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drinks

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"The rum people would hate it when I put bitters in the Mojitos at Rainbow," Dale says. "But then, they were all Cuban exiles, and I think it reflected their hatred of Cuba. Now of course, they love it when I do it."

"It's just a different drink," Saunders says. "I learned that from you. You don't even *know* how much you taught me."

"I don't even remember," DeGroff says, laughing, eyes rolling. "I have no recall anymore. That's why I'm a happy person."

The next stop is the sleek stainless-steel bar at *Citarella* (1240 Sixth Ave.; 212-332-1515), the Rockefeller Center domain of Austrian-born "bar chef" Stefan Trummer. Although DeGroff may be a vanguard in the cocktail world, he also belongs to an old and modest tradition: the bartender as a simple saloonkeeper. But Trummer is a restless futurist, a mixological Kraftwerk. He is as fluent in rare Guyanese rums and odd Italian liqueurs as he is in the trendy club fuels like Hipnotiq and Red Bull. He keeps tools that you don't see at many bars: glass bellini shakers for his Champagne cocktails, a sugarcane juicer for his (un-bittered) Mojitos, a huge propane torch to caramelize aloe for an as-yet-unnamed tequila cocktail he's currently perfecting.

"A torch?" DeGroff observes. "I can see that coming in handy, late at night, with rowdy customers."

Trummer creates precise, intricate, almost architectural cocktails like the *Titanic*: a still, glacial sea of Ciroc vodka, elderflower cordial, and verjus lapping against a beautiful, fractal-like iceberg of Champagne sorbet. He points to a single floating raspberry as he hands it to us. "And there is the lifeboat," he says, with a shy smile.

FLATIRON LOUNGE
Julie Reiner (above left) shows off one of her own creations in the barrel-vaulted bar, where she maintains an impressive range of drink garnishes (left).



MILK AND HONEY
Bartender Joseph Schwartz (above) pours out a frothy Southern Cross (right) in this Lower East Side hideaway.



Which is not to say that he is flashy—just that his knowledge and unstoppable imagination have driven him somewhat, beguilingly, mad. What sort of mind thinks to rinse a martini glass with an overproof rum from Austria, then light it on fire, letting it burn until the glass is polished with the smell of burnt sugar and vanilla—all before pouring a single drop of the drink that will become Trummer's Flamingo? If Bemelmans is the archive, Citarella is the lib.

As I ponder this over a sample of fresh sugarcane juice, DeGroff is checking Trummer's ice for holes. This is cardinal rule No. 2: "One of the primary, defining ingredients of the cocktail is very cold, very dense ice. Not many places have it anymore—they use pellet ice or ice with holes. It melts too quickly and over-dilutes the cocktail." Luckily, no holes here.

Before moving on, we enjoy a sip of Trummer's work-in-progress, the aloe Drink X ("Have you considered 'The John Hodgman?'" I ask), a fresh, bright, vegetal nectar. "That's it," DeGroff slams the table. "I'm getting a torch."

DeGroff and I are walking now down Fifth Avenue, pausing at 22nd Street for a moment at the spot (now a Restoration Hardware) where "Professor" Jerry Thomas, author of arguably the first cocktail book, *How to Mix Drinks*, once tended bar. All cocktail people are to some degree nostalgics. It was an art, after all, that peaked at the turn of the last century before being purposefully killed off by prohibition. When DeGroff took over at the Rainbow Room, he studied a half-dozen antique cocktail books in order to figure out how to rebuild the craft. That collection has now grown into the hundreds.

I ask him where he would be going tonight if he had the use of a time machine. There isn't much hesitation: "The Carpano Café in Turin, where vermouth was invented in 1789. Raffles Hotel in Singapore in the early 30s, birthplace of the Singapore Sling. The Ramos Brothers Saloon in New Orleans when they made the Ramos Gin Fizz. The Big Brass Rail at the Waldorf, right where the Empire State Building is now, when Johnny Solon was bartending. And the Knickerbocker Hotel when DiTaggia mixed his first Dry Martini."

At 19th Street, we turn right to go to Flatiron Lounge (37 W. 19th St.; 212-727-7741), a new spot with a vintage deco flair. DeGroff has a rare copy of Don the Beachcomber's rum drink recipes that he wants to show to the proprietor, Julie Reiner. A Hawaiian, Reiner has a fondness for tiki drinks, the fruity, and the floral.

"Look at those garnishes!" DeGroff says admiringly of the astonishing lineup of little glass bowls: lime and lemon wedges, orange and mango slices, an array of berries, pineapple wheels, brandied cherries, candied ginger, mintsprigs, olives, and orchids. It's a botanical hot house, and a perfect example of DeGroff's third cardinal rule: Start from scratch. "Fresh fruit and fruit juices are critical," he says. "Prior to prohibition, nothing was premade. There was no sour mix. Maraschino cherries were *real*. When I started at Rainbow, I thought we should keep some sour mix as backup. But my boss and mentor, Joe Baum, said 'These guys in the 19th century served thousands of customers night after night this way. They didn't have backup. Find a way, or I'll find someone who can.'" He found a way. And so has Julie, and as far as I can tell, it means time-consuming, Sisyphean prep: "I try to keep [the garnishes] down to 20," Julie confesses later. "My staff wants to kill me."