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LIQUID CULTURE

## Brave New World

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# Smoke Signals

A new cocktail flavor is firing the imaginations of creative bartenders

**NO LONGER RELEGATED TO BARBECUE SAUCES**, meats or cured fish, smoke is trailing from the backyard grill to the back bar. The overuse of super-sweet ingredients in cocktails in the 1980s and '90s has recently given way to a greater emphasis on savory and bitter elements not seen since before Prohibition. Smoke—in mixers, spirits, ice and bitters—produces multi-layered drinks with captivating dark notes, and innovative bartenders are taking note. “Smoke can add a savory, earthy quality to drinks,” says Derek Brown of Washington, D.C.’s The Gibson. “When applied to brighter fruit and vegetable elements, it deepens the flavor and lends complexity.” Brown crafts his own smoked vermouth and smoked ginger ale, the latter of which he’s used with everything from scotch to cucumber vodka to the gingery *Domaine de Canton* liqueur.

John Hogan of Las Vegas-based *BarMagic* has been tinkering with smoked ingredients for several years. He employs a simple Weber kettle-style grill to create smoked fruits, herbs and vegetables that he infuses in spirits. He even smokes water to freeze into ice cubes. Used to chill a martini, water from the melted cubes provides the classic cocktail with intriguing depth; crushed and added to a margarita, the ice counters the zesty lime and pairs with the salted rim—and, unlike with normal ice, dilution actually *strengthens* the drink’s flavor. “To me, smoky elements represent texture, style and character,” says Hogan.

The allure of smoke is nothing new: It’s what gives both scotch and

mezcal their brooding quality. But these days, bartenders are adding the flavor to spirits that have never tasted of smoke before—and they’re getting creative in how they do it. Tucked into supply closets and basements are a number of homemade smoking mechanisms, crafted out of everything from Weber grills to welded-together plumbing pipes. Robert Heugel, who writes the blog *Drinkdogma.com* and opened the *Anvil Bar & Refuge* in Houston, Texas in February, uses several methods to infuse spirits with smoke, including his version of a smoke injector made with a modified fish tank aerator. “One day when I was changing the water for my fish tank, I realized that the aerator was essentially taking air and forcing it into a liquid,” he says. “Substitute smoke for air, and a bottle of liquor for the fish tank, and you get a smoked spirit.”

Heugel adds that less mechanically inclined home bartenders can experiment with smoky flavors by adding *Lapsang Souchong*—a Chinese tea whose leaves are smoked over a pinewood fire—to a spirit of choice. Whatever the method, he believes balance is key when using smoke, as the goal is to achieve a subtle, elongated finish that doesn’t overpower other ingredients. “Too often the smoke dominates the cocktail,” says Heugel. “Someone described my early experiments as ‘liquid cigars.’ This isn’t the point to using smoke; instead, you are trying to incorporate a familiar flavor that is as balanced as the rest of the cocktail.” —Kelly A. Magyarics

## Quiet Forge (Right)

*Cognac steeped with the Lapsang Souchong tea adds depth to Robert Heugel’s Quiet Forge, playing off the Averna’s bitterness and the zestiness of the curaçao.*

2 oz. Lapsang Souchong-infused Cognac  
 ½ oz. Averna  
 2 dashes Orange Curaçao  
 2 dashes Angostura bitters  
 Tools: mixing glass, barspoon  
 Glass: snifter  
 Garnish: orange twist

Stir ingredients together without ice, pour into glass and garnish.

To infuse the Cognac, place ½ cup of loose tea in a jar with a liter of Cognac. Let the tea steep for 4-6 hours, tasting and stopping based on preference. Pour the Cognac through a fine strainer to remove the tea.

*Robert Heugel, Anvil Bar & Refuge, Houston*

## Smoked Ginger Ale (Left)

*Derek Brown got the idea for this recipe from his experience as sommelier at D.C.’s Komi restaurant, where the chef introduced him to charring ginger for making Vietnamese pho.*

Two ¾-inch pieces of fresh, washed, unpeeled ginger  
 16 oz. water  
 10 oz. sugar  
 1 tsp. coriander  
 1 tsp. cardamom  
 Club soda  
 Ice  
 Tools: metal cooking tongs, saucepan, coffee filter or paper towel, funnel, jar, barspoon  
 Glass: collins or tall glass

To make syrup, use tongs to hold ginger pieces over open flame of a grill or gas burner and gently burn the ginger’s skin. In saucepan, bring water to boil. Add sugar and stir until dissolved. Add ginger and spices. Let cool. When it is luke-warm, strain the mixture three times through a coffee filter or paper towel into a clean jar.

To make ginger ale, pour 2 oz. of syrup into an ice-filled glass. Add 4 oz. soda and stir; adjust to taste.

*Derek Brown, The Gibson, Washington, D.C.*

## Smoked Riviera (Center)

*Pineapple cubes that undergo smoldering partner perfectly with gin and Campari for John Hogan’s rendition of the classic Riviera aperitif.*

2 oz. smoked mix (see recipe below)  
 1 egg white  
 ½ oz. fresh lemon juice  
 Ice  
 Tools: shaker, strainer  
 Glass: cordial  
 Garnish: pineapple leaf

Add all ingredients to a cocktail shaker and shake without ice. Add ice, shake vigorously and strain into glass, then garnish.

### SMOKED MIX

2 cups gin (Hogan uses Plymouth)  
 1 cup Campari  
 ½ cup maraschino liqueur  
 ¼ pineapple, husked and cut into 2-inch cubes  
 Smoker box with pre-soaked hickory chips

Place smoker box and chips on preheated kettle grill or smoker (if you don’t have a smoker box, put pineapple on a skewer and place directly on grate). Smoke pineapple for 30-45 minutes. Combine all ingredients in a covered jar and steep for 24-48 hours. Strain with a fine-mesh sieve.

*John Hogan, BarMagic, Las Vegas*

Check out John Hogan’s recipe for smoked ice, along with a Q&A with bartender Lance Mayhew about smoking spirits.  
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