

Robb Report



Thoughts on Taste with Dale DeGroff

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The craft-cocktail movement is growing stronger every day. As proof, the second annual **For the Love of Cocktails** event in Las Vegas begins today and runs through Saturday—two days longer than the inaugural event that was held in Sin City this time last year. The master mixologist Dale DeGroff is one of

five craft-cocktail experts who will be mixing at the various events and dinners; he will also be hosting a Manhattan-specific seminar. Many cocktail enthusiasts point to DeGroff as one of the pioneers of the revitalized craft-cocktail movement—he made craft cocktails cool at the Rainbow Room from 1987 to 1999 and has also published **numerous books** on the subject which have kept classic recipes alive and circulating.

With Valentine’s Day right around the corner, we sat down with DeGroff to talk about one of his greatest loves of all—the cocktail.

Between your work behind the bar at the Rainbow Room and the classic cocktail books that you’ve published, you have influenced, inspired, and educated an entire generation of craft bartenders. What led to your own interest in classic cocktails?

I came to New York to be an actor in 1969. A *New Yorker* critic published a very nice review of a college play that I was in that we brought from the University of Rhode Island to the Yale drama fest, so I went home and packed my bags and thought I was five minutes away from stardom, or at least from Broadway. I had this romantic idea of New York. [After I arrived in the city] I had a lot of crazy jobs, but I always knew that the bars were like the redwoods of California, they were our natural resource. So I ended up working in them and working my way up.

I got hired by Joe Baum in 1985. [Baum is known for opening the Four Seasons and the Rainbow Room, among other restaurants in New York City.] A lot of people in the industry think he was a genius, the guy who took us from the bland 1950s to the age that we live in today, with all the choices that we have going on. Joe was my inspiration, my mentor, and the guy who sent me on the road to study the classics and to learn how they were made.

Now that you’ve become an expert in classic cocktails, is it easy for you to pick a favorite?

A gin martini straight up with an olive and a twist squeezed over the top that’s then discarded. That’s my default. But in this day and age, when there are a number of great bartenders . . . It’s like on the culinary side—you take advantage of local expertise. If you’re in Texas, you’re going to be eating barbecue, baby. So if I’m in New Orleans, I’m going to drink Sazeracs, or if I’m at Napoleon’s House, I’ll be drinking a Pimm’s Cup.

What is it about that gin martini that resonates so strongly with you?

There’s something clean and civilized about a really well-made martini that’s icy cold. It really is the king of cocktails. The Manhattan and martini are both the most revered of all cocktails and have been for a hundred years, and the gin martini—when it’s made perfectly—it’s as civilized and correct as a cocktail can be.

What do you have to have to make a great one?

Icy cold is the key, which means the glass must be icy cold, the olives must be icy cold, everything that touches the martini must be icy cold. The olives are very particular; I like small, Spanish, very flavorful olives. You don’t need an oversize glass, because the drink gets warm too quickly. I like them in a 5.5-ounce glass and no larger.

What pairs best with an icy-cold gin martini?

A companion, a sunset, and a plate of oysters would just be the ideal for me. **P.J. Clarke’s**, a New York landmark, offers a great lunch that starts with a gin martini and then a dozen oysters, and then a gin martini, and then steak tartare, and then a gin martini. That’s a great companion for the gin martini.

If you were to order something other than a cocktail, what would it be?

I'm a big fan of Champagne. It's the one thing that you can drink day or night. You can drink it with everything. When someone suggests opening a bottle of Champagne, it's never met with a no. It's so festive and right at any time of day or night.

Do you have a favorite Champagne house?

I can't afford it all the time, but **Krug** is a marvelous Champagne, so that's kept for special occasions.

A few years back, you developed your own brand of bitters with the help of the absinthe maker T. A. Breaux. What inspired you to do that?

I'd been using a pimento dram from Jamaica that they took off the market. It was so strong that you didn't need more than a few drops to flavor a rum punch. So I started experimenting with the flavors in my kitchen using high-proof vodka and macerating these botanicals—it was 90 percent allspice and dried orange peel, and anise.

How important are bitters for what you do?

There's a ditty that colonial tavern owners used to sing to remind them of their punch recipe: one of sour, two of sweet, three of strong, four of weak, and then spice. The idea of bitters is to offset that two of sweet. Bitters will make the sweet much less cloying. **My bitters** are very dry and intensely strong. A couple of good dashes of my bitters in a sweet Manhattan will dry it out and make it quite complex.

- See more at: <http://robbreport.com/robb-vices/thoughts-taste-dale-degoff#sthash.hYXo7Ys0.dpuf>