



Todd Thrasher stands behind his many from-scratch, homemade bitters and cocktail enhancers that help make PX cocktails distinctive and desired.

# PX • The Speakeasy • Reborn

## PX

728 King Street, Alexandria, VA 22314

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**OWNERS** Cathal and Meshelle Armstrong, Todd Thrasher

**GENERAL MANAGER** Todd Thrasher

**NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES** 4

**BAR FOCUS** Custom-made cocktails

**SIGNATURE DRINK AND PRICE** Grog, \$12

**AVERAGE DRINK PRICE** \$12

**POURING COST** 16%

**AVERAGE BAR BILL** \$48

**GROSS ANNUAL REVENUE** \$500,000



## Prohibition may have ended 75 years ago, but you can still find a speakeasy if you know where to look.

Fortunately, bathtub gin and bootlegged whiskey have given way to finer products, and the art of cocktail romancing is on the upswing. Such pleasures are to be found at PX in Old Town Alexandria, Virginia, co-owned by Todd Thrasher, bartender, sommelier, and James Beard Foundation nominee.

Thrasher's dream to open a speakeasy-like bar came true when his business partners, Cathal and Meshelle Armstrong, found a corner location for their fish-and-chips restaurant, Eamonn's. Directly upstairs was a dilapidated bar. "It was a 20-seat thing," Thrasher recalls, one that they sandblasted and decorated with 1920s-style furnishings, turning it into "a speakeasy—the bar I always wanted to do."

### Intimate Setting

PX stands for *person extraordinaire*, the French term for VIP. To get into the joint, you look for an unmarked street-level door lit by a blue light. You knock, and a cocktail waitress peeks through the sliding peephole before letting you come upstairs. But no password is required—it's all in good fun.

When you reach the second floor, you enter an intimate room with only 34 seats, of which 20 can be reserved. Most popular are the unreserved seats at the bar because everyone likes to watch the bartenders make drinks. A small bar calls for a small staff; PX employs only two bartenders and two cocktail waitresses, one of each per shift.

PX opened in August 2006, and without any advertising or even a sign outside, it has built its business steadily through word of mouth. As word of PX spread, customers began showing up but couldn't get in—the place is that small—so Thrasher instituted a reservation system. "People thought we were being snooty, and it was completely the opposite," he insists. "There isn't a lot of space."

PX is open Wednesday through Saturday. The bar sees tremendous foot traffic, especially on the weekends. In addition to regular business hours, PX can host special events known as "Soirées," which can include office parties, engagements, or a class on

how to make cocktails. Thrasher will choose a small food menu for the evening.

### Cocktail Inspiration and Complexity

The drinks menu at PX changes nearly daily, all based on freshly available ingredients, so Thrasher is constantly inventing new cocktails. "My inspiration is what is coming out of the kitchen," he says.

Thrasher prefers to invent recipes based on fresh ingredients. "I have no history with [classic cocktails]—they're just based on . . . what tastes good and what was at the market today." There is no refrigeration at the bar, so fresh ingredients are put on ice.

The PX bar maven spends 85 percent of his time at Restaurant Eve, where he is the sommelier, and does all his cocktail prep work in that venue's kitchen, including making his own bitters—14 in all. "You have to have different items for each cocktail—like you have to have different kinds of salt to make different kinds of fish," is Thrasher's explanation for composing so many from-scratch preparations. Citing his 14-ingredient lemon bitters as an example, he claims, "It adds a layer of complexity to the cocktails."

### Bartender Training

Thrasher's cocktails are labor intensive—each takes an average of seven minutes to make—so much of his time at PX is spent training his bartenders in their preparations. "We serve 18 or 19 original cocktails, and they have to know all of them like the back of their hand," explains Thrasher. "Once in a while I'll go sit at the bar and make them go through the whole list for me just to make sure they've got it. It's not an easy place to work."

Despite rising costs, PX hasn't raised prices. Bartenders diligently measure every drink to keep overpouring under control. While his cocktails cost about \$12, Thrasher noted that some nearby venues are now charging up to \$16. "I don't really want to raise prices," he confesses.

