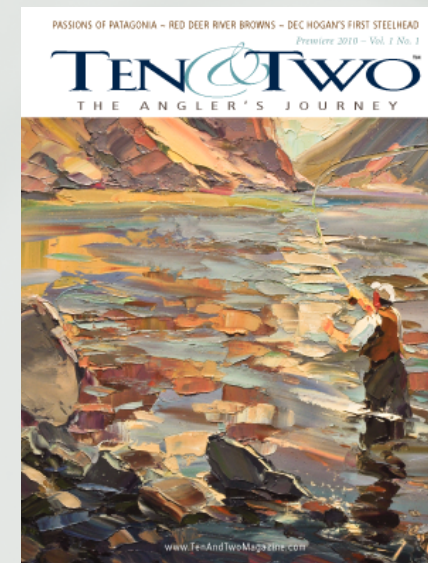


WINE AND SPIRITS

THE PERFECT MANHATTAN

SKAGIT RIVER, WASHINGTON

TEN & TWO™
MEDIA GROUP LLC



POPULAR MYTH SUGGESTS THE Manhattan was invented in the 1870's at the Manhattan Club in New York City. For the second issue of TEN & Two, Jim Ratcliffe our correspondent for wine and spirits, puts on his best Dashiell Hammett/William Powell and searches out the truth behind the Perfect Manhattan.

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THE
SEARCH
for the perfect
MANHATTAN:

A PERSONAL JOURNEY

*(with apologies to
Dashiell Hammett and William Powell)*

Story by JIM RATCLIFFE

Photos by WALTER HODGES

DECEMBER ON THE SKAGIT RIVER is a gamble with weather, river levels and cooperative steelhead. Your chances of getting all three in your favor are about the same as winning with all your money on Black 17. Four of us had spent a long day floating the river. The water was high and murky and a steady rain was interrupted only by snow flurries. We spotted an occasional pod of spawning chum salmon in the shallows, but no sign of the elusive steelhead.

I had exercised my back and arms for many hours casting the Spey rod, loaded with a heavy sink-tip line and weighted fly. Lots of practice with nothing to show for it, like a relief pitcher working in the bullpen for many innings and not getting into the game. The darkness of premature night was settling in when we returned to camp, sore and shivering, with not a fish among us. We built a fire and contemplated the pros and cons of getting out of the waders and changing clothes now, or waiting until the fire got hot. You may be wet but the waders will keep you warm. Young Guy had opted for the clothes change. Bluto was masterfully assembling the fire. Alphonso came to me and said, "Sir, could I interest you in a Manhattan? I am going to have one."

I hesitated. I knew he liked sweet drinks and I don't. My repertoire was very simple. Bourbon in a glass with a few ice cubes, gin with a small splash of

tonic, or a glass of wine pretty well summed it up. I grew up in the West with role models that loved to fish and hunt, drank their whiskey with a little branch water and disdained the post-WWII cocktail scene. When once told that a lounge specialized in cocktails, my father's best friend replied, "I don't know any." These men tolerated attempts at domestication as well as any of their generation and were true gentlemen, but they had no tolerance for new ideas that originated in New York.

"Sure," I said. "I'll try one. Not too sweet."

It is a testament to my weak will that, when confronted with something that really tastes good, I abandon my previous paragon faster than a blind date at a frat house party. When the Manhattan in a chilled cocktail glass came to my hand I became Nick Charles in waders. My left hand folded behind my back, the right carefully balancing the full glass by its

The key to this drink is the balance of sweet, dry and bitter, which have to be subtle and not mask the flavor of the whiskey.


stem and a slight forward tilt of the body. Wishing I could trade my scraggly white beard for a pencil thin dark moustache, I approached the campfire. A little smile, a sip from the steady glass: "Good evening gentlemen, I'm wondering whether you could help me in a little murder investigation."

Damn this was good! I was reluctant to praise Alphonso too effusively for this gift. He is not the kind of guy you want to give too much rope; never know where things may go. So inquiries into the design of this enigmatic drink proceeded at a casual pace into the second Manhattan.

First there is the selection of the whiskey, but that discussion could exhaust the patience of Don King's hair stylist, so we will save that and move forward. The key to this drink is the balance of sweet, dry and bitter, which have to be subtle and not mask the flavor of the whiskey. These elements are the band. Without them it is Bono without U2; Jagger without the Stones. Not bad, but not the out-of-body experience you are expecting. The sweet comes from red vermouth, a strange and pungent herbal wine-based concoction that no civilized person would drink straight up. There is a considerable difference in flavor and intensity among brands. Other potential accomplices in sweetness are the addition of fruit or spirits, such as cherries or

maraschino liquor. True sweetness means there is sugar in there somewhere.

