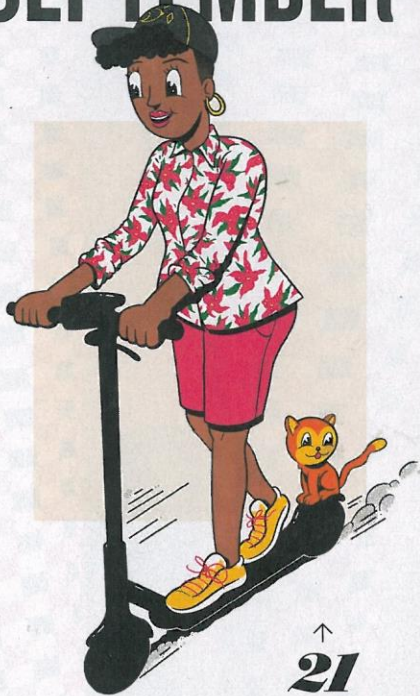


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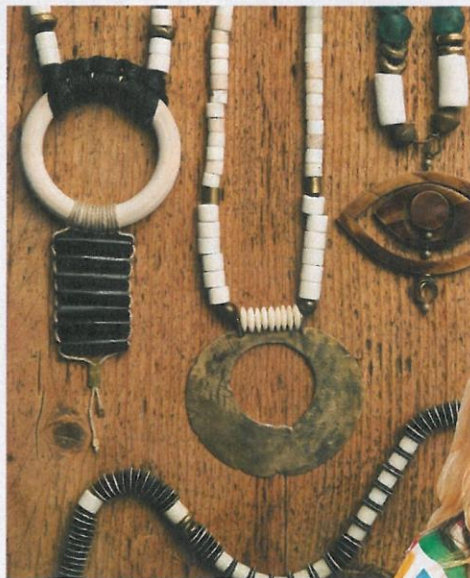
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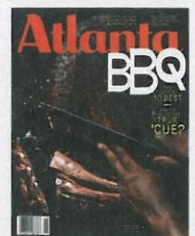
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The Tippling Point

A mere decade ago, Atlanta bartenders were toiling to unearth an all-but-forgotten culinary tradition: the craft cocktail

BY GRAY CHAPMAN

←
Greg Best's peach-infused rye drink with cola bitters made a splash way back in 2008.



IN 2018, ATLANTANS can sip mezcal at burger joints, slug a \$15 ounce of Japanese whiskey within earshot of a Braves game, and have their pick of bitters—from Angostura to Atlanta-made 18.21—at the neighborhood grocery store. But 10 years ago, barkeep Greg Best couldn't even get his hands on a reliable supply of decent vermouth. "The handful of amari and fortified wines that were available would come with a quarter-inch of dust on the bottles," Best recalls of his mid-aughts tenure at Restaurant Eugene. And it was anyone's guess what would be available the next time he needed to restock. "It was a crapshoot."

The evolution of cocktail culture in Atlanta happened at such a breakneck pace that it's difficult to pinpoint a precise moment when the scales tipped, but 2008 was a landmark year by every measure. Prior to then, bar-goers sniffing around for an interesting drink typically found their way to one of a handful of outliers, including Shaun's, Trois, Repast, or Restaurant Eugene, where Best had landed in 2004 after leaving Emeril's in Buckhead. It was at Emeril's where Best, alongside cohorts Andy Minchow and Regan Smith, cultivated a rare thing in Atlanta at the time: a small but rabid clientele of cocktail loyalists.

Bob Amick of Concentrics Restaurants group opened Trois in 2006 with the idea of introducing Atlanta to an artisan cocktail-driven bar on par with New York institutions like Milk & Honey. Amick says that, in retrospect, the concept was ahead of its time. "It was a drastic change to have a popular bar where you couldn't put the drinks out as quickly as people were used to," he says. Behind the

Greg Best behind the bar at Ticonderoga Club

bar at the now-defunct Beleza, Ricardo Ullio's sleek Brazilian spot that opened in 2007 on Juniper Street, Lindy Colburn created elaborate cocktails with produce like soursop and passionfruit—yet in the bar's early days, Colburn says, "half the people that came in would still order a vodka cranberry."

