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Josh Barro:

This is Josh Barro, and this is Very Serious, the podcast. Welcome back. It's good to be doing another episode of the podcast for you, and this is an especially fun one that we always look forward to when we do it. I have Peter Suderman with me for the third time on this podcast, what we're making into a semi-annual tradition, a cocktail podcast with Peter who writes the popular cocktail Substack, Cocktails with Suderman. We do this in the spring and in the fall to get you ready for either the warm weather or the cool weather cocktail season that's coming up.

And of course, we're going into the warm weather season, which I think is the more fun of the two, although way like cocktails at all times a year. Peter, thank you for joining me this spring. Just asked here, we've gotten an 88 degree day in New York City, so arguably we're getting into summer cocktail season right now. But we'll have some spring days coming up, and so we can do some spring focus at least first.

Peter Suderman:

It is absolutely warm cocktail season. Well, it is warm weather season.

Josh Barro:

Yes.

Peter Suderman:

And time for warm weather cocktails, not warm cocktails.

Josh Barro:

Right. Yes.

Peter Suderman:

And I'm very glad to be here talking about those with you today.

Josh Barro:

It's funny, on that 88 degree day I went into Little Ned, which is this new very good cocktail bar in the Ned Hotel in Nomad in New York. And they were doing their cocktail changeovers. They have 15 items on the cocktail list and they were out of six of them, because they were discontinuing them. And the bartender's like, "Well, three of those are hot cocktails. You definitely don't want a hot cocktail today." And that was true in that instance.

So, actually, I want to start by talking about your home bar because you had posted recently about some organization and spring cleaning you're doing down there. I've been in Peter's basement, which is less creepy than it sounds. Peter has a really lovely and really extensive bar setup down in his basement in Washington with a lot of space for bottle storage, but I guess not quite as much space as you needed.

Peter Suderman:

Yeah. So when we built the bar, the thinking was, "Well, I will probably not need any more than say, 150 bottles out and within reach, and then a backup storage compartment that can hold, I don't know, another a hundred bottles or so." And of course, probably by the time the bar was completed, I had already blown past this. And so now, as you have seen, I have a lot of bookshelves as well in the same space, and they're just bottles kind of everywhere. There's also a whole additional rack that's just for sipping whiskey that doesn't really get used in cocktails.

And it has become, I won't say a problem, because it's kind of great, but the problem is that at this point I literally cannot remember all of the unique and specific bottles that I have, especially when it comes to things like more obscure bitters, more obscure liqueurs, and odd vermouths because I really like unusual vermouths. I keep a lot of them around, even if they're not open. Oh, I want to have two dry vermouths in circulation right now. So one of them will always be dull and dry, and then one of them will be, what is this? I don't know. I'm going to try this out, because as it turns out, a dry vermouth makes a huge difference in a martini, especially if you like a 50/50.

Josh Barro:

Oh, yeah.

Peter Suderman:

Like I do. And so it's just been a bit of a challenge recently. I've realized I have to come up with some sort of system for at least having a record or a reference. I have not actually done this yet. And it is-

Josh Barro:

So you don't have an Excel spreadsheet?

Peter Suderman:

No, I do not have an Excel spreadsheet. So I know at bars, they have inventory at the end of the night. And they have a little sheets that they like mark off how far the bottle is gone and that sort of thing. I've never worked as a bartender, but I did work at a restaurant with a very extensive bar program when I was a young man in college. Extensive bar program, by the way, does not mean good cocktails. It just means they sold an awful lot of booze to tourists who were going to the restaurant that had the live alligators.

Josh Barro:

Well, this would've been somewhere around the year 2000, right?

Peter Suderman:

Yes.

Josh Barro:

Like a peak teeny trend.

Peter Suderman:

Yes, exactly. And we served a 40 ounce blue drink in a gigantic martini glass that was purchased from the super Walmart next door.

Josh Barro:

Was this a TGI Fridays?

Peter Suderman:

No, it was absolutely not at TGI Fridays, I did work maybe 7 or 10 nights as a busboy in a TGI Fridays when I was about 17. But I learned nothing from their bar program. Although, although, listeners might be interested, for a very long time in the late 1980s and early 1990s in particular, TGI Fridays had a reputation as being the place with the really good, really well-made higher end cocktails. And they were part of the story of cocktails becoming sort of what they are now, that they're part of the backstory of the craft cocktail evolution.

Josh Barro:

This is when TGI Friday started as a singles bar in Manhattan.

Peter Suderman:

Yes.

Josh Barro:

... before it was a national chain for families.

Peter Suderman:

And so think of the next phase after that, as it was starting to expand to the rest of the country. During that phase, in the 1980s, TGI Friday's actually had a very intense bartender training program. And professionals who were bartenders who worked in the industry thought of that as like, "Oh, that's the place where I can go to hone my skills

and also the place where I can go after my own shift, because they're open very late and have a really well made drink."

Josh Barro:

Who knew? So anyway, getting back to your bar. So you do not have an Excel spreadsheet for your inventory. What is your system then for figuring out what all of those obscure vermouths that you have are?

Peter Suderman:

So I basically have a location based system currently. And my bar is organized based on, I have a spot for whiskey, I've got a spot for gin, I've got a spot for rum, I've got a spot for various brandies, and then I've got a spot for common modifiers. And so that's going to be liqueurs that are things like Benedictine or Chartreuse, which we might talk about later, or maraschino liqueurs, things that go into cocktails very regularly. And then I have had to, recently over the past, I don't know year or so, build yet another section that is just for somewhat more obscure fruit liqueurs and highly flavored liqueurs. So it's mostly fruit, like a lot of peach liqueur, raspberry liqueur, that sort of thing. But also this is where I will keep say Creme de Violette or chocolate liqueur, that sort of thing.

So it ends up being a lot of Giffard bottles, Giffard line of things. Readers of the newsletter know I'm mildly obsessed with banana liqueur, and this is where-

Josh Barro:

This one is.

Peter Suderman:

This is sort of the banana liqueur extended universe section of the bar. And then there's a spot on the bookshelves that's just for backup vermouth, for vermouth that is not yet open and therefore does not need to be refrigerated. And so I keep that out on the bookshelves in part so that I can see it, so that I won't forget what's on it and what's there. And then there are things, I have just a bunch of sherry that's in a cabinet that no one can see. I have probably three or four bottles Cynar of at any given time.

