

The Paper Plane

How Sam Ross' equal-parts cocktail soared to classic status at bars around the country

By Prairie Rose



◆ You only need three spirits and lemon juice to shake up this bright, simple cocktail (p. 92).

WHEN *FOOD & WINE* FIRST PUBLISHED the recipe for the Paper Plane in its 2009 cocktail guide, it was only a year after Sam Ross first dreamed up this now-iconic drink. “I was working at New York City’s Milk & Honey on Eldridge Street at the time,” says Ross, the Australian-born bartender behind the Penicillin, an earlier and equally iconic cocktail creation. “Toby Maloney had just opened The Violet Hour in Chicago, and he asked me if I would come up with a brand-new drink for the summer menu.” Nearly two decades later, the Paper Plane is now considered a modern classic.

The early and mid-2000s were the nascent days of the classic-cocktail revival, with bartenders across the country digging up obscure pre-Prohibition and Prohibition-era recipes. Ross, at the time, was



IN THIS BOOK

Food & Wine's 2009 cocktail guide shared recipes for the year's most impactful cocktails, with tips from expert bartenders like Jim Meehan and Julie Reiner.

particularly inspired by the Last Word, a gin cocktail dating back to 1916 that bartender Murray Stenson rediscovered and started serving at Seattle’s Zig Zag Cafe. “Serious bartenders were blown away by that formula—equal parts sour with liqueurs as the modifier and sweetener—and naturally tried to make some variations on it.”

Around the same time, a Milk & Honey regular who owned a bottle shop in the city brought Ross a bottle of Amaro Nonino Quintessentia, an Italian herbal liqueur. “He had just gotten it at the liquor store, and he knew that I loved bitter amaro,” says Ross. “I immediately fell in love.”

So when developing an original recipe for The Violet Hour’s summer cocktail menu, Ross was

CONTINUED ON P. 92

certain of three things: He wanted it to be an equal-parts sour and to be served up, like the Last Word, and he wanted it to feature Amaro Nonino. In addition to lemon juice and the amaro, Ross experimented with various base spirits, but he kept coming back to a robust bourbon to add a sturdy backbone. For the bittering ingredient, he first landed on Campari but swapped it for Aperol a few days later. “Aperol still had the sweetness, but it pulled back the bitterness a little bit, and that achieved the balance I was looking for.”

Though the Paper Plane is an equal-parts cocktail, it’s considered to be in the sour family of drinks, which includes the daiquiri and whiskey sour. “For me, the most pleasing flavor combination is when you get sweet, sour, and bitter all in perfect alignment,” says Ross. “A lot of the drinks that I’ve created have that connection.” His most famous cocktail creation, the Penicillin, considered one

of the most significant modern classics, is a Scotch-based sour sweetened with a honey-ginger syrup.

The final touch was naming the drink. In the summer of 2008, Ross was inspired by the song “Paper Planes” by British singer and rapper M.I.A. “I was obsessively listening to that song on repeat.”

For a whimsical touch, some bartenders have served it with a mini paper plane clipped to the rim. “I think that’s cute,” says Ross, but he recommends skipping any garnish that would sit in the actual drink. “Any twists of citrus will kill the froth.”

Even now, the Paper Plane remains one of the most beloved creations to come out of the craft-cocktail renaissance. It’s also experienced a recent resurgence in popularity, with ready-to-drink canned cocktail brands like Straightaway Cocktails and Tip Top Proper Cocktails offering premixed versions.

Ross credits the cocktail’s simple formula as the secret to its staying power. “A Paper Plane can be whipped up anywhere and everywhere,” he says. “Anyone can make it just by picking up three bottles of liquor at the store and then squeezing some fresh lemon. I’m fond of the drink.” And clearly, given the Paper Plane’s continued rise in popularity, so are many of the world’s cocktail enthusiasts, new and old.

“For me, the most pleasing flavor combination is when you get sweet, sour, and bitter all in perfect alignment.”



Sam Ross mixes a drink at Attaboy, his cocktail bar in New York City.

Paper Plane

PHOTO P. 94

TOTAL 5 MIN; SERVES 1

The bright and bittersweet Paper Plane is made with equal parts bourbon, Aperol, Amaro Nonino Quintessentia, and lemon juice. Its creator, Sam Ross, was inspired by the revival of another equal-parts classic, the Last Word. Sweet, sour, and bitter are in perfect alignment here—the tart lemon juice and gently bitter Aperol are softened by bourbon’s caramel notes, while Amaro Nonino adds some sweet warmth. The more viscous amaro also adds body to this cocktail and helps it become frothy as it is shaken, yielding a silky-smooth drink.

- 1½ Tbsp. (¾ oz.) Amaro Nonino Quintessentia**
- 1½ Tbsp. (¾ oz.) Aperol**
- 1½ Tbsp. (¾ oz.) bourbon**
- 1½ Tbsp. fresh lemon juice**
- Tiny paper plane, for garnish (optional)**

- 1.** Fill a cocktail shaker with ice. Add amaro, Aperol, bourbon, and lemon juice; cover and shake until chilled and frost forms on shaker, about 15 seconds.
 - 2.** Strain into a chilled coupe glass. Garnish with a paper plane, if desired.
- SAM ROSS, NEW YORK CITY