

Book him

A talk with a cocktail writer



A.J. Rathbun is a spirits writer with a lot of spirit. He lives in Seattle, where he works during the day for Amazon.com, and his published writing includes a significant amount of poetry alongside the meditations on drinks (and recipes therefor) that figure into his books, like *Good Spirits* and his latest, *Luscious Liqueurs*, which includes recipes for infusions to try at home. *The A.V. Club* met up with Rathbun in Soho at the distinguished cocktail bar Tailor, over a drink with bourbon and “smoked Coke” and another involving buttermilk squash.

The A.V. Club: What’s the best concert you’ve ever been to?

A.J. Rathbun: The most influential concert for me was The Replacements in Lawrence, Kan. I was living in a town called Lindsayburg—Little Sweden, U.S.A.—in the early ’80s, and me and four friends cut school and drove three hours to see The Replacements. It was the first super-intimate, small show where I could sit on the stage between bands and be as close as we are here to the band. That was a huge thing to me. The shows I’d gone to before than had been, like, Loverboy at the Kansas Coliseum. I was probably 15.

AVC: They were famous drunkards. Do you think *The Replacements* had anything to do with your love of drink?

AJR: They may have. I definitely did my fair share of high-school drinking, and they were part of the soundtrack of my formative drinking years.

AVC: Is there a weird world of historical drink writing?

AJR: For sure. I started to get introduced to a wider world of cocktails and cocktail literature, which led me to a bunch of really old cocktail books and then spurred this interest in having an awesome cocktail library. I started hunting down old cocktail books.

AVC: What is your absolute essential favorite?

AJR: It’s not as canonized as some of the other old books, but one of my favorites is *Crosby Gaige’s Cocktail Guide And Ladies’ Companion* [from 1946]. I really like the literary/silly feeling of it. I guess you could call it facetious, but it has really good drink recipes and also a whole helping of other little essays—some snacks, some random little asides. That was an influence on me because I realized, you know, everything we would talk about at the bar or while having a party is sort of fair game for me.

AVC: What’s your favorite spirit?

AJR: Gin is such a big part of my life that I’m going to say gin. I’ve been drinking a lot of Hendrick’s. There are so many new gins becoming available that are really, really good, like one from Philadelphia called Bluecoat. It’s really clear and doesn’t have that aftertaste. It’s really strong at first with the juniper and then it ends quickly. It has that little gin warmth at the end, but it doesn’t linger in a way that is pre-possessing.

AVC: How long does it take to settle on a recipe for an infusion?

AJR: When I was making liqueurs all the time, I turned into, like, a liqueur savant, where I would make one and I would instantly—well, not instantly, because you have to let them sit for a couple of months—make another batch. I had so many bottles of liqueur. I feel like I could have made one for almost any flavor. I could have made a polar bear liqueur.

AVC: How many did you have going at any given time?

AJR: I must have had 40 bottles. All my friends were really happy. They got lots of free booze. And all my officemates.

AVC: What’s your standard six-pack of beer for when you’re not drinking homemade liqueur?

AJR: Miller High Life is what I think about as an after-work beer. My friends and I used to drink it all the time, and I still drink it. I’m from the Midwest, and I’m not ashamed of my love of light American beer. I love mixing it into drinks, specifically a drink that is really dear to me in the summer: Miller High Life mixed in a tall glass with lemonade and a shot of vodka. The vodka sort of eases the edges between the beer and the lemonade. And then a little bit of fresh lemon on top. —*Ardy Barthaglia*

A.J. Rathbun’s Luscious Liqueurs: 50 Recipes For Sublime And Spirited Infusions To Sip And Savor is available now from Harvard Common Press.

