



BEHIND  
BARS



HIGH-CLASS COCKTAILS  
INSPIRED BY LOWLIFE GANGSTERS





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INSPIRED BY LOWLIFE GANGSTERS

SHAWN MCMANUS · VINCENT POLLARD · PAUL SLOMAN

PRESTEL

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# Birth of a Gangster

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**PAUL SLOMAN**

Running a mob empire is thirsty work. With all that bootlegging, racketeering, shylocking and extortion, it's no wonder so many gangsters have been known to enjoy a stiff drink. Here's a look back through recent gangster history and their earnest relationship with the bottle.

## PROHIBITION AND THE BIRTH OF THE GANGSTER

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Gangsters and liquor have been dancing a slow tango since Prohibition hit the U.S. in 1920. A sweeping law that sought to finish off booze for good, it was toasted across the American underworld as an opportunity to ramp up bootleg production, from the rank watered-down “bathtub gin” distilled in the bedrooms of Chicago’s Little Italy to large-scale illegal stills operating out of abandoned warehouses. Illegal importation saw gangsters and corrupt officials doing “business” on a national scale. Whisky flowed into Chicago and Detroit over the Great Lakes from Canada; rum came into South Florida and the Gulf Coast via Cuba. Liquor was soon lubricating the affairs of mobsters across the country.

The poor quality of bootleg alcohol, often an objectionable form of high-proof moonshine, gave rise to the need for a creative dilution of the illicit spirits. Strong- or sweet-flavoured mixers, such as juice, ginger ale, lemon and grenadine, were added to disguise the taste in addition to soda water and classic cocktail ingredients such as sugar and bitters. And conveniently, when it came to premises suited to mixing drinks, gangsters cornered the market. The cocktail in the twentieth century was off to a suitably sleazy start.

Speakeasies, illicit bars hidden in basements or in the back rooms of everyday stores, operated outside the law by serving up neat liquor and cocktails to desperate punters. Many of these hangouts were owned by mobsters – controlled by them,

run by them and frequented by them. And if gangsters didn't run the show, they extorted them, shook them down or did whatever else was necessary to rule the sales and distribution network of this flourishing black market.

The most visible of the Prohibition gangsters was Chicago boss Al Capone. Capone presented himself as a man of the people, doing them a service by supplying their liquor needs. "Don't mistake my kindness for weakness", he famously said, obscuring the fact that kindness was rarely at the top of his agenda. Capone knew how to win over his audience, donating to charities and even sponsoring a Chicago soup kitchen during the height of the Depression. And when his more nefarious activities started to damage his reputation, he leaned more heavily on the sports celebrities and political powers of Chicago for influence.

This idea of the community gangster as misunderstood philanthropist was not without precedent. In New York around the same time, Harlem "Queen" Stephanie St. Clair was raking in the cash from numbers rackets while also creating jobs, providing legal advice and generating investment opportunities for her local community at a time when the banks were closed to them. One of the few gang leaders to operate independently of the wider mafia, even "Queenie" knew that a good public image paid dividends when it came to power and influence. Taking out full-page newspaper ads featuring shots of herself in all her gangster finery, she knew that carrying off such audacious stunts required a certain style.

But while St. Clair was dressing up for a local audience, Capone's sartorial choices had wider reach. Embracing fine tailoring, gourmet cuisine and expensive drink, he actively harnessed style as a soft weapon to disarm his enemies. He favoured double-breasted fine silk suits imported from Italy at \$500 a hit, wore shirts with wide lapels and a variety of fedoras, boaters and panamas, and accessorised with expensive custom-made jewellery, from diamond belt buckles and pinky rings to platinum pocket watches. He even carried his own personal cocktail shaker, humbly engraved, "To a regular guy from the boys". Capone, who liked to have his preferred spaghetti and walnut sauce prepared by his personal chef Provino Mosca, knew that when he reached for a neat glass of Templeton Rye he was not only enjoying a drink but making a statement about who he was. All of this wouldn't save him from syphilis and charges of tax evasion, but it would define his legacy and set the template for the legend of the mafia in the twentieth century.

