

THE HOME ARTISAN BAR

Chapter 4: Bitters, Shrubs and Syrups

In many artisan cocktails, bitters, shrubs and syrups are not essential, but learning how to use them will help you create a wider variety of drinks with unique flavor profiles. We're going to take it a step further and create our bitters, shrubs and syrups from scratch, which will help you further manipulate your final flavor, control the quality of your drink ingredients, and add to your adventures in food preservation. At the end of the chapter you can download a recipe book so you can get started concocting your own.

In this chapter you'll learn:

- How to make bitters and what they are used for
- How to make shrubs and syrups and how to use them
- Recipes
- Tips

BITTERS

Bitters are alcohol preserves flavored with roots, stems, barks, seeds, fruits or flowers. Their taste is just like their name: predominately bitter with slight notes of sour or sweet. Today, they are used to flavor cocktails but for a long time they were used as common medicine thought to cure stomachaches, fever, constipation and a slew of other ailments. Although the thought of drinking something very bitter seems a little unappetizing, having small amounts of bitter flavor elements actually changes and highlights other flavors and creates depth in food and drink. Since you don't use a large amount of bitters in a drink because of their strength and intense flavor, these recipes are for small amounts.

Bitters consist of four ingredients:

- Spirit
- Main bitter agent
- Secondary flavor(s)
- Sugar (although in my opinion, a sweetener is not always necessary)



Tasting

If you are lucky enough to live by a specialty bar store (see the resources download at the end of Chapter 6), you can purchase and try a number of different kinds of bitters. When I teach this workshop in-person, I bring my collection of bitters so that my students can taste the variations between them. This gives them a better idea of which flavors they like and which ones they want to make their own versions of.

To taste bitters, pour ¼ cup of sparkling water (no flavor!) into a few cups. Add a few drops of the bitters to each cup. Smell the cups before tasting and record your findings. Think about whether or not you like them, what they taste like, and take note of any cocktail combination ideas that pop into your head.

THE COMPONENTS OF BITTERS

Spirits

You want to work with spirits that have little flavor like vodka or grain alcohol. Since you will not be drinking bitters straight, using grain alcohol won't be too strong on your palate.

Bitter Agent

There are several kinds of bitter roots and herbs that you can use such as cassia, wormwood, gentian, burdock, dandelion or angelica root. These are more specialty items, mostly found online (see the resource download in Chapter 6). You can, however, get started with more common items like citrus pith (the white part), coffee, cacao nibs, pits or kernels of stone fruits or chamomile (mildly bitter). Whatever you choose, try to use items that are not ground (some of the bitter herbs are available ground); they will be too hard to strain and the final product will be so overwhelmingly bitter that your secondary flavors might be lost.

Secondary Flavors

This is the fun part! These elements are the flavors you will savor after the bitter taste subsides. This is your chance to get creative! Before you select your secondary flavors, think about what kind of drink you would like to add them to. I would start with no more than four secondary flavors until you become comfortable with all the flavor combinations. Good examples are: citrus peels, cinnamon, anise, chocolate, chile, lavender, lemongrass, Thai lime leaves, vanilla, peppercorns, cherries, blackberries and clove.

Sugar

Sugar is not necessary, especially if you are using your bitters in drinks that are already sweetened, but traditionally it was used. Remember, bitters were originally used as medicine so the sugar helped it go down!

*The recipe download at the end of this chapter has recipes and suggested uses for Grapefruit + Ginger Bitters, Chocolate Cherry Bitters and Thai-inspired Bitters.



SHRUBS

You might notice that lately shrubs have been all over bar menus. Although it seems like a new thing, shrubs have been around for quite a while and were widely consumed in colonial times. They are made to preserve fruits like berries for use in beverages. Fresh fruit is macerated (maceration is the softening or breaking of something in liquid) with sugar and then combined with vinegar. After allowing the fruit to meld with the vinegar for a few days, the mixture becomes concentrated and this sweet-tart juice would then be used in water or soda. Shrubs were popular because there was no refrigeration at that time and preserving the qualities of the sugar and acid of the vinegar allowed delicate fruits to be enjoyed for longer periods of time.

BASIC SHRUB:

