

PUNCH

Bringing It Back Bar: What to Do with Violet Liqueur Crème de Violette

Every bar sports marginal bottles that elude even the most seasoned drink-makers. That is, until someone dusts them off and uses them in a new way. In "Bringing It Back Bar," we shine a light on overlooked bottles and devise recipes to take them from back bar to front shelf. Up now: the purple-hued, violet-imbued Crème de Violette.

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photo: LIZ LUCKING



Certain liqueurs with bold hues and the strong flavors to match have managed to achieve permanent status in the modern cocktail ingredient canon—their distinctive colors and flavors a crucial component to classic and new-wave drinks alike. A world without sunset-colored Campari or verdigris Chartreuse? Impossibly dreary, and much less delicious.

But for purple-hued, violet-imbued Crème de Violette, the story has been different.

Made from a maceration of violets steeped in brandy with added sugars, Crème de Violette was produced in Europe as early as the beginning of the 19th century, in an era when people clamored for violet-scented candies and sweets. The liqueur was originally served with vermouth or even

on its own, until Hugo Ensslin published the first recipe for the liqueur’s most famous iteration, the Aviation, in 1916. The perfumed, floral liqueur made somewhat regular appearances behind the bar—lending its novel color and flavor to Ensslin’s classic and other since-forgotten iterations such as the Blue Moon and Eagle’s Dream—until the ‘60s, when its major European producer shuttered its doors, making it nearly impossible to track down in the U.S.

Crème de Violette languished in obscurity for the next few decades, falling out of both fashion and recipe books, with drinks that had previously employed the liqueur simply leaving it out all together. Enterprising drink-makers seeking it out were forced to use the more widely available Crème Yvette (violet-based, but with the additions of vanilla, orange and raspberry) or Parfait d’Amour (curaçao-based, with flavors of rose, violet and orange) in its place.

Then, in 2007, importer Haus Alpenz introduced the Rothman & Winter brand and brought the classic recipe back into production and the U.S. While the Aviation remains the primary drink in which you’ll find Crème de Violette, many bartenders have begun using it as an aromatic seasoner for any number of drinks.

“It’s one of those things that sits on the back bar and collects dust until somebody wonders what they can make with it,” says Matthew Belanger, of Brooklyn bar Donna. “It’s a fun flavor to make work, though. If you can tame the florality and make it accessible to the guest, it can be really surprising.”

Gin and lemon, of course, are natural partners for Crème de Violette, with the floral components of the liqueur playing nicely with the herbal flavors and citrus. Bar manager Jared Sadoian of Boston’s The Hawthorne also suggests using it in tandem with tequila, as in the bitter and strong Adelita, or with rum agricole, which Sadoian mixes with lemon and vermouth in the smooth but heady Crème de Canne Collins.

At Donna, the liqueur appears in The Sun Prairie alongside gin and Cocchi Rosa, which are topped with cava to help coax the violet aroma out of the glass. Belanger also finds that that deep florality partners well with grape-based spirits—particularly pisco—but warns to be careful about proportions as the flavor can turn “soapy” quickly: “A little bit goes a long way.”

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