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Classic Cocktails, For Now or Never

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The Manhattan Cocktail Classic returned for its fourth year with a gala at the New York Public Library that drew 3,000 drinks enthusiasts last week to sip negronis in the marble halls of the Beaux-Arts landmark.



Gabi Porter



The Manhattan Cocktail Classic gala evokes retro styles.

Belathée Dancers at the Manhattan Cocktail Classic gala.



Belathée Charlotte Voisey shakes up and serves cocktails.

The event kicked off five days of seminars, tastings and parties around New York City devoted to everything cocktail-related. The offerings ranged from the earnest, including discussions of sustainably produced spirits and farm-to-table cocktails, to the escapist. Monday evening, for example, included a special, whiskey-soaked performance of "Sleep No More," London-based Punchdrunk ensemble's interactive riff on Macbeth at The McKittrick Hotel in Chelsea. (Naturally, the whiskey was Scotch—Bowmore to be exact).

But not all tipples were celebrated. One discussion over the weekend, dubbed Do Not Resuscitate, had experts condemn a list of classic (or at least old) cocktails as un-shaker worthy. Among the death-row drinks was the 1930s Bath Cure, a tiki-like concoction with more than 8 ounces of hooch, which drinks historian David Wondrich pronounced "not even a drink to be thought about."

Neither was Ernest Hemingway's beloved but bracing daiquiri, the Papa Doble, safe.

"Why should we all have our drinking habits be dictated by Hemingway's diabetes problem," demanded Dale DeGroff, the former Rainbow Room bartender who is known as "King Cocktail."

Panelist and drinks consultant Philip Duff said the seminar was aimed at the "mindless obsession" with the past that prevails in today's bars.

"If we continue to follow this trajectory," he said, "next year the fashionable trends will be scurvy and typhoid."

The mood was decidedly more freewheeling a dozen hours earlier at the library, where a brass band cheerfully greeted revelers in the vast entry hall, bathed for the night in red lights. And the more than 120 different cocktails being served over four floors didn't hurt, either. (For those guests who wanted to recreate their experiences at home, there were digital bracelets that could keep track of what they had imbibed, along with the recipes.)



Belathée Cocktails served by Charlotte Voisey.

The party has steadily grown since its founding in 2009, according to founder and director of the event, Lesley Townsend. This year, she said, the \$150 gala tickets sold out in three hours. In the days following, she watched a black market for tickets spring up online, with asking prices reaching as much as \$300.

"It's become a part of the black-tie, New York social scene," she said, "a place to see and be seen."

Andrea Spiridonakos, a ballet dancer with Broadway aspirations and cat's eye make-up, had just the outfit to be noticed—a feather halter dress of her own creation. She plunked down \$250 for a special VIP ticket that got her early entrance and a Champagne toast.

"I told my mother about it and she was like, 'Do it. You only live once.'" Looking around, martini in hand, Ms. Spiridonakos sighed, "I wish every Friday night was like this."



Gabi Porter Amanda Boccato

Still, not everyone might have agreed. Quentin DeLacour was manning one of a few Heineken stations at the event. As a bluesman crooned about unrequited love from a nearby stage, Mr. DeLacour said he'd had few takers. Not that he expected otherwise. "If I weren't working, I would be drinking cocktails, too," he said.

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