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Searching for Jack

Two Guys, One Drink, 60 Bars

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Special to The Washington Post
Wednesday, June 18, 2003; Page F01

It's no secret that the mixed drink is thriving, after spending years in the shadow of microbrews and Chardonnays, particularly in Washington. Age-honored District drinking establishments such as the Old Ebbitt Grill and the Occidental, along with new downtown hangouts like Poste in the Hotel Monaco and Le Bar in the Sofitel Hotel, are flourishing in this environment. "Drink menus" are as ubiquitous as wine lists. Classic and contemporary martinis, gin and tonics, cosmopolitans and Manhattans: You name it and it's being served.

This movement has even touched neophytes like us, a couple of guys whose favorite "mixed drink" had previously been Black and Tan. But we came to cocktails not as a way to meet politicians, not as a way to be seen or to be swept up in the latest social trend. Our discovery was prompted by a 77-year-old novel.

Last August, one of us read Ernest Hemingway's "The Sun Also Rises." Jake, the narrator of this classic chronicle of the Lost Generation, drinks a "Jack Rose" cocktail while waiting to meet Lady Brett Ashley at a bar in Paris. What was in the drink, and why would this particular character enjoy it? A passing question, to be sure. But, for whatever reason, we both remembered it.

So we decided to taste the Jack Rose, expecting to enjoy about 20 minutes of harmless whimsy. We would drink this cocktail, briefly imagining ourselves in 1920s Paris, and then turn our minds back to our lives in contemporary Washington.

It didn't work out that way.

Jack Who?

The Jack Rose was a popular cocktail during the period between World Wars I and II; a favorite of Humphrey Bogart and Errol Flynn, this drink attracted a diverse following. It was strong enough for a Real Man, yet smooth enough for a lady.

It's a simple drink with just three ingredients: applejack, grenadine and lime juice or sour mix. Yet, despite its simplicity, it is commanding; despite its smoothness, it is self-assured. Its taste is equal parts crispness, sweetness and sourness. Or so we heard. Some assume that the cocktail was named for its rosy color. Others think it is a derivative of applejack and Rose's Grenadine. Those hearing the name "Jack Rose" for the first time often erroneously assume it contains Jack Daniel's whiskey. But the most intriguing theory traces the drink -- and its name -- to a gangster in late-19th-century New York City. This final explanation was the one we chose to believe.

The Quest Begins

It was a Sunday night in mid-October when we met at the fashionably retro-hip Felix in Adams Morgan. A bar with decor inspired by British spy movies ought to be able to serve any mixed drink, we thought. But the bartender that night said she had never heard of it.

We headed to Bidy Mulligan's at Dupont Circle, only to hear the same story. Nor could we find our drink at the Childe Harold, the Westin Embassy Row or even the Ritz-Carlton on M Street (although at the Ritz the waiter looked up the ingredients and, not having applejack, offered to make us our own "special" Jack Rose using pear brandy instead).

After visiting five bars, we called it a night. Though novices ourselves, we were nevertheless disappointed that our bartenders had seemed clueless. The Jack Rose had seemingly gone the way of the woolly mammoth and the passenger pigeon. Our cocktail was extinct.

But our lost cocktail had now acquired an air of mystery, its very scarcity making it precious. And we would not be satisfied by just any Jack Rose. No, if we were going to partake of this cocktail, it surely must *not* be prepared by a polo-shirted 21-year-old, armed only with a newly minted philosophy degree and Mr. Boston's Bar Guide. Only an expert mixologist could satisfy our thirst.

Therefore, before our second outing, we established two ground rules. Rule One: The bar serving the Jack Rose must have the correct ingredients on hand. Rule Two: The bartender must create the cocktail from memory. If either of these rules were violated, we would depart immediately -- or order a different drink.

A Second Try

The second night began with great promise. First, we hit the Off the Record bar at the Hay-Adams Hotel, figuring that a prestigious and historic hotel would offer the best bet. While John Boswell, the bartender, couldn't initially recall the drink's contents, he rang off the grenadine and lime juice after we mentioned applejack. Unfortunately, no applejack was on hand even if we had wanted to break our rules and try the cocktail.

Boswell, the consummate professional, was interested in our endeavor. Remembering past travels in Cuba, he noted Hemingway's favorite bars in Havana. He also told us where we could find a Jack Rose in town: Surely, the Old Ebbitt Grill would be our place, he said, likely to have both the proper ingredients and a knowledgeable staff. We bid adieu and headed southeast through Lafayette Square to the restaurant.

The bartender and well-stocked shelves just looked right. But although our barkeep knew the recipe (and he would prove to be one of the very few who did), there was no applejack. When we asked him to suggest other places to find a Jack Rose, he replied, "Try the Willard or Friday's. They both should have applejack." Despite the shock of hearing the names "Willard" and "Friday's" in the same sentence, we tried them both. Neither had it.

By the end of the evening, we had visited 12 establishments. Besides our man at the Old Ebbitt, only one other bartender had known how to prepare a Jack Rose. Sambonn Lek, the longtime head bartender at Town & Country in the Renaissance Mayflower Hotel, had immediately recalled it. But, like the Old Ebbitt, the Town & Country does not stock applejack. As before, we were disappointed yet undeterred.

The Story of Applejack

Like many children of the 1970s, we grew up eating Kellogg's Apple Jacks, completely oblivious to the derivation of the name. Applejack was once common in local taverns and households throughout the Northeast and Ohio River Valley. As apples were plentiful in colonial New England, it was only a matter of time before they would be used to make high-proof cider and whiskey.