And there's just a place kind of in a secret compartment in the bar, that if you sort of tap the side of it properly, you'll open and you'll see, "Oh, here's some extra storage." And it's just full of Cynar, and gins maybe that I have not actually opened or tried out yet, because I don't know what am I going to do with this specific bottle. I just want something else tonight. I'm not going to try this. I've never seen this in a recipe, but somehow or another it's in here, in my bar, and I'll figure out what to do with it later.

Josh Barro:

Obviously, most people do not need a 250 bottle bar or a bar that has gotten so large that it doesn't fit in the space for 250 bottles. You wrote a post to the 41 bottle bar, and this is building on, you described that there's like, there's a classic, the 12 bottle bar and there are descriptions of what you need in your home in order to be able to make good cocktails. What's the distinction between 12 bottles and 41 bottles? If 12 allows you to make a good version of the key classic cocktails and most of the things that people might walk into your home and ask for, what does 41 bottles allow you to do?

Peter Suderman:

So let's start with the 12 bottle bar. I think some of the 12 bottle bars, there are multiple 12 bottle bars systems out there. There is one just famously called the 12 Bottle Bar, that's the name of the book. And those folks did a really good job of thinking through the implications of how do we have the smallest possible bar that allows you to make the maximum number of drinks. At the same time, there are real limitations to their system. And I'll just give you two. One is they include vodka and then use vodka to make other liqueurs. So for example, they allow you to have Limoncello, not because you have purchased Limoncello, but because you have taken a vodka base and made it yourself. So that's a little bit of a cheat, I think.

Josh Barro:

Wait, so you have to infuse the vodka with lemons yourself?

Peter Suderman:

Yes.

Josh Barro:

Okay.

Peter Suderman:

Yes. Sugar and the whole-

Josh Barro:

Yeah.

Peter Suderman:

... go through the whole process.

Josh Barro:

Right.

Peter Suderman:

Again, I think this is totally legitimate as a home bar project.

Josh Barro:

The sort of person who only wants to have 12 bottles of liquor in their house is not the sort of person who's going to make their own Limoncello at home.

Peter Suderman:

Correct. That system also does not include tequila, and yet that book includes a recipe for a margarita, because they say, you know what? We know people love margaritas. And so there are little-

Josh Barro:

It's a 13 bottle bar.

Peter Suderman:

There are small cheats in that book, but it's a good way to start thinking about this. Then Death and Company released a 12 bottle bar in their book *Welcome Home*, which came out just a few years ago. And it's a somewhat different system, includes more Amaro. It's much more built towards kind of modern cocktails and Death and Company style cocktails. They list 50 drinks that you can make with it, although their book isn't built around the system. So this is just a little section inside their book. And then the back of their book, of that specific book, includes something like 600 cocktail recipes and almost none of them can be made with that 12 bottle bar, because their recipes are famously built around quite obscure, quite unusual ingredients.

And so again, there're just limitations with these things. We've made a little bit more progress, I think with something like the book that Jacob Greer co-authored recently called *Raising the Bar*. And he calls for a kind of a 24, 25 bottle system, depending on exactly how you think of it and whether you think of a call for dry sherry as a call for just one bottle of sherry or several, or a call for Chartreuse as both green and yellow. But it's about 25 bottles. And it's a really smart book, really well organized because it starts with one single bottle of whiskey. Shows you all the drinks you can make with one single of bottle of whiskey and basically ordinary household stuff that you might find in your kitchen cabinet.

And then he adds another bottle and another bottle and another bottle. And so by the end you have 25 bottles in your bar, but you can build this progressively. So if you only have the first eight bottles in his book, then there's a bunch of drinks that you can make with just those eight bottles. And by bottle eight, it's using all of the previous bottles. So it's a very smart system.

Josh Barro:

And very good for people who are really getting into home bartending.

Peter Suderman:

Yes. And the drinks are great. Jacob, I should also say is a friend. So full disclosure.

Josh Barro:

He's a friend mine also.

Peter Suderman:

It's a great book, really smartly organized, really smartly done. I think it's the best book version of this. When I wrote the 41 Bottle Bar, I hadn't read his book yet. It hadn't come out yet. And so I was just sort of thinking about what if I was trying to build a bar at, say a new house. If I had to move and I couldn't take my collection with me for some reason if I was going to Europe, I don't know, something like that. And I was going to be somewhere for a year, and I wanted to have a good collection of bottles that was going to allow me to make a lot of stuff, but probably wasn't going to be kind of essentially unlimited in the way that my current bar has grown to how many bottles would I want?

And I struggled with the number for a very long time. I had 32 bottle systems. I had, at one point, sort of pushed closer to 60. And then I was thinking about two things. One was how many bottles fit on a sort of average bar cart? It's probably roughly 40. Obviously bar carts come in different sizes, but it's probably roughly 40, if you're not super concerned about, "Oh, we're just going to have really nice spacing between all of them." No, you can stuff 40 bottles on that bar cart.

And the other thing I was thinking about was, well, I was writing this right around the time I turned 41, and so this seemed like the right number, 41 bottles. And so I built a system that has 40 bottles plus then one bottle at the end, which is banana liqueur. But the banana liqueur is designed to stand in for buy something weird that you really like, keep something strange, something experimental, something odd on your shelf. And maybe it's a rotation of different things, but have something unusual in there so that you can add an ingredient or a flavor that you think is really interesting.

Josh Barro:

And so I was interested in the choices you make here because you have 41 bottles, but you break them into tiers. There's some number of bottles that are really essential. And then it sort of goes through, if you're going to have more bottles as you get all the way up to the 41, there are certain things you add in. And so first of all, in none of these tiers, nowhere in your 41 bottle system is vodka. And so I guess the first thing I

would say is, regardless of your own personal feelings about vodka, people are going to walk into your house and they're going to ask for cocktails that contain vodka.

I mean, personally, I own a house in Fire Island Pines, and I've like gay men traipsing through the house in July and August and they all want vodka sodas. That's sort of table stakes. But I think even in basically any social setting, isn't vodka so essential just because of the tastes of the people that you're going to be serving, that you need it on your bar?

Peter Suderman:

It really isn't, at least not in mine. And when people come in and ask for vodka, I make other suggestions, but almost also almost never happens. So when I-

Josh Barro:

So there's literally no vodka in your house. People don't like-

Peter Suderman:

There is vodka.

