
1 oz French vermouth
1 oz grenadine

Add 1 teaspoon orange bitters. Stir. Add olive (pitted and un-stuffed) and squeeze lemon peel on top. Stir in mixing glass with ice & strain.

from Forty Famous Cocktails, c.1930s

Brandy Punch (serves 20)
1 gal water
1 qt brandy
1 pt Jamaica rum
2 lbs sugar (I think this should be less)
6 juices of 6 lemons
3 oranges sliced
1 pineapple, pared and cut up
1 qt Curaçao
2 quarts raspberry syrup
ice and berries, in season
Mix the ingredients well together in a large bowl, and you have a splendid punch.

from How to Mix Drinks, or, the Ben-Wright’s Companion, Jerry Thomas, 1862

Future program ideas

Cocktail Roadshow: With our development officer, we have talked about creating a version of the program that can go “on the road” for alumni chapters or other events not on our home turf to serve as a fundraiser for chapters, as well as an outreach and donation opportunity for us.

Themed tastings/events: I have several ideas for themed tasting/talk pairings, including one on the evolution of the martini & its many variations, some that focus on specific time periods that coincide with milestones in cocktail history (just post-Prohibition or the rise of Tiki culture in the 1930s and 1940s, for example), and even one that recreates the feel of the 1950s cocktail party (complete with contemporary canapés). I also would love to find a way to try out a mini-workshop where guests could make an ingredient and a cocktail that uses it, working with a book in our collection.

Jack Rose (serves 1)
Juice of ½ lemon or 1 lime
¼ ounce grenadine
1½ oz Applejack or Calvados
Shake well and strain into a cocktail glass.
from The Savoy Cocktail Book, 1930

Happy Hour Burgundy: 45 Prize Recipes, Southern Comfort Corporation, c.1960

How to Mix Drinks, or, the Ben-Wright’s Companion, Jerry Thomas, 1862

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