

Books And Bartending

Chantal Tseng's dual passions merge at the Reading Room in Washington, D.C.

Chantal Tseng's résumé is nothing short of impressive. With roughly 18 years in the service industry under her belt, she's a Bar Ready graduate of the Beverage Alcohol Resource (BAR) program, a Certified Sommelier via the Court of Master Sommeliers, and a Certified Sherry Educator from the Consejo Regulador in Jerez, Spain.

A self-proclaimed "student of all things liquid," Tseng began bartending in Washington, D.C. in 2000, right at the cusp of the modern-day cocktail movement. It was during her nine years at the historic Tabard Inn hotel bar that she developed an affinity for craft bartending, as well as for wine and Sherry. After she moved on to help open the Sherry-focused Mockingbird Hill as bar manager and senior bartender, she earned Eater D.C.'s 2013 Bartender of the Year award.

Tseng's thirst for knowledge is evident in her latest endeavor, which she started in the fall of 2015 at Petworth Citizen, a restaurant and bar located in the Petworth neighborhood in Washington, D.C. The venue had a library-themed private space called The Reading Room, and Tseng worked with owner Paul Rupert to transform it into a bar within a bar. "I wanted to make use of the Reading Room area, which at the time only had shelves of donated books," she says.



For her "Literary Cocktails" program at the Reading Room in Washington D.C., Chantal Tseng takes inspiration from books to create a new cocktail menu each week.

"After meeting with Paul, we built a bar in the space—keeping the bookshelves to serve as a lending library—and I began my program."

By no means a small undertaking, Tseng's "Literary Cocktails" program—a sort of book club for mixology enthusiasts—has been going strong for three years. At the start of each week, Tseng chooses a book to read and by the weekend concocts an entire cocktail menu centered around that book. On a recent menu inspired by Roald Dahl's *The Witches*, she featured the Granny Helga (\$14), comprising La Cigarrera Manzanilla Sherry, Linie aquavit, Green

Chartreuse liqueur, and lemongrass tea. On another menu, inspired by Edward Gorey's *The Iron Tonic: Or, A Winter Afternoon in Lonely Valley*, she featured a cocktail by the same name (\$14), blending Bodega Dios Baco Oloroso Sherry, Fernet-Branca amaro, and Fever-Tree tonic water.

"Most of my drinks are either riffs on classic or modern recipes, or are themselves classic recipes, from Sherry Cobblers to gin Martinis to Zombies and beyond," Tseng says, noting that she enjoys using aromatized and fortified wines and amari, as well as fresh juices and shrubs. "I also light a lot of cocktails on fire," she adds. "The theme comes up often in literature." **mw**

Sally Kral

PHOTOS BY (BELOW) CARLIE STEINER

Chantal Tseng's Recipes



GRANNY HELGA

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 ounce La Cigarrera Manzanilla Sherry;
- 1 ounce Linie aquavit;
- ½ ounce Green Chartreuse liqueur;
- 1 ounce lemongrass tea;
- Lemon peel;
- Dill sprig.

RECIPE:

In an ice-filled mixing glass, combine Sherry, aquavit, liqueur, and tea. Stir and strain into a chilled punch glass or teacup. Express lemon peel over the drink, then discard peel. Garnish with dill sprig.



THE IRON TONIC: OR, A WINTER AFTERNOON IN LONELY VALLEY

INGREDIENTS:

- 2 ounces Bodega Dios Baco Oloroso Sherry;
- 1 ounce Fernet-Branca amaro;
- 2 ounces Fever-Tree tonic water;
- Dried lemon coin.

RECIPE:

In a large highball glass, build the Sherry, Fernet-Branca, and tonic. Add crushed ice and garnish with a dried lemon coin.