Josh Barro:

Okay.

Peter Suderman:

There is vodka because a few times-

Josh Barro:

But you refuse your guests who request it?

Peter Suderman:

No, that's not right. But I'm not sure where it is. I would have to go searching through some kind of dark storage cabinets to remember where I-

Josh Barro:

Sarah asks if it's in the freezer.

Peter Suderman:

It's definitely not in the freezer. So I know there's some vodka, I'm pretty sure I could remember which of the cabinets it's in, but I'm not 100% certain. And I know that those bottles have not been opened. And the reason I have those is because on occasion people have given me bottles of vodka and they just sit there. And I wonder if, well maybe someday I will come to love vodka. I'll change my mind. I have nothing against people who love vodka, it's not a judgment on their character or anything like that. I just don't love vodka drinks.

And I try as a matter of principle, not to serve anything to my guests that I don't love myself. And so this is a big thing for me, is this is one of the reasons why I try to learn virtually every category and style of cocktail and then come up with a way of improving, a way of making it that I think is going to be, if not the best version, an essentialized version that is going to appeal to a very large number of people and myself, is because I want to learn what people like in a lot of these things.

And I want to be able to serve people versions of drinks that I really love. And I can say, "I worked on this. I thought about this and I made this for you. I hope you like it too." And I just haven't gotten there with vodka. Which is why I literally write in that post that maybe my lack of inclusion is a personal failing. I sometimes wish I was the kind of person who liked vodka, but I haven't gotten there yet.

Josh Barro:

I mean, it's funny, because you wrote that and I was surprised because vodka seems like such an essential building block of a bar. But then I thought about my own behavior and I never use vodka unless someone has specifically requested some kind of vodka cocktail for me. And if they ask for a vodka martini, I just tell them to make it themselves. I think that's sort of an absurd concept. But there are no cocktails that are things that are in my repertoire where it's like, "Oh, vodka is really the correct thing to use in this."

And I'm a little surprised by that because I cook more than I make cocktails. And there are all sorts of circumstances in cooking where you really do want the more neutral thing where you need the vegetable oil that has no flavor or things like that. And so I was just trying to think, are there really not circumstances like that with cocktails where you have some really prominent ingredient, maybe it's a non-alcoholic ingredient, that you really want to feature and you're trying to get out of its way, and so you want something that is really just alcohol and water with no additional flavor?

Peter Suderman:

That's the best argument for vodka cocktails. But if you look through classic cocktail books, you see very, very few vodka cocktails. And the ones you see are not very well regarded. They're just very few in the kind of modern canon of drinks. And most of the bars that I like, that I think are making the best drinks, they very rarely use vodka in their cocktails. A few of them have started to, just in the past couple of years in some ways, I think, to challenge themselves. And then there is the one exception to this, which is the espresso martini.

Josh Barro:

Yes.

Peter Suderman:

Which is a drink that of course has been around for a couple of decades, but has come back with a vengeance in the past couple of years post-pandemic. It has become in some ways the "it" drink.

Josh Barro:

So what's the theory about why is vodka the go-to spirit in an espresso martini? Is the idea basically, that an espresso martini is supposed to feature flavors of coffee and sugar basically, and you're not trying to compete with that with flavor from a spirit?

Peter Suderman:

You could make that argument about this drink. But I think the real reason that this drink includes vodka is that it was invented in the 1980s when that's what people were drinking. And so the origin story for this drink is, am I allowed to swear on this podcast?

Josh Barro:

Yes. Yes, please do.

Peter Suderman:

Okay. So the origin story for this drink is that someone, possibly someone famous, and there's a big argument about whether it was a famous supermodel or maybe was not, it's somewhat unclear, went up to bartender Dick Bradsell, who is a famous British bartender and said, "I want a drink that will wake me up and fuck me up." And he, in that moment, invented the drink that he thought of initially as the vodka espresso. And it was espresso, a pulled shot of espresso plus vodka, maybe a little coffee liqueur. The recipe has changed quite a bit over the past decades. So there's been an evolution here.

And then eventually that drink was rebranded as a martini, because during the 1980s and 1990s, almost everything that was a cocktail was called a martini. And it was just, maybe not almost everything, but quite a few drinks that were cocktails were just called martinis of some sort, because that was a branding strategy that worked well for selling drinks. And so he wanted to call it the vodka espresso. And then it became the espresso martini. And I looked at some of the recipes for this, and it was like, this isn't a bad idea for a drink, actually. I'm a coffee drinker. I love coffee. Why couldn't you just do this with some other liquor, some other base spirit instead of vodka?

And what you would get is a more flavorful drink, because vodka doesn't bring a whole lot of flavor. At best, it extends the flavor of other stuff that is in the cocktail. And so why not add in some extra flavor to this, and why not make it more martini-like by just making it with gin? Turns out it makes a really delicious drink that it still has a lot of the same essential appeal, which is that it has that great big foamy head on the top of it because you get that from shaking coffee, and the oils in the coffee just produce this incredible texture on the top of the drink. This does not require some crazy special technique.

Josh Barro:

So I was really surprised by your reaching for gin here, and we'll talk a little bit about your espresso martini with Mezcal, and that makes a lot of intuitive sense to me. The smokey flavor, the Mezcal with the coffee, that that's a combination that seems really obvious, and also the smoke in that is powerful enough to punch through the coffee. With gin, what flavors are you getting through and how do they interplay with the coffee?

Peter Suderman:

So you're just getting whatever botanicals are in the gin, obviously juniper is going to be the primary one in most London dry gins. But what I like about London dry gin is that it has a sharpness and a bite. It's dry, right? It's literally called London Dry for a reason. And that sharpness and that bite is going to cut into the richness of the coffee and the sweetness of the coffee liqueur. Because the way I make my standard espresso martini with gin is just three ingredients in equal parts. It's Kahlua, coffee liqueur, and then one part cold brew concentrate, I don't have an espresso maker in my house.

Josh Barro:

Oh, so that's interesting. You don't have to pull an espresso shot? That makes this a lot easier.

