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SPIRITS

Jason Wilson

Bloody Mary, You're Contrary

I like breakfast. I like to wake up late and eat breakfast late. I like fresh coffee and eggs and bacon and pancakes and a leisurely read of the newspaper (in peace and quiet). And I certainly enjoy drinking in the morning now and then.

But I hate brunch. Which is puzzling, because I do enjoy many brunch components.

Maybe it's the inherent non-casual "brunchiness" of it all; there's always a slight formality that seems like too much of a hassle in the late morning. Maybe it's the forced sociality that drags into the early afternoon, possibly interfering with a 1 p.m. kickoff. Or maybe I've been to too many buffet-style brunches, with their underripe melon slices, stale pastries and hours-old scrambled eggs. (Note to brunch organizers: It doesn't make those eggs any more palatable when you stick them in a big chafing dish.)

Then there are the brunch drinks, and they are always the same dynamic duo. First, there is the mimosa, one of the worst drinks of all time. Hey, can I serve you some really cheap champagne topped with store-bought orange juice? Yum.

Which brings us to the other old brunch standby, the bloody mary.

My, my, Bloody Mary; you are a vexing drink. I want to love you, Mary, I really do. But even beyond my brunch aversion, you've got a few strikes against you. First, I'm not the biggest fan of tomato juice or Worcestershire sauce, and in the wrong bartending hands, you turn into a gloopy tomato-gravy disaster.

Next, Mary, can we be totally honest? The celery-stalk foliage is just ridiculous. Sure, everybody pretends to like it, and Lord knows we've been drinking you this way for a long time. But come on. A garnish should, well, garnish. Not take over the glass.

Finally, Mary, I think we need to get back to the way things were. None of these prefab bloody mary mixes. A little more vodka and a little less tomato. And I think we too often forget that a dash of lemon juice helps keep things fresh and bright.

But despite the flaws, the bloody mary remains as popular as ever, probably the only cocktail served in every bar all over the world. It was invented by a bartender named Fernand Petiot at Harry's Bar in Paris during the 1920s. After Prohibition ended, Petiot moved to New York and served drinks at the bar in the St. Regis Hotel. Concerned that more-conservative American patrons might be offended by the name, the St. Regis rechristened the drink the Red Snapper.

name didn't stick, and neither did the recipe: originally a mix of equal parts tomato juice and vodka, the bloody mary over the years devolved to its current mix of two parts tomato juice, one part vodka.

A friend and I recently stopped in at the St. Regis in Washington and had a few bloody marys off the official Bloody Mary Menu at Adour. The one I enjoyed best was the original Red Snapper, but we also liked variations such as the Capitol Mary (with gin, clam juice and prawns), the Great Wall Bloody Mary (with Tsing Tsao beer, sake and lime juice) and the Mary Terraneum (with extra-virgin olive oil, basil and oregano).

In his 1941 "Cocktail Guide and Ladies' Companion," Crosby Gaige published the Red Snapper recipe given to him by Gaston Laurysen, host at the New York St. Regis. It calls for two ounces each of vodka and tomato juice, and it eschews Tabasco sauce for a simple pinch of cayenne pepper. In fact, with its equal-parts vodka-and-tomato-juice mix, the Red Snapper becomes a wonderful palette on which to experiment with a pinch of this and a dash of that.

At home, I've been tinkering with the recipe, and I've found that I definitely prefer a pinch of cayenne over Tabasco. I like a touch more lemon juice than in most recipes, and I measure the Worcestershire sauce to a half-teaspoon to make sure too much doesn't squirt in. Instead of celery salt, I use a few dashes of my latest favorite ingredient, celery bitters, which are made by a German company called the Bitter Truth and will soon be legally available in the United States. (A bartender tells me it has yet to be approved for sale here.) Many of the finer bartenders in Washington already use them, and there are shops in the area that sell them clandestinely. (If you e-mail me, and you're nice, I might tell you how to find them.)

