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## Tiki Drinks Go Mainstream: Everything You Need to Know About the Trend

BY: SARAH GORR | 6.28.2017 |

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For the last 5 to 10 years, prohibition cocktails have been king. Long gone are the cosmopolitans and alabama slammers of the '90s. But even more recently, another trend is threatening to overthrow the stiff whiskey and gin drinks that have been dominating cocktail menus at bars: tiki. Tiki is like the prohibition cocktail's more fun cousin. Strong spirits are still there to be sure, but the focus is on rum, exotic fruit juices, and funky ingredients that are a bit hard to find and even harder to pronounce (orgeat, anyone?).



BY: Sarah Gorr  
Guide Staff Writer

Chicago native Sarah Gorr is an editor who loves to travel, write book reviews, read movie news, and make eye contact with dogs.

### Bar Deals



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Multiple Locations



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 \$9 \$17
 

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To help explain the tropical wave sweeping bars across the country, I talked to two experts: James Oppedisano, proud owner of the [Hala Kahiki](#) just outside Chicago, which has been slinging mai tais since 1964, and Greg Titian, a cocktail aficionado and host of the web series [How to Drink](#) who believes everyone can learn the ins and outs of mixology. But let's start with a little history.

## The Birth of Tiki

Ernest Raymond Beaumont Gantt was given a choice by his parents in 1925: go to college, or spend his college fund as he saw fit. Gantt took the money and ran, but not just anywhere—he spent his late teens and early 20s island hopping around the Caribbean and South Pacific. By 1933, Gantt had enough saved up to create his own slice of paradise back home in Hollywood, and thus the first true tiki bar was born: Don the Beachcomber. It wasn't the first Polynesian-themed restaurant or bar, plenty of those existed already, but Gantt was the first to match the drinks to the decor. The bar was such a hit, he eventually went ahead and changed his name to (you guessed it) Donn Beach.

It would take years before any of Donn's creations such as the mai tai, the zombie, and the three dots and a dash could be properly re-created by the intrepid at-home mixologist. As Titian remarks, "There's this misconception about tiki that there's a lot fruit juices and sugar and like a gallon of rum and you wanna hide all that rum taste behind a bunch of sweet stuff, and that is a function of the secrecy that surrounded the classic tiki bars like Trader Vic's and Don the Beachcomber."

Tiki titans like Donn and Vic so viciously guarded their creations that almost no one knew what went in them. Donn even went so far as to remove the labels from bottles behind the bar, referring to the liquors and syrups only by vague titles such as "Spices #8" and "Bottle #4". Thankfully, his secrets have been outed and great tiki drinks are finding their place back on the map.

## Tiki's Comeback

Oppedisano is hardly surprised by the resurgence of tiki, noting, "We've seen many a tiki comeback throughout the years. This is personally my third." For this most recent tiki-drink craze, Titian points to the craft-cocktail movement, saying, "I think there's also something to be said for the fact that tiki drinks rely on a lot of ingredients that people have not had access to and that, for whatever reason, the speakeasy, craft-cocktail movement has made those available again." Both agree that drinks like the jet pilot and the beachcomber are simply timeless. That doesn't mean tiki hasn't evolved, though.

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- JAMES OPPEDISANO, HALA KAHIKI

"We'll never do certain things like get TVs or turn into a dance club after a certain time," Oppedisano says. But, he adds, "You couldn't survive in this industry for almost 53 years if you didn't in some way stay current and give the patrons what they are looking for." For Hala Kahiki, that's meant allowing the drink menu to explode from a humble two pages and 25 drinks to an impressive roster of 130 drinks today.

## What to Order



That much variety can seem overwhelming to a tiki newbie. Thankfully, Titian and Oppedisano have a few recommendations. "If someone is absolutely lost, or doesn't know what they like, we usually steer them to the Hala Kahiki. It's sweet, but tangy. Strong, but not overwhelming with liquor flavor. Plus it's our namesake, so you know, it better be good!" says Oppedisano of his house speciality, a blend of three types of rum mixed with an assortment of fresh fruit juices. Titian, on the other hand, turns to the tried-and-true tiki classic: the fog cutter. "It uses a float of sherry in a way that changes the entire thing; it has a flavor profile that I don't think you'll find in another drink," he says.

IT SHOULD BE ESCAPISM IN A GLASS

- GREG TITIAN, HOW TO DRINK

But what makes the perfect tiki drink? Titian and Oppedisano were both quick to answer that the real question is, "What do you like?" With so much variety among tiki drinks, there's truly something for every palate, but one thing both pros agree upon is that a quality tiki drink needs to be balanced.

Specifically, Titian says, "Like all good cocktails, [tiki drinks] should really accentuate the flavors of the base spirits that you're using," but more poetically, "It should be like escapism in a glass." Oppedisano echoes that sentiment, "The perfect tiki drink should transport you to another place mentally. Just like a song evokes a memory and transports you back to that time, a tiki drink should make you mentally escape to a relaxing place."

## Make Your Own

How to Drink: Mai Tai



If you're looking to re-create that beachy vibe at home, you won't need much, says Titian. With just two types of rum (specifically a Jamaican rum and rum agricole) and some orgeat (or almond syrup), you're on your way to learning how to make a mai tai. "When you can make a mai tai I think you've got sort of the granddaddy and homebase of the tiki drinks and a great introduction for yourself and your guests if you make it right," says Titian.

But if the need for a daiquiri strikes and your home bar is woefully understocked, don't worry: beloved family-owned hideaways like the Hala Kahiki have survived 50 years already and plan to be around for at least 50 more. They've got a barstool and a kooky tiki glass with your name on it.

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Photos: Tiki drink images by Greg Titian, Hala Kahiki image by Groupon.

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