Peter Suderman:

You don't have to pull an espresso shot. You just buy cold brew concentrate. This is the stuff you kind of add water to and inflate. And you can buy it at Trader Joe's. You can buy it at Whole Foods. You can buy it at most grocery stores. It's very common. You can order it from Amazon even, and it's not very expensive. You do need to refrigerate it after you open it, but it'll last a month to six weeks or so. And so it's equal parts gin, cold brew concentrate, and Kahlua. And so that's kind of rich and kind of sweet. And what that gin does is it just sort of cuts into that stuff.

It gives it a little bit of sharpness, sort of makes it almost, it's like think of making very round corners a little bit more cornery. And so it just adds this tiny bit of bite and also some of those great gin botanical flavors to this mix. And I was a little surprised at how well this worked, because I have had not seen it on any menus, and I wasn't a huge fan of most of the vodka based versions that I had had in bars. And so I was like, "Okay, maybe this'll work." And it turned out, it worked quite well.

Josh Barro:

And then tell us about the Mezcal version.

Peter Suderman:

The Mezcal version, as you said, is in some ways even more obvious, because you're bringing a sort of earthy smoky note to it. I use Del Maguey Vida, which is the most common bottle of Mezcal. Runs typically about \$40 in most markets. It's not quite cheap, but it is reasonably priced, especially compared to others. And it's just got this really nice balanced, smokey flavor, it's sort of earthy, and that plays so well with the coffee and it just makes for a really obvious like, "Oh, here's smoke earth and coffee kind of cocktail."

Josh Barro:

Yeah. It's funny because I think about other coffee cocktails that you serve hot in the winter and it's obviously Irish coffee with Irish whiskey. I feel like you see a lot of hot coffee cocktails with rum. Are these other good options? I mean, can you basically take any of your favorite spirits and shake it up with espresso and liqueur?

Peter Suderman:

So I will say that you can make an Irish coffee with Mezcal, but I've never made an espresso martini with Irish whiskey. However, I have tried making one with peaty, smokey scotch. And this is one of the weird swaps that I think people who do not know, don't read a lot of cocktail recipes, don't think about. But it works really well, is that almost any drink that you can make with Mezcal, and that's almost, so it won't work every time, but almost any drink you can make with Mezcal, you can productively swap in a very peaty, very earthy scotch. In particular, Laphroaig 10, but also Ardbeg, Lagavulin, and all of those Islay's that have very strong flavor profiles.

It's not the same flavor, obviously, but there's a similar vibe to the flavor. And I kind of think of this in casting terms. There are actors who you can think of as like, "Oh, I can just imagine this movie with a different actor in the lead." At one point, if you remember the pandemic outbreak movie *Outbreak* from the 1990s, it's got Dustin Hoffman in it. Harrison Ford was originally cast in that role before Dustin Hoffman. And so you can just play back that movie in your head with Harrison Ford. And on the one hand, it's a

different movie, but on the other hand it's like, "Oh yeah, I guess I can see Harrison Ford doing-

Josh Barro:

That's an elaborate analogy.

Peter Suderman:

... this standing in front of the board." And it's the same thing with cocktails. You can just do casting in your head. You can think, "Oh, what does this drink taste like with a different lead actor, with a different base spirit in that slot?" And it is different, but there are other actors who can play that same role. And there are other actors who can consistently play the same role across drinks so that you have these sort of standardized swaps that you can make.

Josh Barro:

There's this reputation that bartenders hate espresso martinis and they hate it when customers order espresso martinis. Is that accurate? And if so, why?

Peter Suderman:

So you should probably ask an actual bartender and not just a guy who makes drinks at home. But I've heard that there are some frustrations mainly with pulling a shot from an espresso machine. And pulling a shot just takes a bunch of time and it's not what most bartenders got into bartending to do. Even if you're really into coffee and you really like high-end cocktails. You don't want to stand behind a bar and be pulling espresso shots. If you really cared about that, you'd be working at a coffee shop. Also, if you've ever pulled an espresso shot, well, it's fussy and time consuming.

And this is the thing that bartenders really dislike, are drinks that take a huge amount of extra hand time from them. So that means that they're going to get behind on orders from other customers. And so a drink like the Ramos Gin Fizz, which famously in some recipes calls for 10 or 20 minutes of shaking. Yes, minutes. I'm not making that up. You obviously don't need to shake it for that long. But again, some of the recipes do. The Ramos Gin Fizz is a drink that bartenders in some ways love because it's a wonderful

drink to show off your craft. And in some ways it drives them crazy, because it takes so long to make.

Josh Barro:

Right. But then why don't they just use... I mean, in some bars, they're not pulling shots to order, they're doing things similar to what you're doing. They're either using cold brew concentrate or you could pull a whole bunch of shots before service, because you don't have to serve it hot like you would need to in a coffee shop. That seems like a restaurant management problem where they just need to figure out how to make that more orderly and quicker during service. But then there's also, there's a lot of cocktail snobs who hate the espresso martini. I guess it's just because of that origin in the 1980s and the association with all of those big, crappy blue and green and red drinks that you might have gotten at places like TGI Fridays?

Peter Suderman:

There is very much, it is a divisive drink. And there are two schools of thought on this. One is, it's fun, it's got a great texture. It tastes like coffee, not booze. And that's what we want from a cocktail. Not everybody wants a cocktail that tastes like booze. The idea is wake me up and fuck me up. Not, oh, I can taste 17 different flavors of arugula and banana and cherry, whatever. That's not what everyone wants from a drink. And the espresso martini in particular is a sort of party club drink and has that reputation.

And because of that, there is a school of cocktail snobbery that sort of looks down on that drink. Again, I try not to look down on drinks even if I don't like them myself. I always think, "What is the idea that people like in this? And then how can I make this better? How can I make it a version that I might like?" And so to me, that's why I went with a gin and Mezcal version of this is like okay, I do kind of think that the vodka conversion, I don't quite want to call it a dumb drink, but it's not the vibe that I'm going for, let's say-

Josh Barro:

It's not as smart as your versions of the drink.

Peter Suderman:

But there's something there that is pleasurable, that is interesting. And it's also, I'm not the martini police. This is actually part of the criticism of the espresso martini is, well, that's not a real martini, man, because it's got vodka and coffee stuff in it. That's not a martini is only a spirit and dry vermouth, it's got to be gin. Okay. I kind of agree with that. I'm enough of a cocktail nerd to say, "Yeah, this, it's not really a martini." But who cares? Is it good? Can you make a good version? Have you thought about why people like this, and then tried to find the thing in it that is wonderful and accent that thing?