## OUTLAWS OF THE DEPRESSION

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Out on the road, as the roaring twenties came to a close and the Depression began to take hold, a new kind of criminal emerged. Hardened bank robbers were running riot, pillaging the nation's banks and skipping from state to state to avoid the law. These were opportunistic gangsters cashing in on a new source of income by



exploiting federal law enforcement agencies still in their infancy. From trigger-happy drifters such as Baby Face Nelson, Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow to the suave self-styled “Robin Hood” John Dillinger, the only thing these outlaws had in common was a need to take the money and run.

Much like Capone and St. Clair, the gunslingers of the Depression knew that a bit of flair paid dividends when it came to the court of public opinion. John Dillinger worked the crowd most effectively, portraying himself as a modern-day hero robbing from the rich. Putting his hand warmly on the shoulder of Prosecuting Attorney Robert Estill after his arrest in East Chicago, he delivered a cheeky smile to the cameras. With such winning charisma it was easy to forget that what he robbed just went on to line his pockets – and those of his plastic surgeon.

As the stories of this lawless era matured in the media, Hollywood woke up to the narrative that these self-mythologising criminals were leaving in their wake. These were the earliest gangsters to get the Hollywood treatment, born out of a period that found romance in their rags-to-riches assaults on the system, regardless of the grim truth of their methods. If the silver screen had opted for fact over fiction, as Bryan Burrough illustrates in *Public Enemies*, his masterful 600-page dissection of the Depression crimewave, Alvin Karpis would be a household name and Bonnie and Clyde would be thought of not as the stylish Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty of Arthur Penn’s 1967 film but as the two-bit lowlifes that they really were, holding up gas stations and gunning down innocents for a lousy few cents. Polished up and given gravitas, the Hollywood gangster cultivated a fantasy that would continue to the present day – that of the debonair criminal, consumed with evading the law but still able to dress well and rarely far from a good drink.

## THE MODERN MAFIA

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By the end of Prohibition in the early 1930s, under J. Edgar Hoover’s leadership of the FBI, the bank robbers of the Great Depression were gunned down one-by-one. Their time was up. Meanwhile, the gangsters who dealt in vice had planted seeds in local government and were steadily infiltrating the system, but since they faced losing their stranglehold on liquor operations, they had to adapt and diversify.

These changing times put pressure on the urban mob families, and relationships began to fracture. Soon New York became the epicentre of a feud. Traditionalist Giuseppe Masseria aka “Joe the Boss”, of what is now known as the Genovese crime family, was running things at the time on behalf of a network of Italian-American gangsters from Calabria, Campania and Sicily, but his methods were starting to show their age. In 1930, powerful Sicilian Don Vito Ferro sent Cosa Nostra boss Salvatore Maranzano to New York to make a play for his position, which in turn led to a showdown between Maranzano and Masseria, and a grisly end for both men.

Business in New York had descended into a bloody mess. Enter Charles “Lucky” Luciano, former bootlegger and aide to Masseria. In 1931, having played his own part in the elimination both of his former boss and Maranzano, Luciano organised a sitdown between the warring factions, uniting the mafia families of New York – known as the Five Families – with Al Capone’s operations in Chicago and those of the Buffalo Family. In one meeting, Luciano had authored the cooperation of a New York-centred mafia network that would rule much of the U.S. underworld for most of the twentieth century.

The most infamous names of Lucky’s crew – Frank Costello, Vito Genovese, “Bugsy” Siegel and Meyer Lansky – dominated day-to-day gangster operations over the coming decades. Their networks would stretch beyond America to Cuba, where they funnelled payoffs to dictator Fulgencio Batista in return for uninterrupted operations, and later to the Bahamas when Fidel Castro cut off the supply. Lansky even extended activities across the Atlantic, hiring U.K. bruisers the Krays to provide protection in the heart of East London, while Swiss bank accounts hid the money.

It was the code and practices of the Italian-American Five Families that truly established the lore, etiquette and myth of the modern mafia. They also took mob influence into the heart of U.S. law and politics, turning the mafia into a near-impenetrable force and establishing organised crime as it is known today.

