

The Future World of Ray Snead

October 27, Veronika Sprinkel @ veronikasprinkel.com

I am a creature who thrives on the thrill of the unexpected. Irony, dichotomy, oxymoron, edge, vivacity, I love all that stuff. Perhaps this truth describes as well, the reason why I so sincerely appreciate the man that is Raymond Snead. This Boulder based, quasi-retired software developer, recently launched a line of bitters bearing the moniker Cocktailpunk. I first met Ray through the restaurant where I waitress. He is the type of diner who can easily be compared to your avid theatergoer, each meal an event containing solid storyline, character and arc.

A few weeks back, Ray and his wife Paula invited me over for what they charmingly refer to as “Egg Night” at the Snead-Sewall residence. Ray was making soufflé, and just before sitting down to eat, I took a crawl-through his stunningly eclectic wine cellar. Ray’s collection is impressive in the same way that he is impressive; blending sophistication and whimsy, eloquence and quirk, intellect, ingenuity and street cred. To know Ray, is to understand his palette, and to recognize his insatiable lust for life.

Born in Atlanta some 58 years ago, Ray’s family moved to Arlington when he was four. He has one sister, both he and she attended local high school. Ray’s father worked for the U.S. treasury department in Washington D.C, while Ray’s mother was a teacher and a dedicated homemaker. She loved to cook, and instilled this passion in Ray as well. He recalls one Christmas in particular, when at the age of twelve, his mother gave him the Time Life World Cookbook. Together, Ray and his mother spent a fair part of the following year cooking their way through these books, recipe by recipe, book by book, from start to finish. The final challenge in the very last volume, a traditional Peking duck, requiring two full days of preparation.

As a teenager, Ray was a bit of a radical. He volunteered for Eugene McCarthy, and early earth day movements. Around the age of 16, Ray discovered rock climbing. He devoted himself to the sport, which became a serious part of his life for the following thirty-five years. About five years ago, Ray’s climbing career ended rather abruptly, while during an ascent, he pulled a little too hard in not quite the right way, and tore his bicep from his elbow.

At the University of Virginia, Ray studied politics and literature, science and economics. He eventually selected a major in environmental science; his earliest professional accomplishments included crafting the first software to determine EPA gas mileage estimates in cars. While still in school, Ray met a woman named Paula Sewall, who was studying at the university as well, one year his junior. He actually met Paula while dating her roommate, though in time that relationship fizzled. Paula and Ray began seeing each other, and quickly fell in love. In 1978, Ray and Paula married, after which point they promptly moved to Boulder.

Ray studied at the University of Colorado, earning a masters degree in computer science. During this time, he remained an active climber, balancing sport, marriage and coursework. Just before completing graduate school, Ray became the third-ever employee at the Boulder Wine Merchant. Located then, on Broadway near Walnut, Ray worked closely with founders Jim Drevescraft and Bob Adams. They became his mentors, and Ray became seriously interested in wine.

Two years later, Ray once again refocused, putting his formal education to work. He accepted a position as member of technical staff at Bell Laboratories. Ray stayed there for seven years, before moving on to work through various software jobs. In the late 80’s, he took a five-year

sabbatical, during which time he climbed many of the country's greatest spots. Then, in the 1990's after the ubiquitous bubble burst, Ray started a consulting firm called Bluetrope. He'd originally intended for Bluetrope to provide programming services; though due to market demands, Ray began building websites as well.

Despite Ray's focus in software, the food and wine bug stuck around. A self-proclaimed serial enthusiast, Ray thought to abandon his American dream programming career, and enroll at the Culinary Institute of America. Offers were made by local restaurateurs to become a partner in new ventures. Still, Ray resisted the idea of entering into the restaurant business.

Two years ago, Ray became serious about bitters. He was experimenting with formulas, refining them, and ten months ago, began the process of acquiring TTB certification. Lining that up took a bit of time, and the first series of Cocktailpunk bitters were legally approved three months ago. Ray sprang into action at his commercial kitchen in North Boulder. He does all of the work himself, from recipe building to ingredient sourcing, to labeling and shrink wrapping, done laboriously by hand. This process requires fifteen days to complete, producing approximately 55 bottles of bitters, varying slightly based on flavor yields.

Today, Cocktailpunk, proudly sells in Boulder to Basta, Frasca Food and Wine, Pizzeria Locale, Oak at Fourteenth, Volta, Boulder Wine Merchant, Cured Wines, Hazels Beverage World, and North Boulder Liquor. In Denver, Cocktailpunk bitters can be found behind the bars at Acorn and Comida, both located within the newly opened Source building. Most recently, Cocktail Punk bitters were brought on at craft-cocktail speakeasy Social, located near the entrance to Old Town Square in Ft. Collins.

"Bitters are interesting. At one level you can simplify it and think of it as spice is to food as bitters are to cocktails. In the nineteenth century, there were hundreds of flavors of bitters, and it was widely made and produced. People drank bitters, not only in cocktails, but for health reasons. There was very much the idea of concentrated herbs as being beneficial for one thing or another" Ray continues, "There is a kind of bitters manufacturer that's very interested in reviving those old bitters recipes. They're fundamentally trying to reconstruct bitters. Now, that's not what Cocktailpunk is interested in. Cocktailpunk is interested in a stone cold modern view of bitters. They are accents that are flavored, they have no sugar, not even caramel for a sweetening element. There's no artificial anything in any of them. Bitters should be bitter and that's what these are. The idea behind the first release of Cocktail Punk bitters, the cherry, the orange and the aromatic; is that they are the basic set which any bar can use profitably, to make great drinks. The cherry is a little bit new wave, that's not a common flavor, but it also is just horribly good in Manhattans and boozy drinks. It goes beautifully with rye and bourbon, and it's just a natural thing. The inspiration for all of Cocktailpunk, started with those bitters. The cherries are Washington state, organic tart cherries. Next year I hope to do a Colorado cherry batch. I'm really hoping to do it next year, be on top of tart cherry producers in Colorado."