Josh Barro:

So in that spirit, Exhibit A for the terribleness of the 1990s tini cocktail is the appletini. Bright green with DeKuyper, apple pucker, disgusting. You have a new piece out that is a reimagination of the appletini. And we're even starting to see on certain bar menus new updated, supposedly classy versions of the appletini. How do you make a good appletini?

Peter Suderman:

Well, so the original is vodka, apple Schnapps, maybe some juice, maybe an apple slice for a garnish, something like that. It's a vodka drink that has then been spiked with an apple liqueur for the most part. And it's not a martini. Even though it has that "tini" label. But again, it comes out of the era where all of those drinks got martini or X-tini type labels. Man, there are still bars where you can go and find whole menus that are titled the X-tini-

Josh Barro:

Oh, yeah.

Peter Suderman:

... menu. And it's just all drinks that aren't martinis that got labeled martinis. And so again, what I wanted from this was, okay, there has to be a good idea here. It's a martini and it's apple. Okay, that actually sounds good if you can do it right. And the trick, it turns out, is really dumb. You just use apples. Specifically, you use Granny Smith apples and you juice them. So yeah, it does take a little bit of effort to juice a Granny Smith apple, but you juice a Granny Smith apple. And to do that, you cut out

the core and the seeds because you don't want the core and the seeds in this, but you don't even have to skin it or anything.

You run it through a blender and you will end up with some apple mush, and then you run that mush either through cheesecloth or through some sort of fine strainer, and you just sort of squeeze the juice out. Or if you've got a chinois with a mortar type thing. You could just push the juice out there. And so you get that fine strained Granny Smith apple juice. It's a little sweet, but it's also got that Granny Smith apple bite to it. That Granny Smith apple bite is going to go really well in a gin martini, because a gin martini is about the balance of gin and the dry bite of driver vermouth.

And so you're trying to push it towards this thin but intensely flavorful direction. I often think of a martini as the opposite of a Manhattan. It's like a Manhattan in negative, where a Manhattan is super rich and sweet and luscious. A martini is sort of austere and dry and biting. So the trick is just to make a batched and bottled version of this and to use the Granny Smith apple juice instead of water, so there's no additional dilution. And so it's just a 7:3:2 ratio.

Josh Barro:

Seven parts gin, three parts dry vermouth and two parts Granny Smith apple juice.

Peter Suderman:

Granny Smith apple juice. Yes. And you bottle that and you put it in your freezer and you wait about two hours and it's very cold and it tastes like a martini and it tastes like apples and it's an Appletini. It's incredibly simple and it's delicious.

Josh Barro:

And so, I mean, this is sometimes my reaction to certain homemade ingredients you described here, that sounds like a lot of work. Do you batch these in fairly large numbers? How many apples?

Peter Suderman:

The testing I've been batching in 12 ounce bottles, but you can do any ratio. I designed this for a 12 or 12 and a half ounce bottle because then you can double it easily and put it into a 25 ounce liquor bottle. So if you just have an empty bottle of a 750 milliliter

bottle of gin that used to be filled with gin, then that's about 25 ounces. And so you can just fit this easily into one of those. And you can make as many of those as you want. But I will say I have a blender on my counter-

Josh Barro:

Right.

Peter Suderman:

... so I guess if you have to pull a blender out, that's going to take some time. But I have a blender on my counter and I have a chinois within reach in my kitchen. And getting the juice took maybe five minutes, I mean maybe, probably three or four the second time I did. It just doesn't take very long at all, and all the stuff goes in the dishwasher at the end, so even if you include cleaning and putting away, it's 6, 7, 8 minutes. And then it's just a couple ounces of stuff in a bottle, that's really it. This is something that you certainly, once you have done it once, the second time you do this, the whole process really should take 10 minutes or less and maybe seven or eight minutes.

Josh Barro:

We have a number of listener questions that I want to get to. The first one is actually about non-alcoholic cocktails. And I'm seeing more and more when I go to restaurants, there will be a list of non-alcoholic cocktails. I'm seeing more of my friends ordering these. I'm actually occasionally starting to get people to ask me in my home about what I can do, and I'm always a little bit stumped by the question. Because the people will be like, "Can I get a non-alcoholic margarita?" And it's like, "Well, you want me to make you a limeade?" I can serve you lime juice and water. But I don't think that's really what people are looking for when they talk about non-alcoholic cocktails. What is your approach on this? Are you finding things that you're enjoying? Are you making them in your home?

Peter Suderman:

Yeah, so I love a good non-alcoholic cocktail. And there is now a full-time bar here in DC called Binge that is just serving a non-alcoholic drinks, for a period of time at the end of the life of the Columbia Room, which was the most highly regarded bar in

Washington DC for about a decade. There was a period of time which it became a pop-up non-alcoholic cocktail bar. There were some alcoholic options. Basically, you could add a little bit of booze to your non-alcoholic cocktail. But it was geared towards showcasing non-alcoholic cocktails. And I went and I had every single thing on the menu. I went a couple of times, also because they're non-alcoholic, you can drink all of them and just not worry about it.

It's great. And they were incredible and delicious. So I think a really well made non-alcoholic cocktail can be just wonderful and delightful. That said, I find that making them at home is a bit of a challenge. That doesn't mean that it can't be done, but for the most part, I go in one of a few directions. So there's a non-alcoholic spirits company called Seed Lip, and that makes just a small number of bottles. They're not designed to replicate traditional bottles of whiskey or gin or rum. It's not a non-alcoholic rum. It's not non-alcoholic whiskey. It's Seed Lip Spice 94, but it is a distilled spirit like whiskey or rum or gin.

And so it is a non-alcoholic distilled spirit that then has had the alcohol further removed. These spirits make interesting cocktail bases in particular in daiquiri style drinks. And so you can take your basic daiquiri formula, which is typically about two ounces of base spirit an ounce of lime juice, and then three quarters of an ounce or one ounce of syrup of some sort. You can just make stuff with that and then you can modify it in some kind of obvious ways, grapefruit juice, salt, add a little bit of vinegar, that sort of thing, just some basic stuff there. And you can make some pretty good drinks that way.