## GANGSTER LORE

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A series of thrilling books codified the mafia way of life, preparing it for the big screen. While Nicholas Pileggi’s intense account *Wiseguy: Life in a Mafia Family* and Joseph D. Pistone’s autobiography *Donnie Brasco: My Undercover Life in the Mafia* provided stunning factual glimpses into mob life, it was Mario Puzo’s stone-cold classic *The Godfather*, a work of fiction based around the Five Families and the original source for Francis Ford Coppola’s cinematic masterpiece, that really defined the Italian-American mafia story. Puzo’s tightly written epic is a classic blood feud played out amongst a cast of powerful dons, business-like consiglieri, capi, ruthless enforcers, button men and Hollywood women. The novel centres around the fate of a don of the Corleone family, a man of “extraordinary force and character”, who could not accept the rules of society because those rules would condemn him to a life he deemed unsuitable. It captures the paradox of the benevolent mafia boss, who helps “those in misfortune, whose misfortune he [has] partly created”. It is a merciless ride. In Puzo’s vision, even the cocktail waitress is on the “cold hustle”. Coppola’s subsequent film dressed it all up and brought it to life. Under his direction, Don Corleone’s family go about their brutal business of intimidation dressed in high-button suits with peaked lapels and often furnished with a generous pour of Scotch, much like Capone decades before.

## DEATH OF A GANGSTER

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Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* hinted at the coming of a new order: gangsters with less ties and less scruples, willing to deal in the kinds of vice that even the old Italians frowned upon, particularly the booming drugs trade. While the steady rise of narcotics began to eat away at the old order, it was the 1970 Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO) that more abruptly disrupted the so-called golden age of mafia operations. RICO allowed prosecutors to hammer the Five Families with indictments. Mafia lieutenants eventually turned state witness or found themselves getting rolled by new gangs who lacked respect for the code that had persisted for so long.

