

# Club Cocktails

*For these whisky lovers, it's not just neat*

BY SALLY KRAL



The goal of any whisky club is to bring people together to taste and converse over a delicious dram. For many clubs, this means neat pours of various whiskies to taste and compare—and there's certainly an argument to be made that the most fulfilling way to experience whisky is as simply as possible: pure liquid to glass. But as modern cocktails continue to evolve and grow in popularity, some whisky clubs are branching out from their usual neat servings to incorporate whisky cocktails into their meetings and events—with delicious results.

"Our events always start with a 'welcome cocktail' featuring an expression from the tasting to come," says Kim Ohanneson, president of the Los Angeles chapter of Women Who Whiskey. "These events tend to be

education-focused, and we think tasting the featured whisky in a well-made cocktail is a great way to learn about and appreciate the spirit from a different angle, and it can even help highlight a specific flavor note in the whisky, like spiciness or nuttiness." Ohanneson says that many of the brand ambassadors that have hosted or visited Women Who Whiskey events are also talented mixologists. "We've been the lucky beneficiaries of their creativity," she says, adding that Women Who Whiskey also hosts frequent cocktail classes where members learn how to make classic drinks as well as more unique variations. "Creating a cocktail from scratch really helps members isolate flavors and aromas," she notes.

Peter Grasso, founder of the Monmouth Whisky Club in Monmouth County, New

Jersey, also likes to feature cocktails as part of his regular meetings for the educational elements they can add. "We meet monthly and we usually have at least one cocktail-focused meeting at a member's house in the summertime, and we do this for two reasons: the first is that straight whisky isn't really a summertime drink, and the second is that cocktails give our members something to expand upon their whisky repertoire so that they understand and appreciate it a little bit differently," he explains. For the club's cocktail meetings they may take a well-known recipe like the Old-Fashioned and try it with different whiskies so they can experience how the same cocktail can taste different when made with a rye versus a scotch, for instance. "At another recent cocktail event, a member brought in the recipe for the Godfather cocktail for us to try, and that led to a discussion about the difference between a Highball and other types of cocktails," Grasso adds. "We always try to roll-in that educational part of what we're doing, and I think that members appreciate that. They're having fun, but they also learn something and try something new by the time they walk out of the meeting."

Cocktails are a supplementary feature of events hosted by the Dram Devotees of Bucks County in Pennsylvania. "When I do larger events, such as my Halloween ghost tour, which involves telling haunting stories and pairing different whiskies with each story, I'll end the night with a nightcap cocktail, and then when I do sit-down tastings where I'm discussing all the histories of the brands and covering a lot of information, I usually give people a cocktail to start so that they have something to sip on while they wait for that first dram—it keeps them satiated and it also gets the appetite ready and sets the palate," says Laura Fields, founder of the club.

For the Dram Devotees, cocktails have also been a great way to entice new members to join the club. "We do cocktail-focused events during the summer where I teach people how to mix real pre-Prohibition cocktails, and just the word 'cocktail' helps draw people in and inclines them to try something new," Fields says. "Cocktails seem to be a nice segue for most people—even those who may not normally drink whisky cocktails but might drink vodka or gin cocktails." For these types of people, Fields will take a familiar recipe and replace the usual base spirit with whisky. "It's a nice transition and way to introduce people to the much more dense

# Super-Size Sippers

If you're looking to incorporate cocktails into your regular whisky club meetings or special events, batching large-format drinks takes the hassle out of hosting. "I wholeheartedly believe in batching shelf-stable ingredients ahead of time," says Neal Bodenheimer, owner of the New Orleans bars Cure and Cane & Table, and co-chair of Tales of the Cocktail Foundation. "Classic punch is the ultimate large-scale batch cocktail. David Wondrich's book *Punch: The Delights (and Dangers) of the Flowing Bowl* is a must-have. My personal favorite flavor combinations are peach bitters with bourbon, chamomile with scotch, and black tea with rye."

Whether you're creating an aperitif drink to prepare the palate before a tasting or just looking to add a bit of fun to your next club meeting, keep these tips from Bodenheimer in mind as you decide on a cocktail or two to offer. Bodenheimer recommends having a measuring cup, large barspoon, and funnel for rebottling handy.