Applejack is not apple brandy, which is derived entirely from apples. In fact, apples make up only 35 percent of applejack, with grain neutral spirits making up the rest. When one thinks of apple brandy, Calvados should come to mind. Of course, a good bottle of Calvados will run you more than \$50. A bottle of applejack, on the other hand, will set you back about \$12.

Price aside, many would argue that applejack should not be regarded as an outcast. Paul Harrington, who writes "The Alchemist" column for Hotwired's cocktail Web site, notes that "in the 1946 Gentleman's Companion, Charles H. Baker reports, 'It is rather unfortunate that our Prohibition era, through its raw applejack and Jersey Lightning, managed to completely deflect American taste against this fine spirit. Decently aged-in-wood applejack is a fine thing, just as French Calvados . . . is lovely stuff.' "

Nevertheless, though applejack can still be found in local liquor stores, it usually sits in an obscure place -- like on the hard-to-reach top shelf -- lonely and gathering dust.

The Longest Night of All

On our third excursion, as we entered Conrad's on Capitol Hill, the brown bottle of applejack stared us straight in the eyes. A graying bartender in matter-of-fact manner said that surely he could make us a Jack Rose. Had we found The Man, The Place, The Drink? When the bartender started for his manual, we started for the door. We had suffered another near miss.

Later that evening, we visited Au Pied de Cochon in Georgetown. Here was the ideal restaurant bar for our type of adventure. Behind the counter stood a wizened Frenchman and behind him sat a bottle of applejack. All of our searching would be validated by this final, perfect experience. Or not. Unfortunately, the kindly Continental gentleman did not know how to make a Jack Rose. We were touched, however, by the genuine sadness he showed after failing to fulfill our request.

During Night Three, only our bartender at the Palm recalled the Jack Rose recipe. But, though the Palm is an appropriately traditional establishment, it stocks no applejack.

By this point in our search, we had ventured into 35 restaurants and bars covering most of central Washington. Of these, only three had bartenders who could recite the recipe from memory, and only two had applejack. But no bar had both. Was it time to quit? Certainly not.

One More Time

Sometimes ordinary men do great things when motivated by their commitment to a cause and their loyalty to one another. Sometimes they do foolish things for the same reasons.

That fourth outing became a seven-hour odyssey, as we visited 22 bars and restaurants in Northwest Washington. Attempting to maximize our chances of success, we had carefully selected establishments according to age of clientele, experience of staff and breadth of liquor collection. Indeed, we came close to our goal several times. We found either applejack or apple brandy at the Oval Room, Timberlake's and Shula's Steak House. And the bartenders at Ruth's Chris Steak House and the Omni Shoreham Hotel both knew the recipe. But we never found that magic combination of a fully stocked bar and a fully knowledgeable person behind it.

Our visit to the Omni Shoreham was one of our final stops of the night and the most surreal. Dead tired, we entered the bar and immediately encountered not only a bartender -- sans applejack -- who knew how to concoct our drink, but also a pianist who seemingly understood our quixotic quest. Without realizing the implications, she played a song both cruelly mocking and distinctly appropriate: "The Impossible Dream."

Sipping Nirvana

We were developing reputations. As we related stories of our search to friends, they reacted initially with amusement, then with a mixture of amusement and concern. Lately, concern had begun to dominate.

It was time to cut our losses. We would return to Adams Morgan, where we had begun our quest, and try a few more bars. If unsuccessful there, we would proceed to the dreaded Plan B: We would purchase a bottle of applejack and offer it to one of the five barmen who, during our previous travels, had correctly recalled the Jack Rose recipe.

Our visit to Adams Morgan was quick. We stopped by Cashion's Eat Place, Cafe Lautrec, and Columbia Station. None of the bartenders had ever heard of the Jack Rose, although our man at Cashion's begged us to teach him how to make it. But time and patience were in short supply, so we politely moved on.

So we bought the last remaining bottle of Laird's applejack at Sherry's Liquors on Calvert Street, then headed for the Palm. The bartender from our previous visit was gone, replaced by a forty-something gentleman named Kevin Rudowski, who appeared to know his stuff. The situation seemed right.

Too bad we bungled the whole thing. When we approached Rudowski, asking that he name the ingredients of a Jack Rose he sensed we had some hidden agenda and firmly refused to play our little game. After some prodding, we realized that we could not verify Rule Two: the bartender must create the drink from memory. A bit sheepishly, we retreated by ordering Pernod and water (another Hemingway favorite). Rudowski turned out to be a truly excellent bartender, his demeanor a perfect mix of saltiness and professionalism. We plan to pay him another visit, this time without any aces up our sleeves.

It was late, and our lips had still not tasted the Jack Rose. Fortunately, when we reached the Town & Country at the Mayflower, we again spotted Sambonn "Sam" Lek. As noted above, we knew that Lek could make a Jack Rose. Lek started working at the Mayflower 27 years ago, shortly after emigrating from Cambodia.

We gave him the applejack and paid him the appropriate corkage fee. Lek retrieved two cocktail glasses, then filled them with ice and water. When the glasses had been properly chilled, he jettied the contents and started on the cocktail. With our bottle of Laird's and

his grenadine and sour mix, he crafted the drink with expert precision. Even though he hadn't served a Jack Rose in 20 years, Lek moved as swiftly as if he'd been concocting them all night.

Suddenly the long-sought drinks sat before us on the bar. It was time for the toast -- not only to Hemingway, who had introduced us to the Jack Rose, but also to the bartender.

The aroma was amazing, and the taste better than we could ever have imagined. It was smooth with just the right bite; sweet with a subtle tang. We took our time and savored every moment.

Now we faced another question: What to do with the rest of the applejack? It was an easy decision. We gave the bottle to Lek, who promptly set it on the bar shelf. There it sits, waiting for the occasional stranger to enjoy an authentic Jack Rose.

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