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## HOW'S YOUR DRINK?

## The [Your Name Here]-Tini

Experts charge thousands of dollars to create cocktails for restaurants, hotels, even new-product launches. But you don't need a mixology degree to make your own signature drink. How to stir things up this New Year's Eve.

By ERIC FELTEN  
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In 1933, "The year that brought the end of the long drought," the ever so elegant Del Monte Hotel in California solicited favorite cocktail recipes from many of its famous patrons. Theodore Dreiser contributed a tart drink he called the American Tragedy (gin, grapefruit juice and lemon juice); Ernest Hemingway offered Death in the Afternoon (gin, juice of fresh lemons and limes, crème de menthe and bitters). The Marx Brothers came through with Honeymoon Punch. Their recipe: "Four bottles Scotch, four drops Seltzer water, six teaspoonfuls bicarbonate of soda, four old lemons." Shake up everything but the whisky, and send the mixture out to a laboratory. "While you're waiting for the chemist's report, drink the Scotch."



Donna Alberici (photographer),  
Liz Duffy (food stylist)

The celebs (or at least their publicists) were indulging in a popular sport of the day -- the creation of new cocktails. These days, it's a professional sport -- that is, businesses and party planners regularly hire expert mixologists to craft signature drinks to make product launches and other events memorable affairs. When the new Blu-ray DVD format was launched in New York, Samsung served Blu-ray Martinis and handed out conveniently logoed recipe cards.

But you don't have to be a professional "bar chef" to get in on the ground floor of a new drink -- just have a willingness to do some none-too-unpleasant R&D with your cocktail shaker. Whether you hit on the recipe all by yourself, or get some expert help from an accommodating bartender, a drink of one's own can be a prized possession. And if you're in the habit of throwing parties, a proprietary cocktail helps brand your fêtes.

Democratic political strategist Simon Rosenberg and his wife, Caitlin Durkovich, give plenty of parties. As head of NDN (formerly the New Democratic Network), Mr. Rosenberg helped craft his party's successful election strategy. What with the November results, the Rosenbergs have reason to celebrate, and how better than with a new cocktail of their own? We sat down a couple of weeks ago and, bottles at the ready, set out to devise one.

There are practical questions to ask when devising a new

cocktail, such as "What's your favorite spirit?" Emotive questions too: "Is there a drink that has particular resonance for you?" Mr. Rosenberg is an admirer of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and so it was only natural to make FDR's favorite drink, the Old-Fashioned, the starting point of our quest for a new cocktail. Ms. Durkovich is from New Mexico, and tequila is her spirit of choice, and so we set about devising a tequila Old-Fashioned.

We played around with the basic ingredients but never quite hit on a great combination. And so I turned to Jeff Hollinger, head mixologist at San Francisco's Absinthe Brasserie & Bar, to polish the concept up for us. He found just the right trick for the drink. Instead of sweetening the glass with simple syrup, he turned to a liqueur. Mr. Hollinger started with Amber, a new liqueur made with Macallan Scotch whisky and maple syrup, in which he smushed up a slice of blood orange, two dashes of Angostura bitters, and three cocktail cherries. In goes añejo (the woodiest and most bourbon-like tequila) and, finally, ice.

To add a splash of soda water or not -- that is the perennial Old-Fashioned question. The Rosenbergs tried Mr. Hollinger's recipe with and without, and opted to further personalize the drink by bringing a little seltzer into the mix. In a nod to Mr. Rosenberg's idol FDR -- who once described an Old Fashioned made with anything other than American whiskey as "absolutely sacrilegious" -- they named the new concoction the "Absolute Sacrilege," and plan to introduce it at their New Year's Eve party. The drink works so well because it is a variation on a classic theme. You don't have to come up with anything wild and wacky for a drink to count as a new cocktail. Mr. Hollinger's strategy of supplanting sugar with a sweet liqueur is one that can be used to make fresh permutations of countless cocktails.

"It can take a ton of legwork or, rather, arm-work," shaking away until you hit on a workable combination for a new drink, says Ben Dougherty, bartender at, and co-owner of, Seattle's Zig Zag Café. It's better, he says, "to have a method instead of blindly mixing things together." He notes that the Sidecar and the Margarita -- two classics that would, at first glance, appear worlds apart -- are actually siblings. Each has a base, or foundation, spirit (brandy in the Sidecar; tequila in the Margarita); each has a flavorful liqueur (Cointreau in both); and each balances the sweet of the liqueur with the tart of fresh citrus (lemon in the Sidecar; lime in the Margarita). Any number of drinks can be made using variations on a simple formula of four parts spirit to two parts liqueur to one part citrus.

The basic-formula approach had its greatest advocate in David Embury, whose 1948 book "The Fine Art of Mixing Drinks" is one of the texts most sought after by cocktail geeks. "Every cocktail, properly so called, must contain two distinct types of ingredients," Embury writes, "a base," and "a modifying, smoothing or aromatizing agent." The Martini is the iconic example -- a gin base modified by the addition of an aromatized wine, vermouth. Embury allows that a third type of



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## ABSOLUTE SACRILEGE

2 oz añejo tequila  
¼ oz (or to taste) Amber whisky liqueur  
2 dashes Angostura bitters  
1½ inch diameter disc of blood orange peel  
(enough to include a touch of the fruit inside)  
3 cocktail cherries

In an Old Fashioned glass, muddle orange peel, cherries and bitters in the liqueur. Add tequila and ice and stir.

