



BLACK ROSE



NEGRONI CLASSICO

WITH COCKTAIL MENUS NOW COMMONPLACE AT MOST DRINKING ESTABLISHMENTS, MIXOLOGISTS ARE CONSTANTLY CHALLENGED TO COME UP WITH FRESH AND IMAGINATIVE IDEAS. BRINGING BACK THE COCKTAIL AS AN INDULGENT DELICACY, WITH CREATIVE CONCOCTIONS INSTILLED IN EXPERIMENTAL CRAFTSMANSHIP AND UNORTHODOX INGREDIENTS, WE MEET **TOM CONIGLIARO**, THE MAN INTENT ON KEEPING COCKTAILS INTERESTING

# FACTORY

written by FRED QUICK



CAPER LEAF MARTINI



HONEY AND POLLEN BELLINI

Sat in a converted warehouse in Hackney, East London's hipster suburb, I wait for Tony as I flick through Drink Factory's first magazine: *'Gothic'*. On the cover, a close-up of a woman's mouth with protruding black tongue that seems to be covered in oil – a fairly shocking start to my look behind the curtain. I'm grimacing at an image of some leeches floating in water when Tony appears and introduces himself. *"Those were just props, no one was eating or drinking them,"* he informs me with a smile.

If you appreciate a decent cocktail, chances are you've been to, or will at least know of, 69 Colebrooke Row – a bar with molecular mixologist and all-round drinks guru Tony Conigliaro at the helm. Set on a quiet backstreet in Islington, north London, and identifiable only by an outdoor lantern, this world-famous bar is revered by Londoners for its Film Noir aesthetic and exceptional drinks menu. Far from dealing with the generic concoctions that are slammed on bars across the capital (and knocked back by the thirsty masses), the libations on offer here favour esoteric ingredients devised in a flavour laboratory known as the 'Drink Factory'.

I was half expecting a mad scientist, complete with lab coat and Einstein haircut, but Tony is quite the opposite dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, his arms covered in tattoos. Where we now sit is the latest incarnation of Drink Factory, which was originally an online platform for bartenders to share ideas and knowledge. Nowadays the Drink Factory team is creating the drink menus for Zetter Townhouses in Clerkenwell and Fitzrovia, Bruno Loubet's Grain Store in Kings Cross, 69 Colebrooke Row and Tony's other bar in Soho, Bar Termini. As members and interest grew, the need for a physical collaborative space was evident, so after starting in a small room above 69 Colebrooke Row and then moving to Pink Floyd's old recording studio, Tony has found himself here in Hackney, clearly delighted with his cutting-edge laboratory. So, after 16 years working behind some of London's leading bars, what motivated him to set up Drink Factory? *"Curiosity,"* he says simply. *"I was always looking for new ways to create flavours and combinations that you couldn't just go out and buy in a bottle, because they simply didn't exist. The lab gave me the scope to explore flavours and ingredients outside the technical arena we already had."*

On a whirlwind tour of the lab, I'm shown the sous-vides (water-bath method used of cooking vacuum packed ingredients) used to speed the ageing process of spirits, a centrifuge for breaking



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down fruit and stills that create drinks such as the Terroir vodka which is distilled with flint, clay and lichen. With all the high-tech equipment here it's easy to assume that Tony has a keen interest in science but it's far from the truth. *"I studied art but was never really interested in science,"* he reflects. *"We have a lab but that's just a series of technical instruments that help us get ingredients to convey the message. The drinks are experiences, us telling stories, and it has always been like that. For me, it's much more akin to that romantic idea of art than science. We're magpies who just know how to use tools and how to think creatively. When we get stuck we're lucky to have a collective of fantastic minds we can access."*

Using techniques from different disciplines such as perfumery and food science, Tony and his team have crafted a litany of innovative cocktails that include a reinterpretation of the old hangover cure, Prairie Oyster. Consumed from a ceramic oyster shell, this unique creation features a tomato yolk that has been recoloured from red to yellow and 'spherified' in the centrifuge. Perhaps even more impressive is his champagne cocktail, The Rose. For this tippie, Tony spent two years studying perfumery to create the complex scent of a rose, for it then to be placed on a sugar cube and dropped into a Champagne cocktail. Although a drink such as the Prairie Oyster is now among the most popular cocktails, *"originally people just didn't get it,"* Tony explains. *"It was the same with the bottle-aged cocktails that we were doing with the sous-vides in 2004. I couldn't make anyone see the value, but now it's a global trend. To be innovative in this industry you need conviction or otherwise you'll get crushed,"* he adds with a grin.

With a penchant for bucking trends and a leftfield sensibility, Tony is not one to be deterred by naysayers – instead he seems to thrive on it. *"I know I'm on the right path when people tell me I'm doing things the wrong way. You'll be isolated because people will think your nuts and it's a waste of time, but if you persevere and have belief, at a certain point people will get it."*

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