The next players are bitterness and dryness. These are slight variations on the same theme. A dry wine or spirit gives the sensation of a slight puckering and a dry feeling in the mouth. A lack of dryness can give the false impression of sweetness. Bitterness is a few steps up, bordering on the unpleasant, with a long aftertaste. Familiar bittering agents are hops and quinine. Bitterness is added to this drink by a dash of bitters, a diabolical mixture of ingredients, devised as a tonic by a snake oil salesman in the 1800s, which probably contains numerous illegal drugs. A little bit goes a very long way and too much will spoil the drink. The dryness may come from white vermouth, a wine infused with mysterious herbal flavors that seems innocuous, but has the feminine trait of altering the equation in ways nobody understands. It softens the rough edges and gives the drink an alluring taste. The basic Manhattan is whiskey and red vermouth, mixed from 2:1 to 5:1, with a dash or two of bitters and commonly garnished with a maraschino cherry. A dry Manhattan substitutes white vermouth for red and is usually garnished with a lemon twist. A Perfect Manhattan uses equal quantities of red and white vermouth.



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I looked at the cover. Il Bistro.
Not three blocks from here.*

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So what was the secret to this concoction Alphonso had given me? He was fading fast and I could see I wasn't going to get my answers. What were these unlabeled bottles on the table and what were these things that looked like elk turds in the bottom of my glass? I shook him. "Come on Al, what's in this mix?" I was starting to lose my patience.

"Rick," came the weak slurred reply. "Talk to Rick."

He slumped and tumbled from his chair to the ground. He could be dead for all I knew, but I didn't have time to waste. Seattle was a two hour drive and I needed to get there fast. Young Guy and Bluto were still sitting by the campfire. "See what you can do for him. I'll be back as quick as I can," I called out as I jumped into the car and sped away.

Time was not on my side. Even after getting to Seattle, finding Rick wasn't going to be easy. He had moved through several high-class joints as head bartender and I had no idea where he might be now. He was friendly, skilled and very popular, but he didn't put up with any crap. He should have his own place by now, probably called Rick's with a Casablanca theme, but that was an unlikely guess. His real problem was that he would disappear for extended periods on fishing trips and nobody knew how to find him. Not the formula for a successful businessman. Also, not the kind of guy you want your daughter to meet.

It was getting late by the time I got downtown. The market area wasn't a bad place to start. And then I got a stroke of luck. Standing in front of a tavern on First Avenue I spotted a thin figure try-

ing to light a cigarette with shaking hands. Rainbow Bennie, a low life stool pigeon who eked out a living walking a tight rope between the cops and his racketeer buddies. I slowly walked up from behind. "Hello Rainbow."

He jumped so hard I felt sorry for the guy. "Oh he—he-hello Mr. Charles, what brings you he-he- here?"

"Not too much," I replied. "Have you seen Rick lately?"

"Rick," his voice squeaked, "Oh n-no. Not for ages. And that guy owes me money. Why you want him?"

"Important stuff, Rainbow. Nothing I can discuss, but I need to find him in a hurry. And I know you aren't the kind of guy to disappoint me," I said, giving my moustache a smoothing stroke.

He was shaking uncontrollably, his head turning quickly. Looking for a way out.

"S-S-sorry I can't help you Nick. Maybe the guy just doesn't want to be found." He was looking at the ground and then suddenly stopped shaking and turned to face me as I put a cigarette in my mouth and reached for my lighter. With a little smile he reached in his pocket. "Here Nick, take these matches." He handed me the matchbook, turned, and ran. I looked at the cover. Il Bistro. Not three blocks from here.

It was within an hour of closing time. The restaurant was nearly empty and the only patrons in the lounge were a young couple in a corner table who were too interested in each other to notice my entry. Behind the bar was a tall burly man with thick black hair facing the row of bottles on the back wall. Cleaning up.

I quietly sidled up to the bar. "Quiet night?"

He turned and stared. "Well if it ain't Nick Charles," he said with a touch of acid in the voice and a forced smile.

"Hello Rick; long time."

"Yeh, well I been kind of busy. So what brings you here. I thought you were with the guys on the Skagit."

My, word does get around, but of course he would know. "Al sent me," I replied.

He shot me a look. The smile was gone. "Alphonso or Big Al?"

Christ, Big Al! That idea clearly had him worried. Maybe I had a wedge if I played that card, but it was dangerous and I hoped not to use it. Big Al was a man of mystery. He posed as being from numerous different ethnic backgrounds, depending on the occasion. He traveled extensively to different areas in Asia, supposedly on business trips, but no mutual acquaintance knew what that business was and very few people had ever seen him actually working. Some suspected that he was an international spy, but for whom? Others thought he might be an enforcer for the Yakusa. We knew him as "The Chinaman," a Zen master of steelhead fly fishing.

I glanced at Rick's hands. No fingers missing. "Alphonso," I said.

He looked relieved and the smile returned. "So how is old 'Phonso?" came

the syrupy voice. What crap. I knew very well he had seen him last week to give him the Manhattan recipe.

"Not too good when I left him. He might be dead."

"Yeh, sure," he sneered. "And you drove all the way from the Skagit to tell me. What are you really here for?"

"I want your recipe for the Perfect Manhattan."

"That bastard!" He was clearly referring to Alphonso. "What did he tell you?"