As for liquor, I've tried Red Snappers using aquavit and herb-flavored vodkas to good effect. But my favorite so far is a version using Square One organic cucumber vodka. Yes, I guess it's redemption week, since I have now found a flavored vodka I can love, as well.

Of course, someone will have to tell me how my veggie-flavored Red Snapper goes with brunch. Because I'm not going anywhere near that buffet line.

Jason Wilson's column appears every other week. He can be reached at jason@tablematters.com.

Veggie Red Snapper

1 serving

The Red Snapper, first served in America at the St. Regis in New York in the 1930s, is the original prototype of the bloody mary. Using equal parts vodka and tomato juice, the Red Snapper is the most superior expression of the cocktail.

The "veggie" rendition here calls for a cucumber-flavored vodka. There are several on the market, but Square One is the best; it is available at Central Liquors in Washington. If you can't find a cucumber vodka, an herb vodka such as Herb's dill- or cilantro-flavored works pretty well, too.

Celery bitters work much better than using celery salt, but these particular bitters can be hard to find. Check with your local liquor store about ordering them. Or cozy up to your neighborhood bartender and ask if you can have some.

Two more thoughts: Forget the celery stalk. Do not forget the lemon juice. From Spirits columnist Jason Wilson.

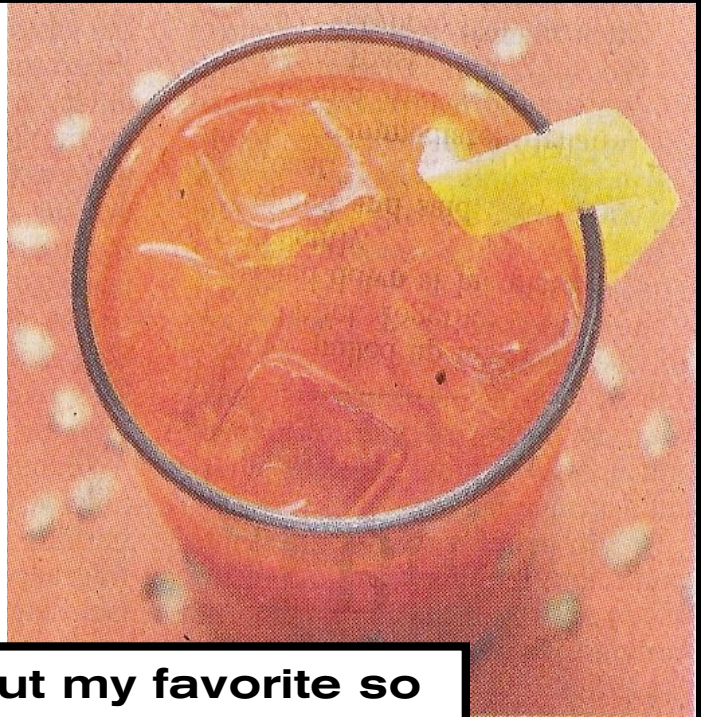
- 2 ounces cucumber-flavored vodka, preferably Square One brand
- 2 ounces tomato juice
- ½ teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
- ¼ ounce freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 2 dashes celery bitters, such as the Bitter Truth brand (may substitute a pinch of celery salt)
- Pinch fine sea salt
- Pinch freshly ground black pepper
- Pinch cayenne pepper
- Twist of lemon peel, for garnish

DIRECTIONS

- Fill a cocktail shaker halfway with ice. Add the vodka, tomato juice, Worcestershire sauce, lemon juice, celery bitters, salt, black and cayenne peppers. Shake well for at least 15 seconds, then strain into an ice-filled highball glass.
- Garnish with the twist of lemon peel.

NUTRITION Per serving: 163 calories, 1 g protein, 4 g carbohydrates, 0 g fat, 0 g saturated fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 459 mg sodium, 1 g dietary fiber

Recipe tested by Michael Taylor; e-mail questions to Food@washpost.com.



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BEER | NEXT WEEK

- Cozying up to the smoked-beer style.

SQUARE ONE
CUCUMBER **1**