I think all of the Seed Lip line works very well in those sort of essential sour or daiquiri style drinks. But ultimately, there's not a huge amount of advanced creativity that you're going to get out of that approach. But the drinks are still pretty good, and you can serve them in a coop glass and if you've got some guests who are drinking and some who are not, your guests who are not drinking will not feel or look out of place. And they will have something that probably they will not be making at home themselves unless they're really hardcore non-alcoholic cocktail geeks.

A second approach is, I really love very specifically the bottled non-alcoholic Negronis from St. Agrestis, which is a company in New York, it's called the Phony Negroni. You could order these online, they come in little bottles. They're a bit expensive. It's a few dollars per drink. It's not super cheap, and you got to pay for shipping for big glass bottles. I won't say it's like this is not something that you're going to be drinking several of each night. They are, in some ways, for special occasions. But they're by far the best attempt at recreating something like a stirred non-alcoholic cocktail because this I think is the place where non-alcoholic cocktails really can't live up and can't match what you

can do with an alcoholic cocktail. Can't nothing like a Manhattan or an Old Fashioned that really works as well.

Josh Barro:

Well, I mean that makes sense, right? Because those drinks are so alcohol forward. Such a key part of the flavor of profile is the bite that comes from the alcohol.

Peter Suderman:

Yes.

Josh Barro:

I don't know how you would replicate that without alcohol.

Peter Suderman:

So the leading theory of how to do that is to use more ginger. And the idea is that ginger-

Josh Barro:

Okay.

Peter Suderman:

... creates a pushback, a flavor profile pushback, that if you mix it with some of the better non-alcoholic whiskeys, for example, you're going to be able to get a kind of an old-fashioned like effect. I've had them, I don't think they're bad necessarily. But they don't hit the same spot. They don't sort of serve the same need as an old-fashioned. I really love Old Fashioned's and I'm very particular about them.

The third thing is just non-alcoholic beer these days is great. It's really great. And there are big brands like Athletic that you can buy everywhere. But they're also just smaller brands that you do sometimes have to mail order them, pay for shipping. It can be a pain in the butt. But there's just so many options. And if you like beer at all, any style of

beer, there is someone making at least a very good and possibly a shockingly excellent non-alcoholic beer right now.

Josh Barro:

You actually already answered one of the listener questions. Joel Miller had asked about whether there's a good non-alcoholic gin alternative for making Negronis and seems like your answer is no, but there is this pre-bottled thing that is good.

Peter Suderman:

That's right. And I would just note that when the editors of Punch had their shootout, their taste test for the non-alcoholic Negronis, their winner did not include a non-alcoholic gin in it at all. It was made all of non-alcoholic cordial type things.

Josh Barro:

And then our other listener question actually comes from Sara Fay, our producer, who has a question about a non-alcoholic cocktail that she made based on a recipe from the New York Times.

Sara Fay:

So I made this dirty lemon tonic the other night, which is a Rebecca Peppler cocktail that's published in New York Times. And-

Josh Barro:

We're going to include the link to this recipe, by the way-

Sara Fay:

Yes.

Josh Barro:

... in the email and the post on substack.com that comes out with this episode.

Sara Fay:

So essentially you chop up the preserved lemon rind into small pieces, which you then muddle with really thin slices of lemon, a little bit of sugar, and then you top it with low sugar tonic water and garnish with another thin lemon slice and some green olives. Delightful drink a little bit salty. Just really has all the attributes that I would really like in especially, I mean, it would be great with booze and it was great non-alcoholic too. But I could not get behind the floating pieces of preserved lemon in the drink. And it reminded me of being 22 and ordering a raspberry mojito in a bar and feeling so cool. But having an awful experience of drinking like raspberry puree, not put through a chinois like I know you would recommend.

Peter Suderman:

Fine strain everything.

Sara Fay:

And so I'm just wondering-

Josh Barro:

By the way, for listeners who don't know, a chinois is that big ass conical strainer that you probably see on Top Chef that if you're trying to turn something that is lumpy and pulpy into something smooth, you push it all through that.

Sara Fay:

Yeah.

Peter Suderman:

And you could always just use cheesecloth instead of a chinois.

Josh Barro:

Yep.

Peter Suderman:

You just looking for a fine mesh strainer of some sort.

Sara Fay:

Or any other strainer. Yeah. But anyways, I was wondering what are some better, smarter ways to use, well, it's a two part question, of course. So how would you improve this specific drink with the preserved lemon? Because I think it's a great idea. And then what are some other better, smarter ways to use fresh fruit or other solid pieces in a cocktail?

Peter Suderman:

Yeah, so I'll start by saying I'm a big fan of Rebecca Pepler's drinks. She wrote a great book that includes a lot of low alcohol, French aperitifs, and then also a bunch of really smart food pairings that go with it. We were talking about this before the show. And this looks like a delicious drink. I have not tried this one. But to deal with your texture frustration on this, you could just take the whole thing and run it through a strainer, but if you want to do something a little more advanced, that would be fun. What I would say is instead of using sugar and chopped lemon, make an oleo-saccharum.

Sara Fay:

What is that?

Peter Suderman:

So if you've ever... Yeah, okay, so if you have-

Josh Barro:

That's oil and sugar.

Peter Suderman:

Yeah, it's an oil sugar mix, that then turns into a sort of sweet, citrus bitter liquid. And basically what you're doing is you are peeling the peels of a lemon, or in some cases maybe a lime or an orange, but you're peeling the peels of a lemon. And then you're covering them with sugar and you're letting them sit. And then that sugar pulls out the lemon oil. And that's what you're getting from the lemons here and from the muddling is this sort of slightly bitter oils off of the lemon. And then you're combining them with sugar and the other stuff in this drink.

And so if you want to make this same drink and have the same idea, instead of doing it with fresh fruit, just in the glass, make an oleo-saccharum first, and especially if you're going to do this for a party, for a group of people, you're going to have some folks over, make an oleo-saccharum in the morning. You do have to start this one either the night before or the morning of, because it takes a little bit of time for the sugar to pull the oils out of those peels. But this is a really fun thing to do.

It's part of a Philadelphia Fish House Punch starts with an oleo-saccharum. So this is a technique that goes back a very long time and is important in a lot of cocktails, and you can just use that in drinks to get that sort of lemon oil and lemon essence into a cocktail without having all of the texture issues that you seem to be a little bit frustrated with here.

Josh Barro:

And so then that gives you an oily substance that you can then you could shake up with other ingredients in a cocktail shaker? How do you disperse that oily substance into the cocktail?