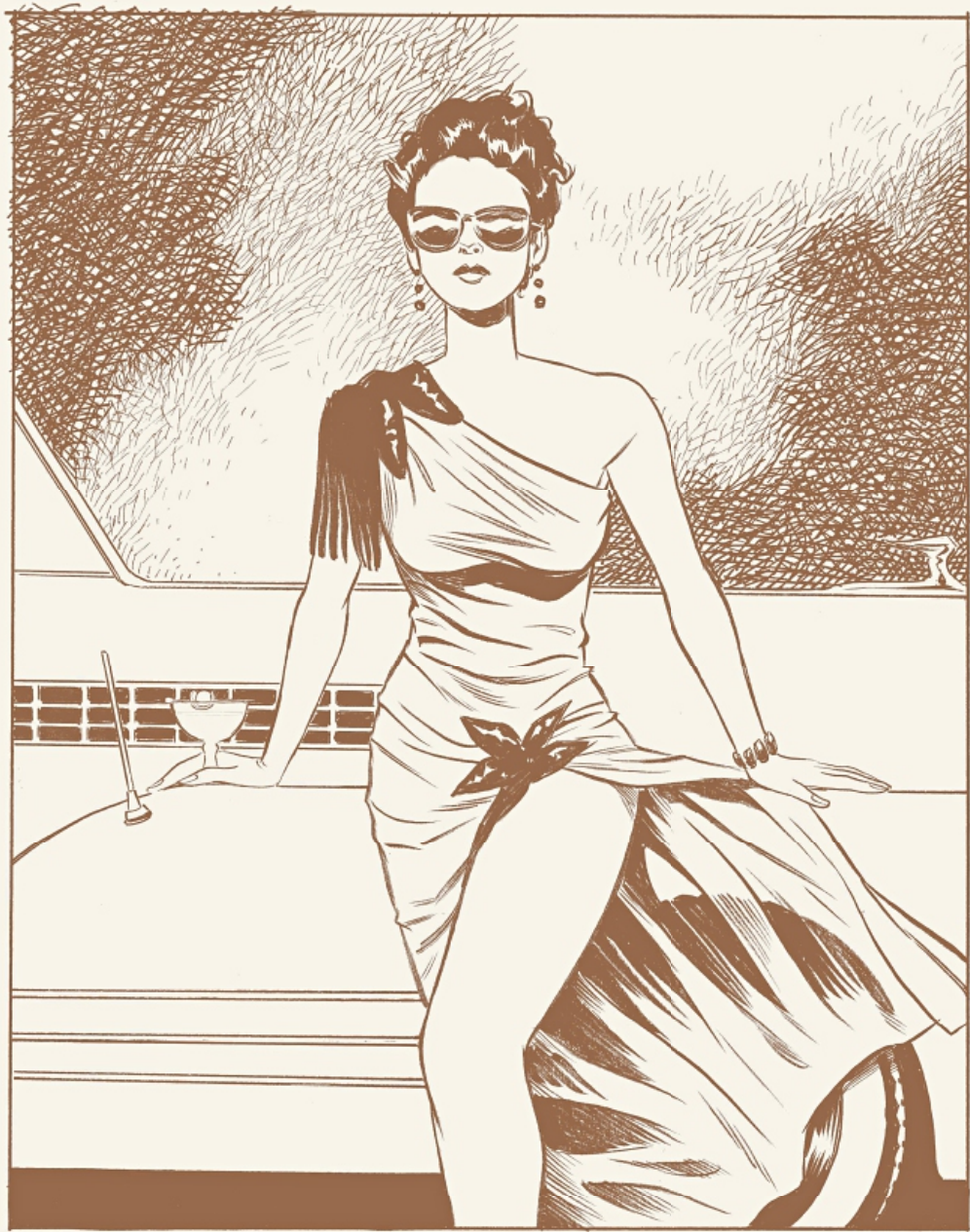
But if RICO signalled the beginning of the end for the U.S. mafia's capacity for grandstanding and showmanship, Hollywood was only getting started. From the 1970s until the present day, the world's most recognised film-makers have lined up to embellish the gangster narrative in wildly different ways, from Martin Scorsese, Michael Mann and Sergio Leone to John Woo and Quentin Tarantino. In the hands of these directors, the fantasy of the modern-day gangster – suave, cosmopolitan and ready to batter you with a baseball bat – has become enshrined in legend.

In turn, cocktail culture itself has felt the Hollywood influence. Movie-inspired drinks such as rumoured Marlon Brando-favourite *The Godfather* have become a part of the contemporary cocktail canon, while the bars in which they are mixed up are styled after 1920s speakeasies, with hidden entrances opening up to reveal opulent interiors outfitted like mobsters' bedchambers.

If there is one rule of the Hollywood gangster, it is that everyone is doomed to a fate equal to or worse than those they bring down on others. Crime fiction researcher Jack Shadoian sums it up in *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster Film*: "If the films insist that [you] can't win, ... it's how you lose that counts". Every gangster is likely to get whacked in the end, and a bullet in the back of the head is one of the tidier ways to check out. But if a gangster's life is a doomed enterprise, there is one thing these professional grifters get right, and that is how to live when not on business. The lesson is this: don't act like a gangster, drink like one.

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**A note on names:** Over the decades, directors have played fast and loose with the names of their lead characters, taking well-known names or nicknames and applying them in new contexts. This means that Frank Costello in *The Departed* is an Irish-American gangster in South Boston, not the Italian-American crime boss that operated with Lucky Luciano, and Scarface played by Al Pacino is clearly not the "Scarface" of 1920s Chicago – that was Al Capone. Since the cocktails in this book honour the characters over the real men and women who inspired them, you will be drinking to the mythology of the silver screen, not the reality.



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# Mix Like a Mobster

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VINCENT POLLARD

One thing we know about gangsters, if the movies are to be believed, is that they generally love a good drink or ten. The mob bar is a place of business. It's where deals go down, friends get together and enemies get whacked – and in the background there's always a bartender on hand to supply the drinks, from sophisticated cocktails for those who want to impress, to neat spirits for those whose nerves are about to be put to the test.