(If you can't find Amber in your local liquor store, try substituting a mix of ¼ oz Drambuie and a splash of maple syrup. And for the cocktail cherries, please, nothing day-glo magenta. Williams-Sonoma has credible wine-dark maraschinos that actually taste like cherries.)

ingredient can be added for "additional special flavoring and coloring." This third ingredient is usually a liqueur, or a syrup such as grenadine. Many classic cocktails share this basic structure. The Cuban El Presidente, for example: rum (base), dry vermouth (modifier), curaçao and grenadine (flavoring and coloring).

Pick a distilled spirit you like, and pour 1½ ounces of it. Professional mixologists use vodka as a sort of blank slate when they're trying to emphasize the flavors of the other ingredients. But otherwise they try to use spirits -- whiskey, gin, brandy, tequila or others -- that bring their own complex and interesting flavors to the mix. Add a half ounce of an aromatized or fortified wine -- vermouth, Dubonnet, Lillet, sherry, port. Finish it off with a quarter ounce of a liqueur of your choice. Given the variety of spirits, wines and liqueurs in any good liquor store, that simple formula alone can produce thousands of different cocktails.

Julie Reiner co-owns the Flatiron Lounge, a New York bar known for its original cocktails. When working on something new, her strategy is to start with a flavor to build on: "I give myself one specific ingredient and work around it." Sometimes that will be a fruit, or a flavored syrup; sometimes she will start with a spirit or a liqueur -- the more distinctive the better. Finding an offbeat ingredient is also a way to come up with a cocktail that

resonates with who you are. Create a cocktail using an ingredient that reflects your heritage or your travels and every time you make the drink you'll be reminded of where you come from, or where you've been.

Lena Nirk grew up in Rhode Island, born to parents who had escaped their native Estonia a few steps ahead of the Red Army in World War II. The Soviets were in the habit of pacifying territorial acquisitions by rounding up the local intelligentsia. Mrs. Nirk's parents were medical students, and thus likely to get swept up in the Communists' net. (Her grandfather, a physician, didn't make his break in time and spent the next decade in a Siberian labor camp.) Estonia cast off the Russian yoke when the Soviet Union crumbled, but it wasn't until this summer that Ms. Nirk, her husband, Don Gregory; and their daughter, Kaili, finally traveled to the old country. They came home with memories of the long-lost cousins Ms. Nirk finally met -- and a couple of bottles of a local liqueur redolent of rum, vanilla and cinnamon, called Vana Tallinn.

To come up with a new cocktail using the liqueur, Ms. Nirk, Mr. Gregory and I did some basic experimentation, mixing a little Vana Tallinn first with rum, then with other spirits, to see what base liquor would resonate with its flavors. We found that vodka worked best, mainly because it didn't get in the way of the liqueur's herbal profile, while helping to cut down its sweetness. But where to go from there? Since Vana Tallinn is often served with coffee in Estonia, we decided to add a little coffee liqueur into mix. One sip and we knew we had it -- a drink that is subtly flavored, nicely balanced, and original.

Not that we were quite done. We had settled on the ingredients, but we still had to work out the exact proportions. Mr. Hollinger, the San Francisco barman, has a new book out with his old bartending partner Rob Schwartz, "The Art of the Bar." In it, they write about how to fine-tune a new recipe: "We'll have four or five glasses lined up next to each other, each filled with a slightly different variation of the same drink," they write. "As we taste our way through each of them, we gain a fuller understanding of how we want to balance our chosen ingredients." We found that equal parts of the three ingredients was very good, but just a taste more vodka than equality demanded was perfect.

What to name it? The mix is fresh, but it riffs on the classic Black Russian (vodka and coffee liqueur). In another context, we might have come up with a name that reflected the drinks' genetic similarities by giving our new concoction a name that plays off of the Black Russian theme. But given Estonia's less than happy experience with the Soviets' tender mercies, anything "Russian" was out. Instead, we looked to Lena's family name. A multitude of Estonian names are drawn from forest fauna, and "Nirk," as Don told me, means a little weasel. "No," said Lena, laughing at what was clearly a longstanding household joke, "a nirk is really more of an ermine." Thus the name of the drink was obvious: The Weasel (No, Ermine).



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## THE WEASEL (NO, ERMINE)

1 oz vodka

¼ oz Vana Tallinn

¼ oz coffee liqueur

Shake with ice and strain into a cocktail glass, or build over ice in a short glass. Either way, garnish with a twist of lemon.

(Unless you're traveling to Estonia anytime soon, you'll have to wait to try Vana Tallinn. Importers hope to have it in U.S. stores by summer.)

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## DRINK MIXING 101



• Vodka is the spirit most easily mixed with other ingredients, a blank canvas that is a safe base for designing your first cocktail.

• When in doubt, use the basic formula: six parts spirit base (such as gin, whiskey, vodka, tequila or brandy), two parts "modifying agent" (such as vermouth, the modifier in a Martini) and one part of a liqueur or syrup for flavoring and coloring.

• Some liqueurs are more versatile than others. The sweet orange flavor of curaçao lends itself to innumerable drinks; the anise zing of Pernod, by contrast, is an acquired taste, and when it's used, usually a dash or two is enough.

• Ask yourself if there's a drink that has a particular emotional resonance for you -- then model yours after it.

• Experiment with an offbeat ingredient that reflects your heritage or your travels.

• To fine-tune your recipe, fill a few glasses with slightly different variations, line them up and have a taste test.

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