Peter Suderman:

What I would probably do is I would make this drink in reverse and put the oleo-saccharum in on top so that even if you're not stirring, it is a top layer that is floating down rather than a bottom layer that then you're trying to pull up with the stirring, if that makes sense. Violet Hour in Chicago talks about a technique that they call two bottle. And so when they take tonic water or club soda, instead of pouring it on the top of the rest of the mixture, they pour it in a measured way into the glass first and then pour everything else on top. So instead of club soda to top, as you commonly see

in a recipe, you get club soda or tonic water to bottom. And that's basically what I'm describing doing here.

Josh Barro:

What about drinks, where the texture of the fruit is supposed to be a part of the experience? I mean, especially as we're going into summer, sometimes strawberries or certain other ingredients, you want that little bit of something chewy, something that really feels like the fruit. I guess there are certain fruits that works with and some that doesn't, you don't want a whole bunch of raspberry seeds. But are there things besides strawberries that you would reach for for that?

Peter Suderman:

Well, many berries can be used in that format. I guess the way I think of this is I don't tend to love drinks that have heavy amounts of floating fruit particulates. So I tend to strain that stuff out before-

Josh Barro:

Yeah.

Peter Suderman:

... it gets into the glass. And I keep a very small handheld conical strainer on my bar. And then in addition to using your Hawthorne, your spring strainer, you just run it through both. And that's called a double strain.

Josh Barro:

The Hawthorne strainer, that's the thing you put on the end of a cocktail shaker when you're pouring the cocktail out.

Peter Suderman:

People sometimes just call that a cocktail strainer, and it's often got wings on it, and it's got that little sort of that circle spring, and that's what you use to strain, whether it's a stirred drink or a shaken drink, that's virtually all the drinks I make. I use Hawthorne strainers to strain.

Josh Barro:

Right.

Peter Suderman:

But then if they're going to have a bunch of stuff, fruit particulate or mint or whatever, I double strain that out, because I like a very consistent, very clear cocktail. But that allows you to do stuff like shake a piece of fruit in your cocktail. And so I would say, the strawberry daiquiri has a bad reputation, because many strawberry daiquiris are bad. On the other hand, if you just make a very classic daiquiri and put one single strawberry in your shaker, just a single strawberry and shake it extra hard. And then you-

Josh Barro:

Did you throw the strawberry whole?

Peter Suderman:

You put a whole strawberry, get a good one, a nice fresh one. You don't want it to be kind of bruised or ugly looking, but honestly just whatever from a grocery store. One single strawberry in a daiquiri, in a shaker, and then double strain it so that you don't get all of that fruit particulate. You will have a strawberry daiquiri that will taste like daiquiri and strawberry. Again, a little like our Appletini, which is a martini with apple. And these fresh flavors, very simple in recipes, you don't need to complicate these things. It doesn't need to be frozen and blended and red and come in a weird tube like they sell them in Vegas.

I don't even know what's in those things, but it's definitely not strawberries. It's probably like the cheapest possible rum. And somehow or another, they've used sugar that is worse than normal sugar. I really don't understand how it works. Those things are awful. But the idea is a good idea. Strawberry, rum, lime, sugar. It's great.

Josh Barro:

Yeah.

Peter Suderman:

Just use fresh ingredients and don't overthink it.

Josh Barro:

We have a question from Matthew who wrote in on Substack Notes. He wants to know what home bartenders are to do now that both green and yellow Chartreuse are being cut back in production. And so just for background, for people who are not aware of the Chartreuse shortage. Chartreuse is made by monks in France, who've made this for an extremely long time. And as Chartreuse has gotten more trendy and more demand has grown worldwide for Chartreuse, they've actually decided to cut back production somewhat.

They want to focus on certain other duties they have as monks, and they're concerned about environmental impact and that sort of thing. And so it's created this shortage of Chartreuse that has significantly pushed up the price. I actually paid close to \$100 for a bottle of Chartreuse when I bought it out on Fire Island. It's probably a little bit cheaper if you're buying it in the city. But it's still, it's gotten really expensive. So I guess the first question is, if you're making a drink like a Last Word that calls for Chartreuse, is there an alternative that you can use instead of that?

Peter Suderman:

So there aren't many direct substitutes for Chartreuse. Probably the closest thing that is easily or relatively easily available is Dolin's Genepy des Alpes. But Genepy des Alpes doesn't taste like Chartreuse. It just sort of, it has some of the same vibe. It's sort of a herbal alpine liqueur. One benefit of it is that it is much less expensive than Chartreuse, even at pre price hike prices. It costs typically about \$30 a bottle. And it will more or less work in those drinks.

Josh Barro:

Does it also have a really intense color like Chartreuse does? I mean, that's also part of the joy of Chartreuse is the way it turns your drink green.

Peter Suderman:

It is a lighter green, and so you're not going to get quite the same color effect, but it's going to replicate something like the flavor profile. It's also not as high proof and it doesn't have quite the same body to it. So again, don't take me as saying this is an exact substitute, but it is a workaround if you're looking for something else and can't find Chartreuse. I guess what I would say is probably think about using less Chartreuse in cocktails. You're not going to be making big batches, and just now think of Chartreuse as something that you're going to have to hunt for.

This is the world we are going to live in. It's not going to be that Chartreuse isn't made anymore or is so rare that you'll never be able to find it. They plan to continue production. It's just that they're not going to be scaling up to meet ever-increasing demand as they have been doing for the past decade or so. As Chartreuse has become more popular because of the craft cocktail revolution. So they're still going to be making it. You will still be able to find it. But you won't be able to find it as often or as consistently. And so if you are someone who-

Josh Barro:

And it'll be expensive.

Peter Suderman:

... wants to keep... Yes. And it will probably be more expensive. And if you are someone who wants to keep Chartreuse in your house, you're going to have to think of Chartreuse as something you buy when you can find it, rather than something you buy when you want it. And unfortunately, that's the reality. As soon as I read about this, I went out and picked up three bottles. So I have a three and a half bottle Chartreuse supply in my overstocked bar. But I expect that that will only last me a certain period of time. And at some point I'm going to have to think about how often do I really want to be making these kinds of drinks.

Josh Barro:

Yeah, I mean, before people panic about this, a Last Word, that's like the most common use for Chartreuse, right? I can't think of any other cocktail that I make in my house that has it. Are there?

