

Tasting Our Way Through the Bitter Truth Manhattan Challenge

By Eric Twardzik

Bitters are a key component of any Manhattan—but the question of which bitters to use is rarely asked. For as any classicist will tell you, that's a settled question: a dash of aromatic bitters, perhaps two if you're feeling spicy.

But why not blow it all up?

That's more-or-less the idea behind The Bitter Truth's Manhattan Challenge. For this initiative, the German bitters maker is asking drinkers to break out of the aromatic box and blend bitters from different flavor

categories to experience how a single dash can change the flavor of the drink.

To participate, I received flasks of sweet vermouth and 100-proof rye



whiskey, plus a selection of mini-bitters divided into three categories: fruity, aromatic, and savory. My instructions were to build the same Manhattan recipe, but include one dash from every category each time. For my first attempt, I went with a combination the company cited as its favorite: Orange (fruity), Jerry Thomas (aromatic), and Celery (savory). But first, I tried each on its own; the Jerry Thomas bitters brought up licorice and leather, the orange bitters a citrusy zest, and the celery bitters proved briny and bright. Altogether, the Manhattan had a big orange note with a faint licorice bitterness, and a savory touch of celery at the finish that proved brightening and lightening. In sum, the first experiment resulted in a much more complex Manhattan than I'm accustomed to. Round two brought in Chocolate (drier and more bitter than I'd expected, like cocoa powder), Peach (sweet and stonefruity), and Cucumber (green and spicy). As the sum of their parts, this Manhattan had cocoa powder up front followed by peach and cucumber, both of which seemed to wrap around each other in a dark mix of vegetal and stone fruit flavors. The

darkness of the peach seemed to influence the chocolate as well, leading to a long and bitter dark chocolate finish.

The final go was an orange redux, now accompanied by Creole (very licorice-heavy) and Olive Bitters (rich and fatty, like dressed olives at a tapas restaurant). The Manhattan it yielded was the darkest of the three, with bitter orange peel and licorice up front and rich, round olive at the back with fat and brine. This combination brought it the closest to being an out-and-out savory drink.

To conclude: A single drop can turn a Manhattan on its head, and even the unorthodox flavor combos (I was a little fearful of chocolate and celery) yielded intriguing results worth chewing over. With winter approaching, I'm looking forward to spending many an evening indoors working on my own Manhattan project.