

ON THE TRAIL OF A BOOZY YYJ MYSTERY

Can you dig it? We're talkin' about the Shaft.

By Linda Barnard

When you order a cocktail, you're probably not checking its birth certificate. But bloodlines matter when it comes to the Shaft.

Victoria and Calgary have been duking it out for more than 25 years over which city launched the legendary quick-sipping coffee drink with a boozy kick.

With cocktail history, there's a good chance chroniclers have hazy recollections. Dates, names and places can get murky.

Getting to the heart of the Shaft story took time, barstool interviews and following twisting tips and leads in Victoria, along with a sip-and-sleuth trip to Calgary.

There were practical lessons, including a Shaft speed-sipping contest with Shaft Ambassador and co-owner Cliff Harvey at The Living Room Restaurant on Calgary's 17th Avenue entertainment and eatery strip. The Living Room is Canada's top seller of key Shaft ingredient Kahlúa, selling up to 18,000 Shafts a year from a special corner of the bar. Drinkers drop in, knock the custom glass against the counter, sip the Shaft fast enough to nearly collapse the straw and toddle off, rejuvenated.

One name kept popping up as the creator of the Shaft: Calgary

bartender Mark Smith. But was there proof? Where was he now? And how did his drink get to Victoria?

BORN IN CALGARY ...

A chance meeting with Shayne Perrin, co-owner of barbershop-bar Cannibale in Calgary, led to former bartender J.J. Ryan. He confirmed that Smith invented and named the Shaft in the spring of 1996 at Cilantro Restaurant. He knows because he was there.

So was fellow bartender Christian Kittleson. That's your Victoria connection. Kittleson sent a new version of the Shaft into Victoria's cocktail world a couple of years later, where it has dominated drink lists ever since.

Through them, I learned that Smith — who was born in America — now lives on the Big Island of Hawaii, where he owns and runs a small artisanal ice cream shop.

But back in the day, Smith was Calgary's favourite cocktail slinger, a personable guy with quick wit and a love of pop culture.

"It's been a muddled sort of history," Smith admits when I track him down by phone.

Smith, who embodies a Hawaiian hang-loose vibe, called the ongoing Calgary-Victoria Shaft origin debate "hilarious."



Barkeeps J.J. Ryan (left) and Mark Smith in 1990s Calgary, where cocktail history was created.