

SUITCASE

TRAVEL + FASHION



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ABSINTHE: A REVIVAL OF LONG-LOST SPIRITS IN NEW YORK

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Take a stroll along Williamsburg's bustling Bedford Avenue and you're likely to find your way to the unassuming, quietly elegant **Maison Premiere**. With its faded-green exterior and pre-prohibition decor, it's a place which is truly transportive in time. The Parisian-esque cocktail den and oyster bar is clipped in **New Orleans** style – a nod to a more glamorous era of decadence and mischief when absinthe flowed as the bohemian's drink of choice. Inside, a horseshoe-shaped bar and classic absinthe fountain pay homage to the bar's Deep South roots, while outside a twinkling, lush garden provides an oasis that whisks you a million miles from the concrete, metropolitan reality.

A short ramble from Maison Premiere in nearby Greenpoint is sister restaurant, **Sauvage**. A new addition to the family, this younger sibling is somewhat more wild, with an adventurous menu and more rustic feel. On the night we visited, we approached to find a gorgeous, model figure leaning willow-like against the exterior wall, dragging louchely on her cigarette. We briefly wondered if she'd been hired to stand there to give the place an air of fashion.... But on stepping through the door, we realised the crowd inside were equally handsome.

Here we met Will Elliott, bar director of Maison Premiere and Sauvage, who over the last six years has guided Maison to be crowned number 20 in The World's 50 Best Bars awards, as well as picking up the prestigious James Beard Award for Outstanding Bar Program. With a penchant for old and rare liquors, and a dress-sense as sharp as his palate, Will is undoubtedly one of **New York's** most captivating hosts. We sipped a cocktail and settled in to talk absinthe, **grappa** and Hermès ties...



How did you begin your journey into spirits and cocktails?

It's a funny road! I could trace it back to being a kid, my parents didn't drink but they kept Pernod for cooking. The first time I remember smelling it – an intense smell which reminded me of jelly beans and liquorice – I guess it opened up my palate to accepting really brave flavours. From then I learnt to enjoy challenging flavours.

I started bartending at a young age at a seasonal restaurant off Maine. It wasn't fancy but I spent a good few years there. I was able to do a lot of tasting and take my palate on an adventure – I became fascinated by grappa. I'd spend the other half of my years in Tucson, Arizona where I played music, so I bartended as a way of supporting myself.

You've had a huge year of winning awards and opening a second restaurant. How have you kept up with everything?

Well, it's exhausting! To state the obvious, if you're in it for the winning of awards you're never going to have the energy to keep up with the bigger picture. Maintaining some sort of ongoing rhythm and having a direction, that's important. It's daunting, sometimes it's really humbling; it can be all kind of things. But having a clear, focused direction is key.



Sauvage must feel like a new baby in the family. How do you make sure both bars have their own personality?

Maison started as an oyster and cocktail bar; it has a delicate and ethereal sort of dining. With Sauvage, it's a little luster with a bigger style of plating and more rustic dishes. The drinks are also more delicate; a lot of the things we make at Sauvage use high-elevation herbal liquors from the **French and Swiss Alps** – flavourful and indicative of place and time.

You use a lot of rare liquors in that menu, tell us about those?

We make some classics like a really great martini or collins, but the ingredients and spirits make them different. A lot of the things that make these interpretations unique are really kind of nerdy choices in what bottles we're using. I guess a lot of it comes down to sourcing and finding unusual things. Because I think that you can make ordinary cocktails taste rather extraordinary if you just charge the tiniest little ingredient.

We can't talk to you without mentioning absinthe. You're credited with its revival in New York...

Yeah, I should mention my good friend Maxwell who was the opening bar manager back at the beginning of Maison. We went through several years of trying to taste as much as we could, as crazy as that sounds...



Those must have been a fun few years!

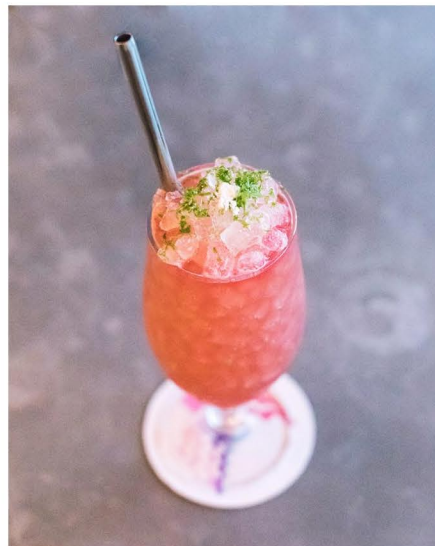
It is a really beautiful spirit that speaks to terroir just like wine, it's interlocked with wine in a geographic sense. You add five parts water to one part absinthe so you heavily dilute it down to the same alcohol content as a glass of wine. You're sipping it in the same way, it's aromatic, you smell it, you're probably swirling it in the glass. It contradicts all the novelty that surrounds it and reminds you of a more historic context, it reminds you that actually it was started very medicinally. I'm a sucker for history and for a story and absinthe has one of the most amazing lineages over the course of two hundred, three hundred years. I love it.

You even have an absinthe fountain at Maison.

America has a long history of absinthe production that predates prohibition – there are even local styles of absinthe in American cities. New Orleans for us was a huge inspiration. The Old Absinthe House down there is a highly historic bar; every walk of humanity from pirates to presidents have been through that bar and it continues to stay open to this day which is pretty cool. The fountain we have is an exact replica of theirs – it's a spiritual centrepiece.

You're known for your snappy dress sense – rumour has it you have quite a tie collection?! Where do they come from?

I get a kick out of the crossover of fashion and food industries and I'm drawn to the aesthetics. The neckties started unintentionally and now I have two hundred of them. **Brooklyn** has so many awesome thrift stores, such as Beacon's Closet and Buffalo Exchange. I'm a sucker for Hermès ties so can find all of the good stuff pretty easily and it's usually on the way to work or something.



Will Elliott's Insider Guide to New York

How do you spend a day off?

A bike ride and daytime drinking: **The Nomad** is great during the day. There's an amazing beer bar called the **Sputnik Duvall** where the bar staff love to make you try all the things. There's also Diner, which reminds me of eating at **St John Bread & Wine** in London due to the sincerity of the food.

What's the best way to explore the city?

Self-guided, unplanned walks around town. Upper **Manhattan** architecture in super interesting and a weekend walk there is relaxing.

Where do you go for a relaxed dinner?

There's a little Vietnamese place on the border of Ridgewood and **Bushwick** called **Bunkey**. It started by a couple of very qualified **wine** buffs, but they're also like skater kids, running the space out of an old garage. It's not quite as sketchy as it sounds! There's a lot of amazing techniques and they serve some of those most flavourful, delicious and crave-able food in the city.