"Not enough. But I will tell you one sip changed my life and I'm not stopping until I get some answers. I think he gave me what is basically your version, but probably tricked it up a bit. You know Al. He will try and sweeten up a dry drink."

"I don't give out trade secrets, Nick. They're what keep me employed." He looked at me pensively as he fidgeted with a small amphora shaped bottle. He opened the bottle to show me marble-sized pellets floating in a thick burgundy colored syrup. "Were these in the glass?"

"Yes. Two in my glass, three in his. What are they?"

"Amarena cherries." He continued. "Almost every bar in the country will put those bright red maraschino cherries in a Manhattan and many other drinks. They are crap. Sweet cherries soaked in corn syrup and dyed with food coloring. Most of them aren't even marinated in

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maraschino. Bartenders who care want to put in a cherry that tastes good. Some make their own. You start with sour cherries and marinate them in Luxardo maraschino for about six months. The other trick is to use these Italian amarenas and add a few drops of maraschino to the drink. I suspect Alphonso is adding more than a few drops. That guy is addicted to cherries.” He paused. “You’re putting me on. He isn’t really dead.”

“I can only tell you he went down in camp a little while after making these drinks. I didn’t stick around to find out.”

“Nah, he just OD’d. Happens all the time,” Rick said.

He was on a roll now and I wanted to get him back on target. “I think you’re right about the maraschino. He probably cut back on the red vermouth to keep my drink from being too sweet.”

“You need to do that,” he continued. “Normally you use equal parts red and white vermouth, but I cut the red back to less than a quarter ounce and put in a splash of maraschino. I like an orange-based bitters and use two dashes per drink. And I’m sure you know that you stir with a lot of ice and pour into a chilled cocktail glass.” He paused. I could see he was avoiding the obvious next subject. He looked at his watch. “That’s about it Nick. I’m going to have to close up.”

The couple in the corner had left. No one else was around. Rick had returned to putting away the bar items, pretending I was no longer there. “I hear you were in Canada for a few weeks,” I ventured.

“Fishing the Dean. It was pretty good this year.”

It was time to shake him up a bit. “You weren’t smuggling any Canadian whiskey from there were you?” He had been caught a few years back. Did a little time.

He wheeled around. “You bastard. You and the cops can’t stop riding my ass. I don’t do that shit any more. Besides I don’t use that in the drink. I use ri—.” He stopped.

I smiled. “What was that?”

He smiled back. “I meant to say I use the right whiskey. And you aren’t going to find out what it is. Now weren’t you leaving?”

It hit me like a bat to the forehead. Of course. The final secret; the most important ingredient: THE WHISKEY. You can assemble the perfect band but success still lies with the lead singer.

I stood up. “Thanks Rick, you’ve told me all I need to know.” As I was walking out I heard; “You aren’t going to tell Big Al you found me, are you?”

“No sir,” I replied and opened the door.

Rye whiskey was used for the traditional Manhattan. Over time bourbon became more popular and rye whiskies began to vanish from the shelves. There is now a resurgence in making this and other whiskey cocktails in the traditional fashion, many of which call for rye, and a variety of brands are now on the market. Rye whiskey has a much drier and sharper character than barley, wheat and corn whiskies; too much so for

many people. It balances well with a drink that has sweet and bitter flavors, like the Manhattan. A wheat-based bourbon (composed of a blend of corn and wheat) is not as dry and is often perceived as sweet with a caramel character. It is the whiskey I prefer straight up, but makes the Manhattan a little sweet. Some bourbons are corn and rye with little or no wheat. These are drier and spicier, but less so than straight rye whiskey. They make a fine Manhattan and are now my favorite.

It was getting darker and the fire was toasty warm. My waders were dry and I was feeling the glow from the second Manhattan. Still standing with that slight forward lean while I chewed the

delicious cherries retrieved from the empty glass, I looked at Bluto and Young Guy. “I guess I had better start some dinner.”

Bluto replied; “You’ve been staring off into space for about twenty minutes while we’ve been talking. ‘Phonso fell asleep in his chair and I had to wake him up. You haven’t moved. We thought you were in some kind of trance.”

“I was,” I said, as I begin assembling the dinner ingredients.

I haven’t abandoned the pleasure of simple spirits, but I have entered the world of cocktails. Next, I think I will meet up with Big Al in San Francisco and search for the perfect Martini. ☺



The Classic Perfect Manhattan(3:1): **My Perfect Manhattan(4:1):**

3 oz **rye whiskey or rye dominant style bourbon**
1/2 oz **red(sweet) vermouth**
1/2 oz **white(dry) vermouth**
2 dashes **Angostura bitters**
Lemon twist garnish

4 oz **Bulleit bourbon**
1/2 oz **Dolin red vermouth**
1/2 oz **Noilly Prat white vermouth**
1/2 teaspoon **Luxardo maraschino**
2 dashes **Regans’ orange bitters**
Amarena cherry garnish

Put ingredients into cocktail shaker cup and fill with cubed ice. Stir gently with a long spoon for at least 30 seconds. Do not shake. Strain into chilled stemmed cocktail glass. Rinse the syrup off two amarena cherries and add to glass.