Peter Suderman:

There's the Temporary, there's the Alaska. I mean, there are other drinks, but yes, Last Words and Mezcal Last Words are probably the most popular at this point.

Josh Barro:

So a Last Word has three quarters of an ounce of Chartreuse, so you can make 33 of them with 1 750 ounce bottle. So if you're going to make 10 Last Words a year in your house, then the bottle will last you more than three years. Now, if you're a fanatic for that cocktail, then you may have more of a problem here. But for most people, a bottle of Chartreuse will last them a pretty long time.

Peter Suderman:

Yeah.

Josh Barro:

I should note for people who are not familiar with the cocktail, a Last Word is a cocktail that is made with four equal parts, three quarters of ounce, each of gin, maraschino liqueur, which is cherry liqueur, green Chartreuse, and lime juice. Classically, it's an equal ratio. I know that you have a slightly different version of it.

Peter Suderman:

Yep.

Josh Barro:

And then you also are proponent of the Mezcal Last Word, where you swap in Mezcal for the gin. And I believe in that one, you actually do stick to the equal ratio, right? Three quarters-

Peter Suderman:

That's correct.

Josh Barro:

... of an ounce of each. Yeah.

Peter Suderman:

Unless you are the sort of person who is obsessed with Last Words and drinking them very regularly, you're drinking a couple a week or you're throwing a party where you only serve Chartreuse cocktails, you are not going to go through an awful lot of Chartreuse. Even someone like me, and I just make a lot more cocktails both for drinking, for serving, and for testing purposes, than almost anybody who is not a pro bartender working at a bar. Even for someone like me, I'm going through maybe two bottles a year on average, which is, that's a lot of Chartreuse, actually. But it's not that much. And I suspect that most listeners here will go through far less than that.

Josh Barro:

Are there other examples, I mean spirits that are important for certain cocktails that disappear entirely or become really difficult to obtain? And how do you adjust to that? If there's something that is supposed to have this ingredient and the ingredient doesn't exist anymore.

Peter Suderman:

Yeah, so Amerpicon, A-M-E-R-P-I-C-O-N, used to be widely available in the United States and by used to, I mean very long time ago. It's actually, I wouldn't say common ingredient in pre-prohibition cocktails, but you do see it. And it's simply not distributed in the United States anymore, although there are rumors.

Josh Barro:

What is that?

Peter Suderman:

It's a sort of a light Amaro, almost think of something, it's a bitter liqueur. So think of something a little like Cynar and a little like Aperol. Right?

Josh Barro:

Okay.

Peter Suderman:

Kind of somewhere in between those. But we don't replace it by using Cynar and Aperol, instead we use Bigallet China-China Amer in most cases. Or Amaro Ciociaro C-I-O-C-I-A-R-O, I believe is how you spell that.

Josh Barro:

Mm-hmm.

Peter Suderman:

Right?

Josh Barro:

Yep.

Peter Suderman:

And so there're two common replacement bottles, neither of which tastes exactly like Amerpicon, but which have enough of the same sensibility that they can fill in for Harrison Ford when he's doing another movie.

Josh Barro:

So as the weather is warming up now, and we're getting into spring, you're getting warm days in Washington DC, is there something that you're busting out now that you're really especially looking forward to besides your new Apple martini? What's really saying summer for you right now?

Peter Suderman:

So I'm really excited to be working on a sherry cobbler. And a sherry cobbler is a super simple drink, but it combines sherry and a lot of fruit. And so this in some ways ties together a bunch of things that we've been talking about, is that it's a low ABV drink that is incredibly refreshing and beautiful to look at because it's sort of piled with fruit. My favorite one that I've ever had is at a restaurant in Brooklyn called Maison Premier. It's a sort of a New Orleans French restaurant that is known for their cocktails.

And they serve this absolutely decadent, elaborate sherry cobbler. You probably won't go that far when you were making it at home. At the same time, it's a great excuse for an icy cold summer sipper that uses a low ABV base and then has a bunch of fruit in it. So if you're going to your farmer's market and you're just like, "Oh, I want just a little bit of that" or, "I have a little bit of stuff extra leftover after I've made my summer salad or whatever." My summer fruit salad, whatever it is. This is a great use for it. And it's just a perfect summer drink that really hits the spot when the weather gets hot.

Josh Barro:

And so what does that drink look like? So you have the sherry and you have the fruit. Do you shake them and then strain that? Is it in a tall glass with ice? What are we looking at with this cocktail?

Peter Suderman:

It's in a tall glass with ice. Sometimes it is muddled, sometimes, typically some of the fruit is muddled, maybe all of it. But in many cases, just a little bit of the fruit is muddled

and then the fruit is sort of piled on and in. And it is in some ways a garnish. And in some ways the alcohol is picking up some of the flavors. And some ways it's just framing the drink in the sense that you are drinking, it's kind of sherry on ice with muddled with some oranges muddled in, and then you've got some berries on top, just maybe a lot of berries and some mint, and who knows what. And there's just a kind of, there's a-

Josh Barro:

I thought you said you didn't want some fruit particulate in your cocktails.

Peter Suderman:

So it's not particulate, it's not broken up.

Josh Barro:

Okay.

Peter Suderman:

And that's the thing is that the berries and all the stuff is sort of piled on top and often around the drink, in more elaborate servings. And it's sort of decadent and sumptuous and wonderful and uses great fresh ingredients. And this is a drink that I have made most summers for past several years. I have a bunch of different versions and I'm going to end up publishing one later this summer. But I'm really excited to be working on this drink and to be drinking a lot of them for research purposes.

Josh Barro:

Well, that's exciting. And I look forward to reading that. Let's leave that there, Peter. This has been a lot of fun as always. Thank you for joining me again.

Peter Suderman:

Thank you for having me. It's been delightful.

Josh Barro:

Peter Suderman writes the Cocktails with Suderman Substack newsletter. If you go to our website, joshbarro.com, the page for this episode of the podcast, we'll have a link to Peter's Substack. It'll also have a link to many of the specific cocktails that we've discussed, products and books that we've referenced, and we think that'll be a useful accompaniment to this podcast for you. Very Serious is created by me, Josh Barro, and by Sara Fay. Jennifer Swiatek mixed this episode. Our music is by Joshua Moshier. I'm Josh Barro. This is Very Serious and I'll be back soon.