

# the Art of Eating

The authority on food, wine, and taste.

Copyright 2017 The Art of Eating

## Besk The Bitter Taste of Some of Chicago's Best Bartenders

[artofeating.com/besk/](http://artofeating.com/besk/)

3/25/2017



MARCH 25, 2017

By Jude Stewart

Photographs by Jude Stewart

What does besk — and its locally infamous variant, Jeppson's Malört — taste like? Intensely bitter. Resinous. Stubbornly long-lasting on the palate. A Swedish wormwood spirit popular in Chicago but largely unknown outside of it, Malört's power to cure dyspepsia feels needlessly potent: what, are you preparing your stomach to digest rocks? Malört's contrarian fans have long filled the internet with lovingly harsh superlatives to describe the drink, such as "burnt Band-Aids," "wet cigarettes," and "gasoline." The comedian John Hodgman once offered "pencil shavings and heartbreak." And "The Champagne of pain" is an actual advertising slogan for Jeppson's Malört, the US distillers who popularized the drink in Chicago's Swedish community. Google "Malört face" (with or without the umlaut) and you'll find

a huge visual catalog of the grimacing aftereffects of tasting Malört for the first time. Hate-loving the spirit is absolutely a thing.

It's worth taking a minute to clarify terms. Jeppson's Malört is a straight wormwood liqueur, with no fancifying herbs added to soften its bitter shock. In Swedish the word "Malört" simply means the wormwood plant, *Artemisia absinthium*, the same plant from which absinthe is produced. (More on the differences between absinthe and besk below.) "Bäska" or "besk" refers to the broader category of Swedish wormwood spirits, the word "besk" meaning "bitter" in modern Swedish. Besk is a bitter spirit in which wormwood is macerated with other herbs to increase the drink's nuanced flavor and reduce its harsh one-note quality. Among Chicago bartenders, the terms "malört" and "besk" are used more or less interchangeably. A 2014 trademark scuffle resulted in Jeppson's holding the exclusive right to the "Malört" name. Competitor distilleries making a similar drink adjusted. Letherbee renamed its malört "Bësk," adding an umlaut for more Scandinavian — if grammatically incorrect — effect. In choosing its name, Bäska Snaps opted for a more old-fashioned spelling of the modern Swedish word "besk." To avoid head-spinning — because drinking besk already involves plenty of that — I'll refer to the drink here as "besk" unless specifically referring to Jeppson's Malört.



Jeppson's was first produced in Chicago during Prohibition as a medicinal preparation and afterward survived locally at Swedish bars as a shot of courage, warmth, bitter nostalgia, or all three. You can still saunter over to Simon's Tavern in the Andersonville neighborhood, where I live, and order a Malört shot or boilermaker — which my husband and I did again recently, amid a crowd avidly quaffing glögg. While the taste of actual Malört is just as pungently medicinal as I'd recalled, the drink isn't without its pleasures: lingering sourly on the palate, it produces an angelic sensation of warmth, conviviality, and a giddy survivalist feeling.

Malört and other variants of besk are unapologetically bold, like Fernet-Branca, a similarly bitter spirit of the amaro family. According to my bartending sources, Fernet was popularized by San Francisco bartenders, who began sneaking after-shift shots from neglected bottles, enjoyed the novel taste, and then started mixing *amari* into customers' drinks, just as Chicago bartenders are doing now with besk. Both spirits illustrate a paradox of great cocktails: often the best drinks rely on a seriously off-putting ingredient, judiciously applied. After all, booze is a learned taste; the whole premise of drinking alcohol rests on perverting your natural sense of what tastes good. The oddity of an ingredient like Malört gives a drink more dimension, makes it unplaceable in an

intriguing way. It's like the French expression *jolie laide*, "pretty-ugly": someone who's not exactly beautiful but who exerts an overpowering charm, stronger than ordinary beauty.

Malört is a big, ugly flavor, difficult to tame in cocktails, although numerous Chicago bartenders have taken up the challenge. Letherbee Distillers, located ten minutes from Andersonville in Ravenswood, started by concocting its own, less noxious variant of besk. Robert F. Haynes was managing the bar at The Violet Hour and "had this kind of drunken idea: to make a gourmet version of what's reputed in Chicago as the worst liquor on earth," said John McCourt, distiller

at Letherbee. We were standing with his colleague Nathan Ozug in their factory, barrels stacked to the rafters, a distillation boiler periodically chugging into noisy life. Haynes eventually teamed up with Brenton Engel to found Letherbee four years ago. Added Ozug: “Our recipe includes wormwood, gentian root” — those are the bittering agents — “fresh grapefruit zest, elderflower, juniper berries, star anise.” Compared with Mälort, it’s “a lot more complex in terms of ingredients, which helps with incorporating it into cocktails. You can play off different flavors.”

Letherbee starts by macerating the botanicals in a neutral grain spirit. “Literally, the herbs are soaked in booze. Think of it like making an alcoholic tea,” McCourt explained. After three weeks, the herbs are filtered out, the besk is partly diluted with water, supplemented with sugar, and then mixed and filtered. Besk resembles absinthe in having wormwood as its chief ingredient; it differs, however, in slight but crucial ways. Absinthe’s botanicals include aniseed and fennel seed, and it’s distilled again after steeping, reducing its bitterness.