But soon, the cocktail renaissance that had started in New York City several years earlier would make its way to Atlanta. (Perhaps not coincidentally, it arrived around the time that a certain moody ad man with a penchant for Manhattans introduced viewers to the lowballs of the *Mad Men* era.) Orders for vodka cranberries and Cosmopolitans gave way to calls for Negronis and Sazeracs. At Trois, Eric Simpkins gently coaxed guests into trying a gin concoction with raw egg whites, and the drink, the Trois Cocktail, went on to become a bestseller. In the Old Fourth Ward at Repast, Kysha Cyrus managed to convince diners to try shochu and smoked whiskey alongside their hake and scallops.

Starting in 2008, a succession of high-profile restaurants opened despite the looming recession. Perhaps as an antidote to the era, these restaurants had ambitious bar programs—the most innovative cocktails the city had ever seen. Restaurant Eugene's kid-sister spot, Holeman & Finch, opened its doors that year with Best as a partner and behind the bar. One Flew South set up shop on Hartsfield-Jackson's E Concourse months later. On their heels came Leon's, Miller Union, and the Sound Table. At these establishments, cocktails were no longer neon nightclub concoctions or sugar-laden dessert "martinis." Patrons were, in equal measures, curious about and puzzled by drinks that required a laundry list of unfamiliar ingredients—and a lot of time—to make.

From his perch at Trois, Simpkins watched as interest in craft cocktails swelled, and he became wary of mixed drinks joining the gilded ranks of fine wine. "I didn't like the idea of people making cocktails feel pinky-in-the-air snobby," he says. Demystifying cocktails was important to his ethos as a bartender, but he also wanted to ensure that this new movement could outlast the blip of a trend bubble. "There's always been a challenge in the culinary world to expose people to new things in a way that doesn't frighten them away. You can't be an asshole, and you can't make people feel dumb or stupid."

But as it turns out, the public's thirst for cocktail culture could hardly be quenched. It was revelatory, Best says, "like dusting off *The Joy of Cooking* for the first time in a hundred years to a group of people who really like to

“
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SNOBBY.”

eat.” Yet as people’s taste for cocktails grew more adventurous, the ingredients for those cocktails continued to be difficult to source. Simpkins, who had arrived in Atlanta to work at Trois after a stint at the renowned Pegu Club, quickly realized he was working with a fraction of what he had on the backbar in Soho. “Everything we take for granted today, from gin to bonded applejack to mezcal, just wasn’t in the market here,” he says. Bartenders banded together and lobbied distributors to expand the inventory available to them.

up to Buckhead? Miles Macquarrie, whose work behind the bar in the decade since has earned him national acclaim. At that point, Macquarrie says, “I’d always thought cocktails were either martinis or super sweet.” The first day Macquarrie set foot inside Holeman, Best sat him down at the bar and made him a Sazerac. It was a lightbulb moment, Macquarrie says. “I was like, ‘I want in.’” He went on to co-open Leon’s the following February, Decatur’s Kimball House in 2014, and, in June, Watchman’s in Krog

lively sandwich bar called Victory opened on Elizabeth Street where a parking deck now stands, and a star was born in the Whiskey Coke Slushie. “Suddenly, all the people who were really serious about cocktails were willing to be not so serious,” Best says.

In the years since, cocktail culture has proliferated with such fervor that you can now find almost any creation in Atlanta, from the produce-focused cocktails served out of Gunshow’s roving cart to the over-the-top Zombies and swizzles at SOS Tiki

7 GAME-CHANGING ATLANTA COCKTAILS



THE TROIS COCKTAIL

by Eric Simpkins
Circa 2006
Simpkins convinced patrons at Trois to expand their horizons with this Trojan horse of a drink, with flavors inspired by '90s prom dates at Imperial Fez. “To my surprise, we were able to get people to drink gin with egg whites in 2006.”

