

The New York Times

July 19, 2013

The Bartender With a Lab Coat

By JENNIFER CONLIN

Seated at 69 Colebrooke Row, his watering hole in north London otherwise known as “the bar with no name,” Tony Conigliaro watched closely as a woman at a nearby table picked up the Prairie Oyster drink that had just been served to her.

Eyeing the white seashell filled with what appeared to be an egg yolk floating on its pearly surface, she hesitated briefly before slurping it down in one gulp. Within seconds, her eyes widened in surprise as she savored a parade of flavors: horseradish vodka, a dash of pepper sauce, a sprinkling of shallots and a burst of gelatinous cherry tomato. “That is the most amazing thing ever,” she said to her friends, giggling and licking her lips.

“I just love to see people’s reactions when they experience it for the first time,” Mr. Conigliaro said, a large smile stretching across his face. “This is all about making beautiful things from pure ingredients, but mostly about creating pleasure.”

Mr. Conigliaro, 42, and one of the world’s most notable mixologists, is now sharing those “pleasures” with the United States market in “[The Cocktail Lab; Unraveling the Mysteries of Flavor and Aroma in Drink, With Recipes](#).” The book, published by Ten Speed Press, is designed to appeal both to industry professionals able to whip up a concept drink like Cosmo Popcorn (a liquid nitrogen recipe with a safety warning included), as well as home-bar enthusiasts wanting to serve their guests a simple Buck’s Fizz (one part fresh orange juice and four parts Champagne).

But for Mr. Conigliaro’s fellow cocktail scientists, well versed in working with everything from xanthan gum (a thickening agent) and hydrosols (water-based essences) to tinctures (concentrated small volumes of flavor), his book is a long-awaited treatise, the unlocking of original recipes created by one of the masterminds of their wet-bar world.

“Tony is a legend and one of the most interesting, innovative bartenders out there,” said Ann Tuennerman, the founder and executive director of [Tales of the Cocktail](#), the industry’s premier trade event, attended by thousands and held each summer in New Orleans. “Everyone is excited when he puts down what he does on paper. He lives in his own world, and has these ideas and combinations he puts together that stem from his unique intelligence and artistry. It is really impossible to compare him to anyone else.”

Mr. Conigliaro does, in fact, occupy his own world around the corner from 69 Colebrooke: the Drink Factory, a liquid laboratory he started in 2005 that is now in a building that once housed

Pink Floyd's recording studio. It is here that he, along with a team of four technicians and a revolving door of mixology interns, works his alchemy, mixing herbs and spices, perfumes and flavors, fruits and vegetables and even tree bark and rocks.

Concocting one of his signature cocktails is a process that requires not just a sophisticated palate but also patience. It is not abnormal for a recipe to take him up to two years to release, as the ingredients must be replicable to his standards before it goes to any of his three London locations (he also has a bar at the Zetter Townhouse and is responsible for all cocktails served at a new restaurant, the Grain Store).

"I like to tell a story through flavors and creating bespoke ingredients," he said, describing how he reinvented the Prairie Oyster, a concoction Sally Bowles, Liza Minnelli's character in the film "Cabaret," consumed every morning.

Another drink, the Rose, came from a perfume project in which Mr. Conigliaro wanted to "recreate the experience of sipping a glass of Champagne while walking in an English summer garden." The drink's secret is a sugar cube containing rose essence; the cube reacts with the Champagne bubbles, propelling the aroma through the cocktail.

Endless shelves at the Drink Factory house vintage spirits and glassware, and hundreds of bizarre ingredients, like a beaver aquavit from northern Sweden, oak moss, nettles, Japanese shiso mint leaves and even bee pollen from Transylvania. Lining the walls are also numerous books on art, film and architecture, as well as the history of food and drink, making the place feel as much like a library as a laboratory.

But it is the machinery and other equipment that are the most mind-boggling — and explained well in his book for those interested in barware beyond a shot glass or a martini shaker. There is a centrifuge; a rotavapor, for distilling; an induction heater; a cold smoker; a dehydrator; and a thermomix, the ultimate blender, among other pieces of equipment, all of which Mr. Conigliaro uses to draw moisture, flavors, aromas, fibers and even smoky notes out of ingredients.

"I am an artist and a romantic, but not a scientist," said Mr. Conigliaro, who went to art school and fell into the drinks trade because he was trying to finance his studio work by bartending on the side. His "love affair with liquids," he writes in the book, began when he realized that "art and cocktails ... are both about appealing to sensory experience."

Not long after that, he began working at some of London's top bars, from Isola to the Shochu Lounge, as well as in the city's top restaurants, and began paying attention to the work of chefs, scientists and perfumers to expand the methods and techniques of his drink-making.

"If you think back to the Tom Cruise movie 'Cocktail,' that is what the industry was like when he started," said Alexandre Gabriel, the president and owner of Cognac Ferrand, whose Cognac house

in France also makes artisanal spirits, one of which won best new product at last year's Tales of the Cocktail event.

"Showmanship was what it was about back in the '80s and '90s, not craftsmanship, like it is now," Mr. Gabriel said. "Tony was one of the first bartenders to start to change that attitude. He took a scientific approach early on and decided to understand spirits, flavor, color and texture the same way chefs were striving in new ways to understand their ingredients."

With the Drink Factory, Mr. Conigliaro moved his work to a higher level, leveraging himself in the drinks world with the likes of the celebrated molecular chefs Ferran Adrià of El Bulli and Heston Blumenthal of the Fat Duck (both good friends). Mr. Blumenthal pays tribute in the first sentence of the "The Cocktail Lab" introduction, stating simply, "Tony Conigliaro is a revolutionary."

[Harold McGee](#), himself a groundbreaking cook, the author of the 1984 book "On Food and Cooking: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen," and one of the first writers to look at the chemistry of cooking, spent a week in 2012 at the Drink Factory, at Mr. Conigliaro's invitation.

During that time, he helped Mr. Conigliaro work through some scientific issues with his new rotary evaporator. "At the time I remember he was trying to distill an aroma from clay," said Mr. McGee, a former Dining columnist for The New York Times. "People often say something has a mineral taste, like granite in a riesling wine, and he was aspiring to create that ingredient. He has this curiosity and desire to take information and turn it into something totally original and unpredictable."

Highly produced with colorful photos of enticing-sounding drinks with names like Blush, Luna, Oh Gosh and the Wink, the book also offers classic cocktails with a twist, from a white truffle martini to a marshmallow milkshake. But some recipes require more time than talent (a Vintage Manhattan mixture has to age for a minimum of six months in a cool, dark place) while others seem strictly for professionals — the famous Prairie Oyster being one example, as making it requires a centrifuge, a half-sphere silicone mold, some vege-gel, orange food dye and soy lecithin.

Anyone truly wanting to learn how to use a peristaltic pump, micropipette, Brix meter or Bain-Marie might want to fly to London for one of Mr. Conigliaro's two-hour mixology classes, which are open to the public for about \$60.

Or maybe just pop into 69 Colebrooke to down one of those Prairie Oysters. And raise a glass to Sally.

