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Vermouth in the Balance

Part one of an investigation into achieving balance in spirits-driven cocktails.

A few days ago I had the occasion to revisit an old original cocktail called The Criollo. I created it back in 2009 when I first fell in love with amari (singular amaro), the class of Italian digestive bitters that many bartenders were experimenting with at the time, most notoriously in the so-called "Black Manhattan." In that cocktail some or most of the vermouth is replaced by an amaro. My particular goal was to bring chocolate flavors into a manhattan-style cocktail that would appeal to adult drinkers—i.e. not be creamy or too sweet. I had found that Mozart (the people who make the Austrian chocolates) had a liqueur (Mozart Black) that claims to contain 87% cacao mass. It wasn't creamy but still pretty sweet with plenty of chocolate flavor. My thinking was to balance the sweetness of the Mozart Black against the bitterness of the amaro. Here's what I came up with:

The Criollo (No. 2, AKA The Mozart Black Manhattan)

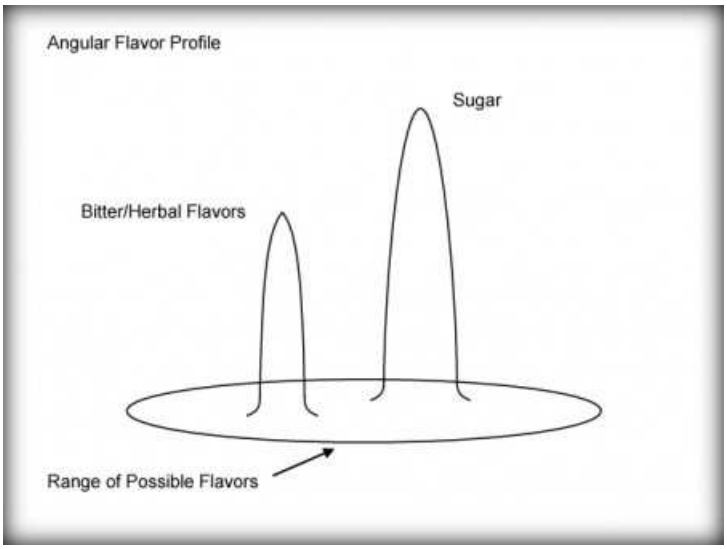
2 oz. rye
3/4 oz. Amer Boudreau (or Ramazzotti)
1/4 oz. Mozart Black chocolate liqueur
1 barspoon Grand Marnier
1 short dash Fee Bros. Whiskey Barrel Aged bitters
1 short dash Angostura orange bitters (optional if you used Amer Boudreau)
Long thin orange peel, for garnish

I liked it well enough when I first formulated it but when I remade it I was struck right away by how sweet it was. Not sickly, but pretty out there. I don't know why it didn't strike me so at the time. However, the reason for

its sweetness is certainly no mystery to me now: it was the amaro. While we experience them as bitter, most amari contain a lot of sugar. I am guessing anywhere 20 to 30% by volume, possibly higher. Add that to the sugar in the Mozart Black liqueur and then my barspoon of Grand Marnier, and well, my recipe starts to look pretty lopsided. Think of it in terms of major flavoring components:

rye: congeners+wood flavorings
amaro: sugar+bitters/herbs
liqueur: sugar+cacao
liqueur: sugar+orange
aromatic bitters: bitters/herbs

If this were a glass of wine I was tasting, I might apply the adjective "angular," meaning to me that the flavor is dominated by a couple of notes (in this case sweet and bitter) that don't particularly harmonize. Nothing much links them together (though the chocolate and orange do help). In my mind, when I picture the flavors of this cocktail, this is what I see:



What this cocktail needed was a major rethink!

Back to Basics

I started by considering my point of origin, the Manhattan and flavors lent to it by the ingredient I had chosen to replace, the sweet vermouth. To be honest, it's not an ingredient I had given my deepest thoughts to before. I knew which brands I liked but had otherwise taken it more or less for granted. Now however I had reason to really engage with it. Why does sweet vermouth create a balanced cocktail while the combination of amaro and liqueur (a pretty complex set of flavors) fails to do so? For starters, the vermouth is far less sugary. But what else is going on in there? I decided that it would be worthwhile tasting though a number of different sweet vermouths* and cataloging aromas and flavors. Here's my aggregated list:

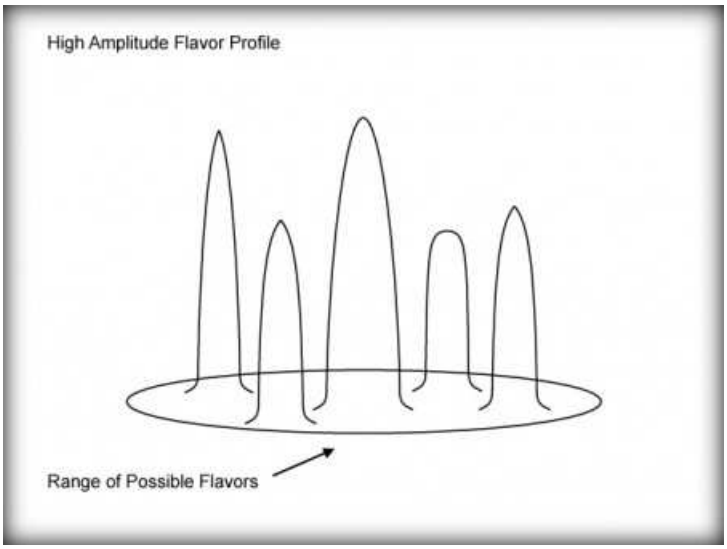
vanilla, orange peel, white pepper, wine, licorice, sun dried tomato, cedar, mint, dust, brown sugar, nuts, vinegar, soy sauce, black pepper, menthol, baby powder (flowers), anise, cherry, plum, chalk, band-aid, bitter