Cinema's greatest mafia moments are often laced with liquor. From the bars of Little Italy's Mulberry Street to the basements of the Copacabana and the Bamboo Lounge, much of the action of Martin Scorsese's legendary New York mafia flicks *Mean Streets* and *GoodFellas* takes place alongside rows of drinks. Further down the coast, organised crime series *Boardwalk Empire* sets the tone when Atlantic City treasurer Nucky Thompson toasts Prohibition at a raucous party at Babette's Supper Club, a notorious nautically themed bar on Pacific Avenue. And inevitably many of these gangsters own the very pubs and bars they frequent, from The Garrison run by the Shelby family in *Peaky Blinders* to the mob-run Hi-Hat in *The Deuce*. Meanwhile, if the gangster molls tend to steer clear of their partners' squalid hangouts they can usually be found preparing stiff libations at home, as Debby Marsh proves in Fritz Lang's classic *The Big Heat* when she hastily mixes herself a whole jug of Martini with only a passing intention of sharing it.

The most common gangster drink by far is Champagne, with its connotations of success and the high-life. In terms of hard liquor, whisky reigns supreme, especially Scotch, which is often regarded as a sign of a discerning drinker. A symbol of sophistication and power, it frequently appears as the liquor of choice to seal a deal, most notably in mafia chronicles such as *The Godfather* and *The Sopranos*. More dramatically, in pivotal scenes of U.K. classics *Get Carter* and *Layer Cake*, whisky gets downed by the bottle rather than the dram, and in Sergio Leone's epic *Once*

*Upon a Time in America* the brown stuff even gets served out of a radiator. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the prevalence of Irish blood in gangster history, Irish whiskey is a firm mob favourite, and characters such as *Peaky Blinders*' Tommy Shelby and *The Irishman*'s Frank Sheeran are rarely without a bottle of the Irish sauce close by. Aside from whisky, the other brown liquor with its own sophisticated associations, Cognac, proves itself the third most favoured gangster tippie. Hennessy is by far the most popular brand, which is downed by everyone from Mark "Gor" Lee in *A Better Tomorrow* to *The Wire*'s Stringer Bell.

Of all the cocktails that feature in the gangster movies of the big and small screen, the Martini appears most frequently. There was a point in the late 1980s and early '90s when "Martini" or the suffix "-tini" was used to describe a whole slew of fruity concoctions served in a Martini glass that had little or nothing to do with a Martini. A genuine Martini is simply gin (or vodka) mixed with dry vermouth but can be served multiple ways. Probably the most versatile yet specific cocktail there is, the Martini has almost unlimited variations depending on the drinker's preference. There are three distinct variations of this classic cocktail among the recipes in this book.

Alcohol aside, the most common drink to feature in gangster movies is coffee. Many of the characters featured in *Behind Bars*, from Neil McCauley of Michael Mann's heist movie *Heat* to the "lone man" of Jim Jarmusch's *The Limits of Control*, are hardly ever seen without a cup of coffee to hand. Paying tribute to that trend, the recipes in this collection include several coffee cocktails, some of which are well known, such as the Espresso Martini – a guilty pleasure among bartenders that is now seeing a newfound respect and popularity – and others that have been created exclusively for this book.

In the following recipes we focus heavily on classics and modern classics, some served straight up and others with a thematic twist. Also included are a number of original cocktails created specifically for the gangsters in question and a handful of outstanding cocktails from some of the finest bartenders around the world. The cocktail recipes are explained in detail and come with guidance on technique and instructions for any "prep" needed for the drink, such as custom syrups. All you need is some basic bar tools, good ice and a few bottles of liquor – and of course a gangster movie to watch while you drink.

We have endeavoured to represent a range of cocktail styles from traditional American stiff and boozy hard-hitters to spritz low-ABV Italian aperitifs. Difficulty ranges from quick and easy – such as Tommy DeVito's deadly Stinger – to complex, with one or two reserved only for the most patient of mixologists, such as Mia Wallace's Ramos Gin Fizz. Whether you prefer something boozy with bourbon, crisp with gin or refreshing with rum, you'll find something in here to help you drink like a gangster.