- **"Measure twice, cut once."** This old saying in carpentry means double-check before you execute, because you can't go back and fix it. For batching, this means measure twice and mix once—not all measuring cups are created equal.
- **Quality matters.** Only use ingredients that you would drink on their own. Better ingredients make better cocktails!
- **Grate your own spices.** The potency of ground spices fades as they sit on grocery

and pantry shelves. You want the spice to be fresh, strong, and aromatic. Grating fresh whole spices is the only way to ensure that.

- **Consider your dilution levels.** When you shake or stir a cocktail with ice, it adds dilution (water) and chill (the by-product of the reaction of ice turning into water). When batching, add an appropriate amount of water—generally 20%-25%—then refrigerate or chill your batch. Serve each drink over fresh ice (or straight into the glass) because it will already have the correct dilution.
- **Save the citrus and bitters for last.** It's fine to mix most ingredients ahead of time, except for any citrus or bitters. Don't add either until serving—citrus will turn if left out too long and bitters can expand.

## COCKTAILS BY THE BOTTLE

Each of these cocktails for a crowd is based on a standard 750 ml bottle of whisky, to make mixing easy. After combining the ingredients, stir and chill in the refrigerator until you're ready to serve. —Neal Bodenheimer

### Boulevardier

Serves 15  
(3 oz. servings)

#### INGREDIENTS

750 ml bourbon  
9 1/2 oz. Cinzano 1757 Rosso  
sweet vermouth  
9 1/2 oz. Campari aperitif  
11 oz. spring water

#### SERVE

Garnish each serving with an orange twist.

### Among Dreams

Serves 30  
(3 oz. servings)

#### INGREDIENTS

750 ml rye  
750 ml Green Chartreuse liqueur  
3 liters Carpano Antica Formula  
sweet vermouth  
1 liter spring water

#### SERVE

Garnish each serving with 1 dash each Angostura bitters and tiki bitters.

### Chamomile Malt Punch

Serves 25  
(3 oz. servings)

#### INGREDIENTS

Peels of 4 large lemons  
1 cup white sugar  
Rest together, covered, for one day

750 ml blended malt scotch  
1 cup fresh lemon juice, strained  
5 cups chilled chamomile tea  
8 dashes Angostura bitters

#### SERVE

In a punch bowl. Garnish with lemon slices and chamomile flowers.

### Howitzer Punch

Serves 25  
(3 oz. servings)

#### INGREDIENTS

Peels of 4 large lemons  
1 cup white sugar  
Rest together, covered, for one day

750 ml bourbon  
1 cup fresh lemon juice, strained  
2 cups spring water

#### BEFORE SERVING

750 ml sparkling wine  
peach bitters, to taste

#### SERVE

In a punch bowl.

and interesting flavor characteristics that whisky has to offer. We're broadening people's horizons, one drink at a time."

People are indeed embracing cocktails more and more these days. When Monmouth Whisky Club's Grasso built his own speak-easy in his home and invited club members over to christen it, he was pleasantly surprised by how enthusiastically they wanted to try the cocktails he offered on a homemade menu. "I had the whole bar with all the regular whiskies, but I was really happy to see that most people gravitated toward the cocktails," he says. "And everybody wanted to try

something different—even some guys who don't really know how to make cocktails at home and don't totally understand what bitters are were trying different kinds of cocktails and enhancing their appreciation for a spirit they already know and love."

There are still, of course, the purists who remain wary of mixing their beloved dram with even ice or water—let alone bitters, vermouths, syrups, or juices. To these sticklers, Grasso says there's no harm in a little experimentation. "You don't know good from bad if you've never experienced bad—you have to open up your mind and your palate," he says.

"For example, if you really want to appreciate peated whisky you also have to understand unpeated whisky, and if you want to understand bourbon and how it's distinct, it helps to understand scotch or Irish whiskey. It's the same with cocktails: It's a new way of learning about and experiencing whiskies."

Dram Devotee's Fields agrees that you can't claim something is bad or wrong if you haven't given it a try. "I never like to tell people how to enjoy their whisky—my feeling is, you enjoy whisky the way you want to enjoy it, and I'll do the same. To each his own. But I will say that I think the purists are just being silly." ■