Ozug likens besk to *génépy*, a bitter liqueur made in the French and Italian Alps where the wormwood plant flourishes. He groups it with Italian *amari*, noting: “Bitters help with digestion and strip your tongue of fats and oils, like tannins do in wine. It gives your digestive system a wake-up call.” When asked how they’d incorporate besk into cocktails, Ozug and McCourt, who are also bartenders, lobbed out one suggestion after another. “It goes well with tequila drinks. You could do a Paloma with it,” said Ozug. “Or you could substitute besk wherever you’d use green chartreuse, to make a bitter version of that drink.” “



A little bit goes a long way,” McCourt added. “If you overdo it, it’s a sledgehammer.” He adds it to a Bee’s Knees, to balance out its honey flavor, and enjoys it in a grapefruit Radler (like a shandy) or a boilermaker (beer and a shot).

How do other Chicago bartenders make this rough-riding ingredient play nicely in a cocktail? Dan Rook, head bartender at South Water Kitchen in the Loop, advises “steering towards imbalance,” meaning using a very small amount of Jeppson’s Mälört to balance out other sweetening agents. His Mälört cocktail, the Swedish Seed, is a menu fixture that Rook describes as “a root beer float with a bitter back end. You’ve got frothiness from the egg, and a long-lasting bitter finish from Mälört. All those other things happen in the party up front, so you’re not just shocked from Mälört ruining it” at the end. This recipe won’t suit every home cook: it calls for root beer liqueur, another not-so-common ingredient. It also requires whipping up spiced brown-sugar syrup; I made mine with cinnamon, cloves, and nutmeg. But the taste was well worth it: properly Christmasy but not cloyingly sweet.

“Nobody tastes Mälört for the first time and says, ‘That’s delicious, it’s right up my alley!’” said Danny Shapiro, bar director for the Scofflaw Group and co-owner of its flagship bar Scofflaw in Logan Square.

Besk-flavored cocktails appear frequently on his menus. He offered two recipes, the first his own unnamed invention. “It’s a triple-bitter Manhattan, I guess,” he explained, offering “a bizarre harmony between aggressive flavors.” Making it at home, I found this drink a standout: dangerously smooth and well-balanced, pleasantly bitter, and with a beautiful color like cherry wood.

1 ounce (small jigger shot) Carpano Antica vermouth  
1 ounce Cynar  
½ ounce Malört or other besk  
½ ounce Fernet-Branca

*Stir ingredients in a chilled tumbler.*

Shapiro's second suggestion, from fellow bartender Meghan Konecny, is a drink called Private Vices. "It's refreshing and citrusy," he noted, and reminiscent of many bright, shaken cocktails that pair besk with citrus to tone down sweetness. I also liked this one: the drink starts out tasting like a gimlet, and then gradually you notice the besk imparting an enjoyably weird undertone.

1½ ounces Scofflaw Old Tom or similar (sweeter than London) gin  
¾ ounce lemon juice  
½ ounce Letherbee besk  
½ ounce Combier pamplemousse (grapefruit) liqueur  
½ ounce honey syrup (equal parts honey and water, simmered, then cooled)

*Shake ingredients with ice in a rocks glass. Garnish with grapefruit zest.*

Eden Laurin, current managing partner of The Violet Hour, offers other ideas. "Malört can be a heavy hitter," she wrote in an email. "It will dry out a drink and often steer the flavor profile too tannic." Like the other bartenders I spoke with, she recommends pairing it with grapefruit or citrus, agave, tonic, or cinnamon, and softening it with egg white. "That being said, I've tasted some incredible combinations that bend that logic: featuring cherry liquor, port, orange juice, even topped with sparkling [wine]." She added, "It can be used as a wash in a cocktail for aromatics and nuance rather than as a main ingredient... Or pair it with ingredients that have a floral element, which would bring out the softness of the wormwood."

Will besk ever go mainstream? Probably not. But adventurous drinkers (and eaters) could do worse than sampling whatever drink bartenders are enjoying post-shift. In Chicago, Malört is "the bartender's handshake," Ozug of Letherbee said. Downing a generous shot of besk predictably loosened our tongues. Ozug wondered if besk got rediscovered out of some bartender's slightly buzzed curiosity. "What is this bottle back here, collecting dust?" Ozug imagined. "It'd be next to the blackberry brandy and DeKuyper triple sec. Then you drink it, and you're like: 'Ugh. Is that awful, or do I like it? I don't fucking know. Let me try that again.'"

Jaded palates crave boldness. Habituation is magic. My third shot of besk ever — taken midday standing by the Letherbee still — tasted wholly different from my first: big, bracing, warm, flowery but powerful, exhilarating, singular. It compelled you to talk about it. Do I like besk? Is it awful? I still don't know. But I do want to try it again and again.●

[From issue 97](#)