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# Bitters' sweet symphony

Cocktail culture is seeing a revival in the fortunes of the little bottles with a lot of kick. Lucy Britner speaks to leading lights in the world of bitters

Bitters are the preserve of the bartender, with the category remaining something of a mystery to those of us who don't shake and stir. In fact, the average man on the street probably doesn't realise his shot of Jägermeister or his pre-dinner Campari are both bitters.

It's probably easiest to deal with the departure of these brands from the broader term of bitters first. Gruppo Campari head of group communications Chiara Bressani says: "We consider Campari a category in itself. There is nothing similar."

"Often, bitters are consumed after dinner but Campari is an aperitif."

Jägermeister is the biggest selling bitters brand in the world. According to Drinks International's Millionaires Club listing, the brand shifted 6.41 million 9-litre equivalent cases in 2008, and the brand is marketed in more than 80 countries with export sales accounting for some 75%.

Jack Blecker, the board member responsible for international marketing and sales for

Jägermeister, says the success of the brand in the US played a big part in the decision to steer away from the umbrella term of bitters.

Blecker adds: "The trigger for the consideration to lead the brand outside every category was the increasing success of the brand in the US at the end of the '90s."

"In this market there was, and still is, no category such as bitters or similar, but yet we were remarkably successful at that time."

"Until today, the strategy which was developed as a consequence from this success has proven very successful, not only in the US – where we are part of the top 10 brands – but also in many other developing and emerging markets."

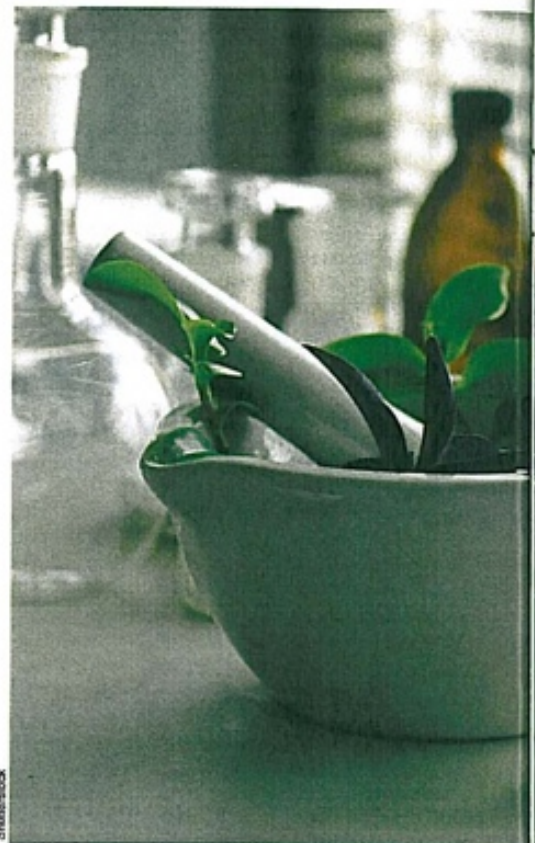
Jägermeister is not the only brand to enjoy success in the US. Sicilian brand Averna launched a bartender-facing initiative in the States in 2007.

Gruppo Averna export director Michel Jordens says: "The US cocktail culture is making Averna relevant (and known) to a younger and wider demographic in the US while maintaining the core audience of traditional Averna drinkers who enjoy it as a digestivo, thus the overall market is expanding."

"Averna was launched to the bartender community with the 'HAVE' campaign, and a contest to engage bartenders, which drew hundreds of entries and really jump-started acceptance by the emerging mixology culture in the US."

## The way they were

Bitters may be re-emerging Stateside now, but it has been a struggle. Prohibition was responsible for the disappearance of many bitters brands, according to The Bitter Truth, a German-based



company started by Stephan Berg – co-author of online historical barbooks blog the Bitter Blog – and Alexander Hauck, a bartender and fan of the classic bar.

The pair write: "In 1919, Prohibition set in and wiped out almost all domestic bitters brands. Few survived or even got permission to produce medicine. At that time the cocktail was a truly American thing with weak impact in Europe."

According to the duo at The Bitter Truth, Johann Siegart – the German doctor who created Angostura aromatic bitters in Venezuela, 1824 – was in the lucky position to be outside the US.

"In America itself cocktail culture almost died out, drinks were simplified to just the necessary number of ingredients. When prohibition was repealed in 1933, the brand Siegart's (Angostura) Bitters had more or less the entire US market."

Which brings us nicely to perhaps one of the most commonly recognised back-bar bitters – the now Trinidad-based brand Angostura, with its iconic, oversized label.

According to international brand manager Alison Getty, who was unwilling to disclose volumes, 85% of the brand's production is

Things like Angostura used to be remedies. In a lot of ways bartenders are like pharmacists – they prescribe little lifts

Wayne Collins

Mixologist





Maxxium UK's resident mixologist Wayne Collins advises caution in the use of strongly flavoured bitters



exported and goes to almost every country in the world.

There's no doubt the brand has done a lot for the category in terms of education.

Getty continues: "We have developed and produced an innovative pan-European brand education campaign that can be used on many levels. It can be used as part of a full brand experience and training session or simply for information for bartenders and consumers."

"The theme adopted is Welcome to the World of Angostura, which explores the manufacturing methods of Angostura's rum and bitters, the art of mixing and the 'melting pot' culture of the company's Trinidadian backdrop."

The campaign includes a book which contains

tasting notes for all of Angostura's products, new cocktail recipes and a seven-minute DVD shot on location in Trinidad and Tobago."

