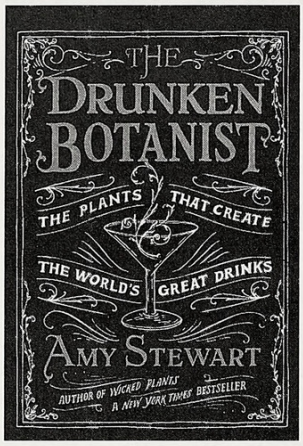
MADROÑO, Vol. 61, No. 1, pp. 144–145, 2014

REVIEW



The Drunken Botanist. The Plants That Create the World's Great Drinks. By AMY STEWART. 2013. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC. 381 pp. ISBN 97816 16200466. Price, about $20.00, hardcover.

Anyone who has ever taken or taught an Economic Botany course, or who simply has been intrigued by natural ingredients in foods, cannot help but be baffled by the tremendous array of botanical products that go into various alcoholic beverages. Grapes, grains, junipers, agaves, nearly everyone knows a bit about the role these plants play in various libations. But this list does not come anywhere close to the array of plant products that appear in the bottles of a well-stocked liquor store. Amy Stewart has written a super-detailed compendium of the plants that "create the world's great drinks," and not a few of some of the world's more obscure drinks. The treatments of plant species vary in their depth and detail, but one would be hard pressed to find a plant that Stewart omitted. In her introduction, appropriately titled "Aperitif," she states that it would be "impossible to describe every plant that has ever flavored and alcoholic beverage." Perhaps, but she must be very close to that goal. Around 160 plants from nearly eighty families are treated in the book, plus the necessary fungi and bacteria, and even a few invertebrates.

The Drunken Botanist is organized naturally into three parts, beginning with discussions of the processes, natural and human-invented, that account for alcoholic solutions. A brief note at the start of the book titled "About the Recipes" is dedicated to instructing the reader on the proper proportions and size of a cocktail: "do get into the habit of mixing one small, civilized drink at a time" and "please get rid of your jumbo-sized cocktail glasses." This advice is well placed, as most of the recipes in the book are fairly simple with quality ingredients, but high in alcohol content. Next there is a long catalogue of herbs and spices, flowers, trees, fruits, and seeds; who, for example, would have expected entries on genera such as *Croton* L., *Drosera* L., *Adiantum* L., *Araucaria* Juss., or *Arbutus* L. in a book on alcoholic potations? Some plants warrant only part of a page; then there is the six-page account of the labyrinthine saga of angostura bitters. Part three deals with gardening and growing your own plants to use in preparing cocktails ("Gardeners are the ultimate mixologists"). Bay Area dwellers with tiny yards will love her cocktail garden planted in a seven foot wide side yard at her Humboldt County home (see her blog on Gardenrant.com for photos). The book is further punctuated with sidebars titled "Bugs *in* Booze;" who knew that, up to 2006, the shocking red color of Campari was due to cochineal insects. There are brief discussions on whether it's mescal or mezcal, whisky or whiskey. There are instructions on how best to grow your own plants to be used in drinks. And there are, of course, recipes for fifty cocktails, and several others for syrups, infusions, and garnishes.

A lot in this book will be familiar to the Madroño readership, devoted botanists that we are. In the section on *Agave* L., taxonomists will appreciate the sidebar titled "The Lumpers, the Splitters, and Howard Scott Gentry," where Stewart gives a brief but detailed history on the taxonomy of the genus. Gentry believed that the *Agave* species should be split based on floral characters. Stewart points out the difficulty in using this character due to the fact that one might have to wait as long as thirty years to actually see a specimen in bloom! But there are still likely to be items new to readers: why does gin cause allergic reactions; why precisely does adding water make absinthe cloudy; and which plant contributes to speedy recovery in sexually exhausted male rats.

The book is attractively designed and Stewart is a delightful raconteur (she is also the author of *Wicked Plants: The Weed That Killed Lincoln's Mother, and Other Botanical Atrocities* [2009], and *Flower Confidential: The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful* [2008], both published by Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill). She is equally interested in the botany, the history, and the chemistry of plants, and is adept in ferreting out the most obscure and mysterious facts (for example: in its time, George Washington's whiskey distillery was one of the largest in the country). Stewart has researched her subject very thoroughly. Her taxonomy is up to date (fide Angiosperm Phylogeny Group) and she even points out recent taxonomic reassignments. The text is refreshingly devoid of large numbers of botanical errors and misstatements that botanists so readily catch in popular writings and cookbooks; we did notice that, on a page discussing European centaury, she

has a drawing of *Centaurea* L., not *Centaurium* Hill, and there are a few sentences that begin with an abbreviated first letter of the genus name, rather than the spelled-out name; botanists don't do that.

The Drunken Botanist is a fun and easy read, easily affordable, and would make an excellent gift for botanists and bartenders alike. And how much fun it would be to offer a course in which this book could be used as the text. It is easy to become addicted to all things Amy Stewart, especially when a good drink is involved. If you like The Drunken Botanist, be sure to visit her website at www.amystewart.com to see, for example, high-resolution photos of many of the cocktails listed in the book. How about a Herbarium Cocktail? Indeed, there is a recipe for it!

—Sheryl Creer and Robert Patterson[1], Department of Biology, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA 94132. [1]patters@sfsu.edu.