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The Home Bartender's Guide to Smoked Cocktails

How a smoking gun and some wood chips will change your drinking habits

BY KIRK MILLER

A few months back [Bespoke Post](#) introduced a \$70 cocktail smoking and infusion kit that seemed revolutionary ... as most like-minded kits are twice the price, if not more.

Then I got one. And I promptly set it next to the \$200 smoking kit (from another company) I had received as a gift from my girlfriend a year before and just let the two of them collect dust.

The problem with smoked cocktails is that while they *look* cool — and the idea of infusing drinks (or food) with a smoky flavor is always welcome in my house — I really didn't know what I was doing. Somehow the idea of using a smoking gun, burning wood chips and working with a glass dome — none of which seems that difficult — seemed too much effort to add a little smack of campfire to my whiskey tippie.

But, yes, the final product is worth the small extra expense and effort. "The idea with smoke on a cocktail is to allow the flavors of the liquid and the smoke to infuse one another — the longer you let them sit with each other the more their flavors get to play," says Dan Stern, the Head Bartender at the recently-opened NYC bar [Bandits](#) (which makes a Cuba Libre riff called the Smoky Cokey).

To help assuage my smoking fears — and get past my procrastination — I asked a few bartenders with extensive smoked cocktails knowledge for tips.

What chips am I using for what booze?

My first problem was wood (that's what she ... nm). I had three wood chip choices for my smoking gun — cherrywood, applewood and mesquite — and no idea what paired with what.

"I find applewood chips to work well with rye whiskey," says Barlow Gilmore, the [Weekend Mixologist](#) and a photographer. "But I think you just need to find pairings that you enjoy. For example, I like cinnamon smoked with a dark rum, and smoked rosemary can go well with gin and tequila."

And, as Gilmore notes, you don't necessarily have to stick with those wood chips. Cinnamon, anise or herbs also do the trick.

One unusual thing you might want to try? Lemon smoke. "That's simply dried-out, thick-cut lemon peels — including the pith — that are then chopped up so that they fit into the smoking gun," says Stern, discussing his bar's "Smoky Cokey" cocktail. "Using dried lemon peels instead of wood chips — which would result in a thicker smoke — came from the fact that Old Fashioneds and Cuba Libres are garnished with citrus. Now that lemon flavor has a chance to not only bring a great look and nose to the cocktail, but also incorporate itself into the cocktail as a whole.

Wait, so what is this smoke I'm adding?

It's not just fire.

"Smoke is a generic term," adds Craig Schoettler, Executive Director of Beverage and Corporate Mixologist at MGM Resorts — which includes the Bellagio's [Petrossian Bar](#) in Las Vegas, where they offer smoky cocktail pairings with exquisite food (including caviar). "Traditionally it means the application of fire to burn something organic to produce a colored and aromatic or flavorful 'smoke.' But "vaporizing" is another technique that adds an aromatic smoke or air. This works well with teas, dried flowers, spices, herbs, etc., especially when you don't want to have the burnt flavor of applying a flame."

I'm worried about using this smoking gun.

That's ok! It takes practice.

"Smoking guns are fun, but it's also easy to lose control of the amount of smoke produced and get your entire room smoked," explains Miguel Lancha, Cocktail Innovator at [ThinkFoodGroup](#). "It just takes more practice and attempts to see ahead of time how much it will generate in a minute. With its hose you can direct the smoke directly into a carafe or a bottle and trap it there to smoke a batch, for example."

A few tips from Lancha, if you're using a smoking gun with a hose: Fill a bottle halfway full and lay it down. You'll increase the surface area of liquid to get smoked. But if you're just smoking a cocktail in a glass, be sure it already has a large ice cube inside of it ("It'll trap the smoke for a bit longer than just the bare glass.")

What ingredients or booze *won't* work with smoking cocktails?

"I haven't tried smoking cocktails with milk or cream in them. I assume that wouldn't do well," says Gilmore. (He adds: "But then again I haven't tried it. I may have to give it a shot!")

"Clear spirits," says Schoettler. "Tequila can sometimes work, but the flavor of the smoke comes across too harsh in a gin, rum or vodka." That said, the MGM Resorts mixologist *has* used smoked water to make ice cubes in rum cocktails. His rule of thumb? Use the smoker for "stirred or booze-forward cocktails."

"99 percent of your liquors in this situation will be whiskey, Scotch and bourbon," suggests Rodrigo Otalora, F&B outlet manager [Balboa Bay Resort](#) in Newport Beach, CA, which features a smoked whiskey cart at their A+O Restaurant | Bar. "Vodka, rum, wine or something fine like Cognac would be an odd mix ... but technically it can be done."



The Smokey Big Apple from Balboa Bay Resort (no smoking gun needed)

Balboa Bay

What if I don't want to spend \$70-\$200 on a kit for smoking cocktails?

“Use wood planks,” suggests Azael Salgado, the Beverage Manager at Washington, D.C.’s [Oyamel](#). “Planks can be used to trap smoke using a dome or to burn the plank and trapping the smoke in the glass itself to odor the glass to enhance the smells on the nose of a cocktail. Scotch, bourbon and mezcal already have wood-like notes, and smoking components of the whole cocktail can be used to enhance those flavors.”

What about time?

This one is important. “You need to time smoking a drink carefully,” says Stern. “If you simply let a cloud of smoke sit in with your cocktail, the result will be a heavily smoked flavor bomb of bitter heat that won’t have nuance. Allowing whatever beverage you choose to smoke the time to sit for 1-4 minutes is the perfect amount of time.”

OK, so what smoked cocktails should I drink?

Setting up the Marcellin cocktail kit from Bespoke Post just took a few minutes, most of which was figuring out how to get butane into the smoking gun — btw, the kit does *not* come with butane or wood chips, though the first cost me \$2 at a grocery store and the latter is available in many places (and Bespoke Post sells a trio of chips for \$25).

Otherwise, you simply place your cocktail on the wooden base, place a small stack of wood chips beside it, use the torch on the chips, and cover with the dome (“cloche”) for your desired time frame. Serve immediately. After a few practice runs, I made a pretty solid, lightly smoky Old Fashioned, based on one of the recipes below.

Gilmore suggests his Tiki Bonfire.

Smokey Big Apple (no smoking gun needed)

Balboa Bay Resort

2 oz Hudson Manhattan Rye
.5 oz Apple Cider Syrup
1 dash Old Forester Smoked Cinnamon Bitters
Burnt Smoking Stick

Add Hudson, Apple Cider Syrup and bitters to a mixing glass. Add ice and stir for 25 seconds. Strain over a large ice cube. Take a whole cinnamon stick and heat with a lighter until it starts smoking. Place stick on top of the ice.

WhistlePig Smoked Old Fashioned

Balboa Bay Resort

2 oz WhistlePig Piggy Back 6 Year old Rye
.5 oz Runamuk Farms Maple Syrup

Place ingredients in a mixing glass. Add ice and stir for 25 seconds. Strain and pour over ice. Place the drink in the smoking box and smoke with pecan wood.