Angostura has no intentions of releasing any new bitters products at the moment. The brand's strategy is based on promoting the pink gin & tonic, the long vodka and the Angostura lemonade, lime & bitters (LLB) in on-trade outlets.

Getty adds: "The key is for us to challenge the on-trade to premiumise its offer by adding



Angostura aromatic bitters to everyday bar calls, such as the gin & tonic or lemonade & lime.

"A 200ml bottle contains more than 700 dashes and a small charge for Angostura can make a real difference to profits, while also extending an outlet's drinks offering without the need for in-depth training or the purchase of new products and equipment."

Education, a renewed interest in cocktail culture and companies such as Bitter Truth have helped push the bitters category.

Mixologist Wayne Collins says: "We have to be grateful to The Bitter Truth in Germany. They have worked hard to revive old-fashioned, defunct bitters."

Collins says bitters were more commonly

#### Millionaires Club 2009: Bitters

Brand	Owner	Category	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	% +/-	Status
Jägermeister	Mast-Jägermeister	Bitters	4.50	5.20	5.95	6.32	6.41	1.4	International
Fernet Branca	Fratelli Branca Distillerie	Bitters	2.34	2.55	2.90	3.12	3.28	5.1	International
Campari	Gruppo Campari	Bitters	2.90	2.90	2.90	2.93	2.93	0.0	International
Aperol	Gruppo Campari	Bitters	0.70	0.65	1.00	1.15	1.30	13.0	Regional
Amaro Ramazzotti	Pernod Ricard	Bitters	1.25	1.28	1.27	1.18	1.22	3.4	Regional



## Bitters



known as tinctures – a concentration of aromatic flavourings first used by pharmacists.

He adds: "Things such as Angostura were remedies for stomach complaints or were little pick-me-ups. In a lot of ways, bartenders are like pharmacists – they prescribe little lifts."

One of the most exciting bitters for Collins is celery, but he warns bartenders not to overdo it.

He says: "Don't get too carried away – what do they give to the drink? Do they add depth and seasoning?"

"A lot of the time it's about aromatics – a few drops over the ice on the top of a drink can add a lot."

Collins is also a fan of a new bitters called Bittermens Xocolatl Mole Bitters, but more about that later.

He adds: "A lot of this interest in bitters has come from the reprinting of old bartender books."

He's not wrong – Alex Hauck from Bitter Truth says bartenders are discovering forgotten knowledge from old cocktail books.

He adds: "A few of them started to produce their own house bitters to get an impression of how ancient cocktails tasted, but these bitters are only produced in very small quantities."

Hauck says Gary Regan was the first to make a bartender-produced bitters into a commercial venture.

"If someone likes to make his own bitters he should do it like Gary Regan did at the beginning of the 1990s. He took an orange bitters recipe from Charles H Bakers Gentleman's Companion and changed it a little bit."

"He rebuilt this recipe – it took him several attempts to get the result he achieved but finally it worked," says Hauck, in reference to Regan's Orange Bitters No 6.

Following in his footsteps, the team at The Bitter Truth have also revived an old bartender bitters recipe. The Jerry Thomas' Own Decanter Bitters is based on the eponymous recipe written down in the first cocktail book ever, *The Bartender's Guide* – also known as *How to Mix Drinks* or the *Bon Vivant's Companion* – from 1862. Hauck adds: "There are some more bitters recipes in this book, but one has to be careful, because some of the ingredients are forbidden today because they're classified as drugs." Hauck suggests using the bitters in a Martinez and Pink Gin, as well as several other cocktails.



Stephan Berg and Alexander Hauck are intent on reviving bitters' fortunes

## A bitter excitement

### Bittermens Xocolatl Mole Bitters, 44% abv

Xocolatl Mole Bitters has been dubbed "a new bitters for a new era of cocktailing". According to Bittermens: "These bitters blur the lines between Old World bitters and New World flavours and play exceptionally well with tequila, aged rum, sweet vermouth and most brown spirits."

#### Tips for using Xocolatl Mole:

Add a dash to a Manhattan to start exploring its complex flavour, or use in a tequila Old Fashioned to bring forward the spirit's vegetal flavours. This bitters was designed by Avery and Janet Glasser and is produced under license from Bittermens.

#### Tasting notes:

Dark, rich and complex. A bitter chocolate nose leads the palate to dark chocolate, cinnamon and spice flavours that are supported by classic European bitter herbs.

#### Slight Detour

20ml Tequila Reposado  
15ml jalapeño-infused tequila  
15ml Mezcal Joven  
1 spoon agave nectar  
2 dashes The Bitter Truth Bittermens Xocolatl Mole Bitters  
Orange twist  
Stir with ice & strain into a cocktail glass

Though the number of types of bitters is on the up, the category doesn't have as much variety as the likes of gin and vodka. Hauck says this is why bartenders are likely to experiment with their own bitters concoctions.

He adds: "In a few years people will be accustomed to bitters and then it (the category) will reflect what flavours they like most and can handle best."

#### Back to the Future

The cocktail renaissance has led to all kinds of twists on classic recipes and new bitters are being created to suit the 21st-century approach to bartending. In June this year, Bittermens, a San Francisco-based company founded by Avery and Janet Glasser, joined forces with The Bitter Truth. One of the fruits of their labours is Bittermens Xocolatl Mole Bitters. It has got the likes of Wayne Collins and Angus Winchester excited. Bitters have turned a corner.