Three new Cocktail Punk flavors are on the way. Smoked orange; Pastiche, offering a basic flavor of Pastis; and Alpino, inspired by mountain amari, like Braulio. These new flavors are admittedly unique, and that was certainly one of Ray's motivations in building them. "I think of these things as building blocks. Just like you think of the universe of liquors, and spirits and all those things as building blocks for cocktails. There are the useful ones that are large and have nice shapes and fit together with everything, and then there are the little weird ones that don't quite fit. I want to build the first kind."

Future visions include a tonic syrup which approximates the flavor of bottled tonic water, and a ginger based variation as well. Ray also dreams of one day developing a line of vermouths, though at this time no actual plans have been set into motion.

One might imagine that a culinary thrill-seeker such as Ray would have some pretty incredible memories in his arsenal of foodie tales. Remembering Arzak, “The first time I went to that restaurant was mind-blowing. It was all the tricky molecular stuff, and epicly perfect. It was a new kind of food. A new kind of technique, nothing you’d ever seen before. They pretty much did all of the forerunning of the molecular stuff that Adrià took over later. It was cool to be there in those heady days; but the other part of Arzak, and the Spanish in general, they were doing a hyper-refined farm to table thing always. They never, they wouldn’t consider an ingredient from another region. The thought of putting a tomato that came from another region in their food was absolutely out of the question.”

On another adventure, Ray and Paula drove from Bilbao to Lisbon. Along the way, the couple stopped by a cider tavern, where they snacked on chipirones and local cider. Ray experienced revelation. Those tiny deep-fried squids were, in his opinion, “the ultimate bar food”.

Ray spent time in Piemonte, during the annual the truffle festival, and tasted a dish which he describes as a “professed improbable feat”. While dining in an unnamed a one star Michelin room in Monticello, Ray was served an egg dish with truffle. The chef had elongated the egg in a cylinder, setting the white while the yoke remained runny. Truffle was shaved over top, and when sliced down the middle, the egg unfurled like a flower. The yoke inside was perfect, as it then settled to the bottom of the plate and fanned out.

Over Thanksgiving, Ray and Paula will be traveling to Shanghai, to visit their daughter and their son-in-law. Ray comments, “It’s great to go to China and eat. They don’t have a lot of money, so often we go out to kind of street food sorts of places. Real Szechuan restaurants. It’s all pretty amazing.” Next year, Paula and Ray plan to visit Paula’s brother, a career diplomat who has recently moved to Dar es Salaam. This will be their first visit to Africa.

It would have been quite possible for Ray to choose a corporate career path, one which would have undoubtedly rewarded him with far greater security. Ray is well aware of this, and stands by his decision. “I wouldn’t mind being rich, but I’m not going to do anything untoward to do it. I worked for years for Bell Labs, for seven years. If I had worked for 27 years, I would have a full-boat pension at three-quarters of my highest salary now. I didn’t do it. Do I regret that? I sure the hell don’t, because I would have been there for all those years. I just don’t look at it that way. It seems obvious to me that it would be silly to stay somewhere for twenty-seven years just to have a big pension. I wouldn’t have done a lot of things.”

Ray is unsure where his creativity comes from. “It just comes. You have these crazy ideas and you do them. It’s not really a process that’s particularly easy to understand. At this point I have two jobs, both of them are full-time, and you just make it work. That generally involves working some every day. I work seven days, I don’t work eight hours on many of those days, but on some of them I work more. This is sort of my reaction to retirement I guess, to start another company, and to double the amount of work I do. It’s an emotional risk, I don’t like failing. I’m relentless, implacable, I just keep working on it, slowly. And eventually, well, it’s happening now, so we’ll see where it goes.”

Cocktailpunk came partly as reaction to those whom Ray dubs the revivalists. “To me, interesting things about anything you consume, food and wine, cocktails and whatever, is what they’re going to do in the future. What Arzak and what Adrià did for food, and what UC Davis did for wine. So there’s the Idea.” Continuing, “You know bartenders, They’re punks, they’re not fancy. They don’t drink tea with their finger up in the air. They don’t drink Tea. And the logo reflects the interplay between the fancy aspect of cocktails – sitting at the bar at the Ritz, with the fundamentally Punk element under it. The use of black letter font for “Cocktail”, scanned from old manuscripts, evokes images of 1970’s skate punk and Black Flag; and then the fancy

script font reserved for “punk”. The call to arms on the Cocktailpunk website states the following: “Bitters are as old as cocktails, but Cocktail Punk looks to the future, not the past. Our goal is simple: to create compelling accents for the modern cocktail. These bitters are a carefully chosen set of basic elements that are focused and nuanced, simple yet devious. They are perfect in classic cocktails, but were really designed for the cocktails that haven’t been invented yet.”

That’s Cocktail Punk. That’s Raymond Snead. The end.