

Inside 2025's 'drink of the year' named after a hit song — from the NYC bar owner who invented it: 'Very unique and different'

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Here's something worthy of a toast.

The bourbon-based cocktail crowned Food 52's "drink of the year" is finally getting its moment in the spotlight two decades after its creator mixed it the first time in a Big Apple bar.

The pink-hued "Paper Plane," first crafted at what is now Attaboy on the Lower East Side, has reached new heights due to its ability to balance "the Holy Trinity of bitter, sweet and sour," creator Sam Ross, 42, told The Post.

"If you can balance all that, it has a weird, amazing sort of pleasantry to it."



The Paper Plane, a bourbon-based concoction crowned Food 52's "drink of the year" for 2025, hails from none other than New York City — and is finally getting its moment in the spotlight after nearly two decades, according to the drink's creator Sam Ross.

Tamara Beckwith

"It's the sum of its parts, It doesn't taste like any one ingredient individually," the Australian-born New York bartender said. "Once you get it into the glass, you actually realize you're tasting something very unique and different."



Aside from bourbon, the cocktail also features equal parts aperol, amaro and lemon juice, which Ross describes as “the Holy Trinity of bitter, sweet and sour.”

Tamara Beckwith

Ross first crafted the concoction in 2007 at his tucked-away bar – formerly called Milk & Honey – while he was tasked with creating a signature drink for a bar out in Chicago called The Violet Hour.

The drink was inspired by a bottle of Amaro Nonino gifted to Ross by a friend, he said, and aptly named his creation for M.I.A.’s indie-rap hit “Paper Planes.” Aside from equal parts bourbon and the Italian liqueur, the spirit-forward cocktail also features Aperol and lemon juice.

“I just fell in love with it immediately,” Ross said. “I created this drink because I wanted people to experience Amaro Nonino.”

And despite it first appearing on a Chicago bar’s menu, the beverage “definitely holds a New York immigration card,” the bartender stated.

The resulting cocktail helped Ross – also known for inventing the Penicillin – land on the map of modern cocktail tastemakers, but it also helped the 127-year-old Amaro brand stick the landing in cocktail scenes around the world, according to sixth-generation distiller Francesca Bardelli Nonino.



“The United States sets the trend for [not only] movies and TV shows, but also for cocktails,” Bardelli Nonino, 35, said.

Tamara Beckwith

“The United States sets the trend for [not only] movies and TV shows, but also for cocktails,” Bardelli Nonino, 35, said — adding she’s toasted with Amaro lovers in Japan, Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom thanks to the success of the Paper Plane. “In Italy, most of the time you first start to appreciate a product by itself and then in a cocktail, but in the United States you first appreciate it in a cocktail.”

To Bardelli Nonino, the celebration is personal, as the grappa-based liqueur traces its roots back to her great-grandfather’s recipe from Friuli, Italy [*corrected: grape distillate-based liqueur, Ed.*].

“The paper plane put together Italian culture and American culture – and I think people realized then, ‘this is delicious, I want to know more about the other ingredients,’” she said, raising a glass at an inaugural Paper Plane Week event at Attaboy.



Paper Plane Week at Attaboy in the Lower East Side, Manhattan.

Tamara Beckwith

Ross added that the drink is a crowd pleaser as it’s easy to make given its equal parts recipe only requires four ingredients and is “self-policing” – in that it’s immediately apparent if it was made incorrectly because of its signature pink hue and ample froth.

“All the ‘modern classics’ have to be somewhat simple to make – we’re not talking about strange infusions or crazy techniques that take a long time,” Ross said. “If you want to be able to be made, especially at home bars it has to be things that are very approachable ... and I think it’s just straight up delicious.”

Ross credits the dawn of the Facebook age for the Paper Plane’s initial popularity among bartenders in the late aughts, but he believes the drink’s versatility has been able to keep its humble profile steadily gliding over the years.

The Attaboy co-owner notes he’s pushing a newer take on the cocktail — dubbed a Mosquito with mezcal, Campari, fresh ginger and lemon — that he hopes to be met with similar fanfare.

“It kind of startles me, each year it seems to get more and more popular,” Ross said of his Paper Plane. “It doesn’t have a singular market. “When you think of a whiskey cocktail, you’re automatically going to be thinking whiskey sours, Manhattans, old fashioned,” he added. “These are powerful, potent drinks — and this one isn’t that.”