THE SOURSOP ELDERFLOWER COLLINS

by Lindy Colburn
Circa 2007
After chef Ricardo Ullio introduced Colburn to Marietta’s Brazilian markets, she began playing with tropical produce in drinks at Ullio’s woefully short-lived Beleza in Midtown. The Soursop Collins was her favorite.

THE BUFALA NEGRA

by Jerry Slater
Circa 2008
Slater brought this vinegar-laced bourbon drink to Atlanta from Louisville. It made its first local appearance at One Flew South, later showed up at H. Harper Station, and has since been replicated at bars around the world.

THE RESURGENS COCKTAIL

by Greg Best
Circa 2008
Best’s peach-infused rye drink with cola bitters gained fame at Holeman & Finch, but its precursor debuted years earlier at Emeril’s, where Best used Pappy Van Winkle rye. Miles Macquarrie calls it “a quintessential Atlanta Manhattan.”

THE GUTTERPOP

by Miles Macquarrie
Circa 2009
Debuting on Leon’s first winter menu, the Gutterpop was born after Macquarrie began tinkering with housemade sodas, including one that paired cardamom with blood orange. Best says it raised the bar on inventive cocktails.

THE SOCIALIST

by Paul Calvert
Circa 2010
After Calvert’s three-rum drink won the top honor at a local cocktail competition, it made special cameos at Leon’s and Holeman & Finch. Calvert says it’s an example of how the pioneers of Atlanta’s cocktail scene supported each other.

THE WHISKEY COKE SLUSHIE

by Ian Jones and Caleb Wheelus
Circa 2011
Victory’s whimsical frozen whiskey and cola signaled “a return to fun,” according to Simpkins.

“We fought hard,” Simpkins says.

They also were each other’s best customers. “I spent every single waking minute that I wasn’t at work going to other bars,” Best says. Jerry Slater, who moved from Louisville to Atlanta to open One Flew South in 2008, was struck by how supportive people in the city’s service industry were. “Because it’s such a cooperative scene, everybody pushed everybody to get better,” he recalls. In 2008, Brick Store Pub traded one of its bartenders for one from Holeman & Finch for about a week. The swap functioned like an informal exchange program to help the Brick Store and Holeman bar teams round out their cocktail and beer skill sets, respectively. The barman that Brick Store sent

Street Market. Kimball House now shares with Holeman & Finch the honor of being Atlanta’s only finalists for the James Beard Foundation’s Outstanding Bar Program.

At Holeman & Finch, a jasmine-laced rye drink called the Oracle had long captivated guests with its floating orb of ice. “It became the bane of my bar staff,” Best says with a laugh. (He left Holeman in 2013 to co-open Ticonderoga Club with Smith, Paul Calvert, Bart Sasso, and chef David Bies.) “Once the word got out, people were ordering six or eight of them at a time, and we couldn’t keep up with those stupid ice spheres.” Over in Decatur, the Gutterpop debuted at Leon’s after Macquarrie experimented with making blood-orange soda in a siphon. In 2011, a

Bar. “We’re very much into the idea that our places need to be fun,” says Simpkins, whose 2017 restaurant, Bon Ton, serves a smoked bourbon mai tai and a spiked, frozen Vietnamese coffee. At Watchman’s, you can find daiquiris, highballs, and a retrofitted Chartreuse shot machine. And right next door, Ticonderoga Club offers its eponymous “Cups” in hammered copper mugs alongside low-alcohol “suppressors.” Post up at just about any cocktail bar in the city, and you’ll see patrons casually calling for drinks bartenders wouldn’t have dreamed of selling in 2008. “We couldn’t give away Sazeracs back then,” Calvert says. “Now, we have people who come into Ticonderoga asking for one like it’s a Budweiser.”