If I then reduce this list to classes of aromas and flavors, I get this more canonical list:

Acid
Sugar
Herbal/Bitter
Oxidized Flavors
Fruit
Minerals
Savory

Looking at this list, two things occurred to me in quick succession:

First, this single ingredient is capable of providing a very wide spectrum of flavors. It has what I believe flavor chemists call high amplitude, where "amplitude" is defined as the total effect of flavor and aroma in a food. The higher the flavor amplitude, the more broadly it stimulates our taste buds. (Ketchup is the classic example of a food which has high amplitude.) So including vermouth in a cocktail provides a big flavor bang for the buck. Depending on the brand of vermouth used, it tickles pretty much every major flavor receptor in some degree.



Second, neither of the ingredients I used in place of the sweet vermouth provided any significant amount of acid. If you think about all the different sorts of ingredients one uses in spirits-driven cocktails, you can see that while it's easy to get sugar into the drink, its much harder to get acid to balance things out—that's the brilliance of citrus in a sour. Vermouth, being based on wine, brings acid along with all of its other flavors. In addition to balance, that acid also helps heighten our experience of all the other flavors as well.

It seems pretty obvious that when we replace vermouth in a spirits-driven cocktail, we've got a pretty tough act to follow. It's kind of a super-ingredient: complex flavors and acid. In The Criollo cocktail, I had found a way to bring complex flavors together (there's plenty going on in there) but I had lost any acid that might balance against the additional sugar in those ingredients. Obviously I could try adding back some vermouth to fix The Criollo and re-balance it. That seemed like going backward. What I really wanted to know is what other options I might have for bringing acid into a spirit-driven cocktail. It was time to do some serious science!

Next: Putting Ingredients to the Acid Test

[*] - *Vermouths evaluated were: Carpano Antica, Dolin rouge, Noilly-Pratt rouge, Vya sweet, and Cocchi Barolo Chinatto. Technically the latter isn't a vermouth but it can certainly be used as one and I happen to have an open bottle.*

One blogger likes this post.

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One Response to "Vermouth in the Balance"

The Electric Cocktail Acid Test « Stirred, Not Shaken Says:
December 28, 2011 at 9:32 am

[...] Back in March I wrote about trying to improve a spiritous cocktail I had created (Criollo #2) which on reconsideration, I felt turned too sweet. The concept started out as a kind of 'Black Manhattan' with amaro taking the place of vermouth but I discovered that as I added more amaro I was also increasing the amount of sugar. That in turn led me to think a lot about the options we have for bringing acidity to a cocktail. It's acid which helps brighten and highlight all the other flavors. However, without citrus as an option, we're at a distinct disadvantage. I focused on the properties of vermouth, which I described as a kind of super-ingredient, bringing not only needed acidity into a cocktail but also many other interesting and complex flavors. I decided at that point to "do some serious science" by which I meant to I wanted to measure the PH of common cocktail ingredients to determine exactly how acidic. or not, they were. [...]

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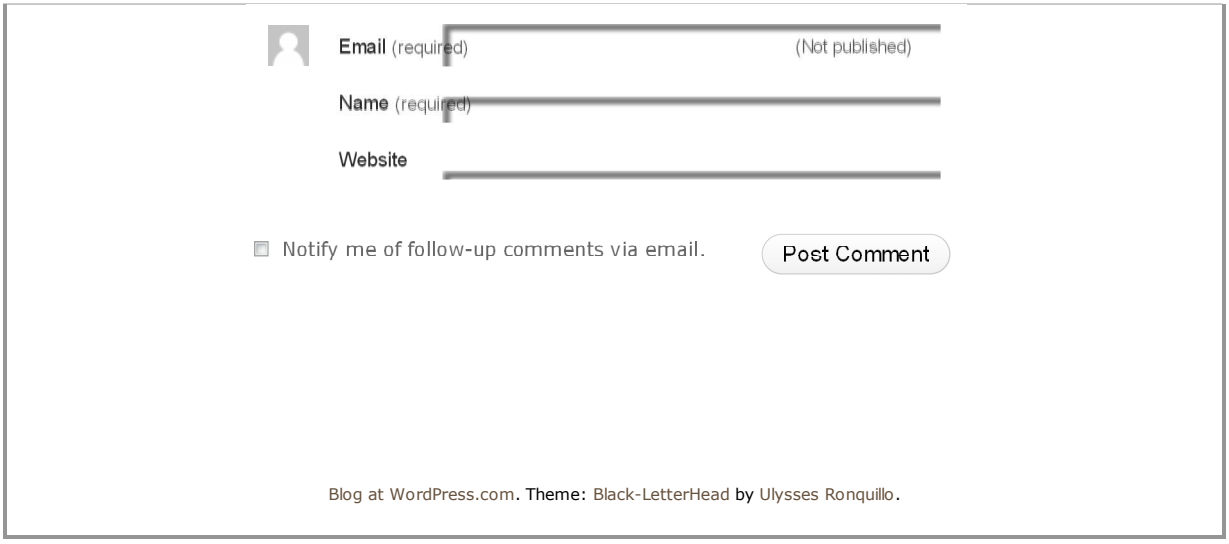
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