By Garrett Peck

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One of our farmers brought celery into the kitchen one night about three years ago, and the smell was so strong I could smell it in the dining room. I came running into the kitchen, wondering where that smell of celery was coming from. I started making celery bitters that night. I had no recipe, just an idea.”

Only the Champagne Cocktail remains permanently on the list. Thrasher's bartenders are trained to make about 100 classic cocktails to satisfy customers who don't order from the menu. Despite this flexibility, he notes, "almost everyone tries an original."



The 110 Ghost is made with Thrasher's celery bitters

This attention to detail pays off for both bartenders and customers. "After working for me, they can go anywhere and be the best bartender on staff, I think, with the cocktails they have to make," Thrasher concludes. "I want my customers to say, 'That was the best cocktail experience I've ever had.'"

### Cross-Marketing Success

Thrasher and the Armstrongs run four venues, all within six blocks: Restaurant Eve, Majestic Café, Eamonn's, and PX. "We always said we should be close enough to each of our properties to check on them," says Meshelle Armstrong. "We love Old Town."

Alexandria is a beautiful old colonial city that was George Washington's hometown. Many customers live within walking distance, making it easier to attract business and cross-market the restaurants. "We promote each other through each of our venues," Armstrong remarks. "If a reservation time doesn't work for a customer, managers can offer another establishment or recommend drinks at one, then dinner at another."

PX started out serving fish and chips from Eamonn's; however, the combination of cocktails and cod didn't fit quite right, so Thrasher installed a panini grill. Three different kinds of paninis are prepped at Restaurant Eve, then grilled at PX when a customer orders one. Homemade potato chips are always served, but Thrasher notes, "The basis to go there is not to eat; it's to have cocktails."

"We run the gamut of the dining scene," Thrasher concludes. "We have fine dining [at Eve], we have casual dining at the Majestic, and then we have fast food at Eamonn's. We're covered any day of the week!" But Thrasher's first love is his speakeasy; he muses, "It's just my little dream bar."

### Celery Bitters

By Todd Thrasher

Citrus vodka	1 L
Celery with leaves, washed and roughly chopped	1 bunch
Celery root, peeled and chopped	1 small
Lemon verbena leaves (fresh, preferably)	10
Cardamom pods, crushed	5
Juniper berries, crushed	5
Celery seed	½ tsp
Salt	pinch
Whole black peppercorns	5
Serrano chiles, sliced	2
Gentian root	1 tsp
Quinine powder	1 tsp
Lemongrass, chopped	1 stalk
Lemon skin, thinly sliced, no pith	from 1 lemon
Lime skin, thinly sliced, no pith	from 1 lime
Water	500 ml
Granulated white sugar	1 cup

1. **Combine first 15 ingredients** in large mason jar, and store in warm, dark place for 18 days, shaking and agitating every day.
2. **After 18 days** separate liquid from solids with a fine-mesh sieve, and set liquid aside in separate jar. Place solids in warm saucepan, and cook until celery starts to brown and burn a little.
3. **Add 500 ml water to pan** (to deglaze pan and reduce proof of bitters), and pull off the heat. Transfer mixture to heavy-bottomed pot. Place on stove but not on burner.
4. **In another heavy-bottomed pot**, add 1 cup granulated white sugar. Turn heat to high, and allow sugar to start to burn. Once sugar starts to bubble, begin to stir constantly. (At this point, place pot of solids and water back on the burner at medium heat.)
5. **Continue stirring sugar**, which will caramelize and start to smoke. Remove from heat, and maintain stirring while sugar bubbles, until it falls to the bottom of the pot.
6. **Carefully pour sugar into pot** with solids and water. Mixture will bubble up and possibly crystallize, but continue stirring until sugar is completely dissolved.
7. **Cool sugar-bitters mixture**, and remove contents of pot to jar for overnight storage.
8. **Combine solids mixture** with vodka-based liquid, and allow to repose for 2 more days, shaking each day.
9. **Strain through fine-mesh sieve**, or for greater clarity strain through coffee filter.

Garrett Peck is a freelance beverage writer and author of *The Prohibition Hangover*, forthcoming from Rutgers University Press in 2009.