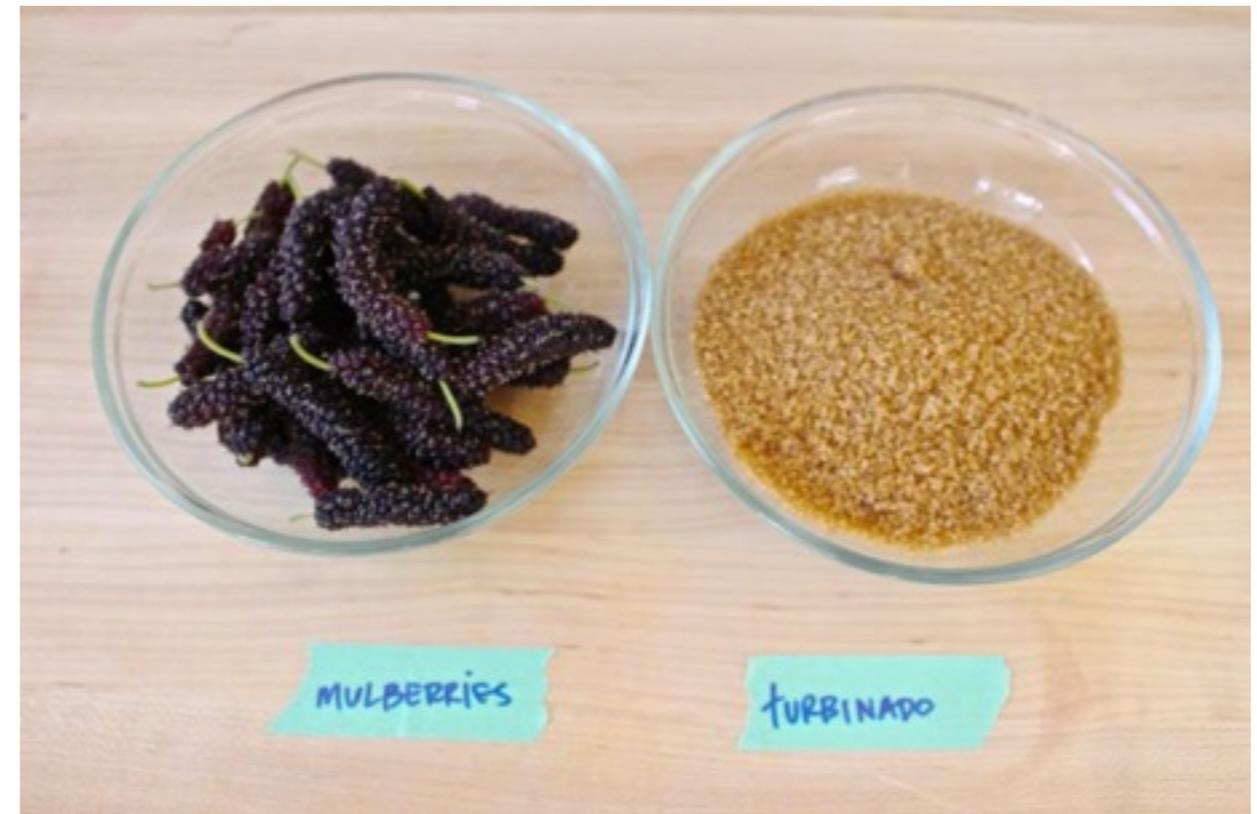
There are several methods on how to make shrubs online; mine isn't the standard and some people even use alcohol to make shrubs. This is just a way to start. This is a great project to do with children if you want to talk about food preservation or history!

Fruit: I always choose peak-of-flavor fruit, soft berries or stone fruit. That kind of produce will give up its juices easier and that's what you want — the juice!

Sugar: I typically use cane sugar or turbinado because it is slightly richer in flavor, but you can use any type of sugar. I would stay away from artificial sweeteners as the maceration might not result in the same results as using natural sugar. Honey can be used but you may have to manually macerate the fruit and the consistency of the shrub might be a little thinner.

Vinegar: I prefer apple cider vinegar (organic with live cultures from Braggs) for all shrubs. The flavor is superior and the live bacteria in the vinegar is good for you too. I have used white wine vinegar as well and it tastes delicious. There are a number of vinegars you can use, so experiment!

*The recipe download at the end of this chapter has recipes for Strawberry-Rosemary Shrub, Mulberry Shrub and a Mulberry Shrub Cocktail.





SYRUPS

Bartenders use syrups to make cocktails sweet. Made from an equal ratio of water and sugar, the granules of the sugar are dissolved so mixing them into a drink is easy. The simplest method of making a sugar syrup is to combine a 1:1 ratio of water and sugar, then boil until the sugar is dissolved (a few minutes) and you see the liquid is slightly thicker than water. This simple process allows for many variations that can make slight changes in your drink. Refrigeration allows syrups to last a long time, so they can be at your immediate disposal for making creative cocktails.

Sugar: One way to mix things up is to just change the sugar. Brown sugar has a much richer and deeper flavor and color; it's my go-to sugar for making a basic simple syrup. It does make your drinks darker but as you can see from some of my photographs of darker cocktails I do prefer it.

Grenadine: A common syrup used in cocktails that lends a sweet and tart flavor and a characteristic red color. Originally made from pomegranates, commercial brands now use colorings and additives — but you can make your own easily.

To make grenadine, it is important that you use pomegranate juice that is as close to 100% juice as possible. Make sure you check the label — if the juice is diluted, it will affect the taste of your syrup so use the highest concentration you can. In my recipe, I like to finish the syrup with lemon juice as it will make the syrup a little more tart and for this I also use a lighter sugar like cane as darker sugars will mask the pomegranate flavor.

Herb/fruit and more syrups: You can also make endless types of syrups by infusing teas, peppers, herbs, other fruit juices or even vegetable juices. Nothing really changes as long as you keep the ratio equal parts water to sugar. You will notice that in some recipes, I have increased the liquid portion, which I do when I have to steep something as you will lose water in the initial boiling of the water.

*The recipe download at the end of this chapter has recipes for Basic Simple Syrup, Grenadine, Hibiscus Grenadine, Serrano Pepper Syrup, Lavender Syrup and Blackberry Syrup.

TIPS:

- If you have a favorite bar or bartender, you might be able to ask them if they can give you a tasting of some of their bitters during a slow time. Make sure you bring your notebook!
- Just like the previous chapters, sanitize your glassware before starting a project.
- When you are creating a new cocktail using your new creations, start small. For example, if you want to make a “spicy margarita” using your pepper syrup, make the margarita without the syrup first — then add small amounts of the syrup until it is to your liking.
- I do not always strain my syrups or shrubs. I like the thick consistency of using fruit and lavender flowers to decorate drinks. However, the straining of a syrup should be on a case-by-case basis. Delicate items like basil, strawberries or peppers do not hold up well after being boiled, and items like tea might not taste good. Pay attention to what you are making a syrup or shrub from and what it looks like when you are finished making the item.

