On inventing your own job

Writer and historian David Wondrich on leaving academia behind to become a full-time writer, and how a simple editorial gig led to a career as a cocktail historian.

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As told to Mark Sussman, 2150 words.

Tags: Writing, Beginnings, Process, Education, Focus.

You started as an English professor, but academia didn't suit you. Why?

I hated it. Grad school I mostly enjoyed, because I was in comparative literature, and comparative literature meant I could study whatever I wanted. You know, you make your own program up. That was interesting to me. There were parts of grad school I didn't care for—the feeling of powerlessness and all that. But reading books and studying complex things, I really enjoyed. I graduated and I had my degree from NYU, and I was looking for jobs and there were very few. I was very reluctant to leave New York.

I eventually got a job in New York City. That was the good news. The bad news was it was on Staten Island at the St. John's University Staten Island Campus. That was a little rough. Some of the students were great, some of the students were terrible, the administration wasn't so much fun, and the workload was high. I was really not thrilled with this. While there, I got an opportunity to write professionally, and I said, "Screw it, I'm going to do that," even though there was, at the time, no money in it, really. But I needed to get out for my sanity.

On the other hand, you could say, I was professionally trained at inventing my own job. So I invented my own job.

How did that process of invention work?

Well, I got a real simple editorial gig for *Esquire.com*, through a friend who knew I liked cocktails. I wasn't obsessed with them. I had a little interest, I'd tracked down a few rare ingredients, and he knew about that. He got me this editorial gig for their website, editing an old *Esquire* book. It had these kind of fun little paragraphs for random drinks in it. And, of course, being a comp lit person, I immediately organized the drinks into families and wrote paragraphs where they were missing for important drinks. It became a drink-of-the-week column. Then I started researching the history of all these cocktails, which had not been done too much at that point. There was one book out that had done quite a good job with it, but there was so much more to know. I was there, and I had the tools, so I was like, "That's my job. I'm going to research the history of these things, and write them up in as amusing a manner as I can come up with."

I took a year off from teaching, and spent it writing. And then I went back for a semester and said, "Okay, I'm done. I can't go back to this." Fortunately, my wife was supportive, because that was a big thing. We had a small child at home, also. But she could see that I hated my job and was miserable in it.

Besides your own natural curiosity about this stuff, what made drinking, and cocktails specifically, seem like the sort of thing that was ripe for historical investigation?

Well, partly because it hadn't been done, because nobody had the tools before. Over the last 15 years, we've seen online newspaper databases blossoming. For history like that, this is the first time you can look at some of this stuff, because otherwise you've got to go through newspapers on microfilm. I mean, I could go through only maybe four issues in a day. Because you're not looking for something that's on page one, it's never tied to a date. It's all a fishing expedition.

But with computers, I mean, the technology is by no means perfect, and it misses a lot and it's a pain to sift through all the results, but it's still transformative. I jumped on it. I think that was the main thing—I was among the first to jump on that with a good deal of determination and patience. That's what I'd learned in grad school: chase down every rabbit. No matter what.

Everybody has a shovel. It's what you do with it that matters. If you can dig a better hole or build a better sandcastle, then it doesn't matter that everybody else also has that same shovel. And it really is all in the interpretation. It's not enough to just say, "I found this stuff."

You're saying that since all the digital stuff makes it easier, why would you not use it in your work. But so much of what you do seems to be dedicated to reviving these old, primitive methods of cocktail craft. If the appeal of the digital stuff is that it makes everything easier, what is the appeal of doing something in a way that seems more difficult than it could be?

Well, it makes it easier to find out how they used to do things. It's the difference between research and handcraft. It makes the mind work easier, but it's all in the service of resurrecting this handcraft, this American art of mixing drinks.

Can you pick an old drink that you had to research and walk me through the process of figuring out the real story?

The most recent one I did was the Michelada. You know, beer with hot sauce, lime juice, and dashes of this and that bottled condiment. It's a Mexican thing. I first came across it probably a little more than 15 years ago, around 2001. First, like everybody, I look at Wikipedia. Sometimes I forget to do that, and I can get really screwed. It tells you what you're up against. It's like, "This is the entrenched story."

So, for this instance, Wikipedia had a couple stories, and a couple of them just already stank of legend to me, so then I went and looked through some newspaper databases. I always drop a timeline. When does this first start appearing in at least American newspapers, right? And then, I go to Google Books and I look up names that have been mentioned in some of these stories. In this case there was a guy who was mentioned from San Luis Potosí in Mexico. It was claimed that he invented it in the 1970s. I found an interview with him that's quite detailed and pretty plausible, as well as a couple of other mentions of him going back a few years. And it seems *really* quite plausible. Then I find the first place the drink made it into the U.S. that I'd been able to find. It was brought in by people from that part of Mexico, from that state. And it's like, okay that's interesting.

And that was a good 10 years before anybody else heard of the drink or brought it in. You start putting stuff together like that. I always go by preponderance of the evidence. There's never "beyond a reasonable doubt." Not with drinks. It seems like this guy's story checks out, and it's a good story, and I've got quotes from him in Spanish, which fortunately I can pretty much translate. So you piece it all together, and you look for what sticks out and what needs further tracking down. And eventually, you can get a pretty good story that makes sense.

It sounds like finding the narrative is built into the research.

I think it's built into it, yeah. It kind of has to be, because I'm always on deadline. I've got to work efficiently. I've got an article due, so I'm researching it as I go, usually. For some things, I step back and spend a lot of time. I spent a lot of time on trying to get to the history of Batavia Arrack, this spirit from the former Dutch East Indies. That took a lot of digging.

Usually I'll just buy books and then I've got it, and I always write the notes in the back of the book, so I know where the notes are. I can always expand on that. So for things like that, like the history of Batavia Arrack, that's a big pile of books that you've got to put together. But the storytelling is still, to a degree, built in there. You're always up

against a story.

All these drinks, almost all of them, already have an existing story that's been told. At least all the interesting ones. So you've got to fact check that. To do that, in a way, you build an alternative story. Or you say, "All right, this checks out here, here, here, and here." There might be a couple bubbles, places where the lamination gets a little loose between the facts as you know them and the story. But other times it's like, it checks out all the way down the line or immediately goes off.

I've learned more about the history of the drinks by making them. I realize this assumption I had is not possible. I make this drink, and find out it couldn't have been made that way, because it's disgusting and this was a popular drink. And popular drinks are not disgusting, almost by definition, at least as long as the palate stays more or less the same. The American palate has changed some, but it hasn't changed that much.

There are so many recipes that I had to revisit after making them and realizing that I clearly did not understand this properly. I'm not getting something about the ingredients or the measurements or the techniques, because it's just not working.

It's like, this clearly is not how it happened because I tried to set the drink on fire, and it wouldn't light. The nature of fire hasn't changed. What must have changed? Maybe it's the alcohol. It was like that with the Blue Blazer. I realized that it had to be made with overproof whiskey. And then, after realizing that, I found a detailed description of it… that talks about using overproof whiskey. And I was like, "Okay, phew. You know, I'm not making this up. But I already had come to that conclusion, that the only way to do it is with cask-strength whiskey."

You're testing a hypothesis. Experimenting and revising.

Yeah, and you go back and forth. But it teaches you—at least it taught me—to appreciate some really very simple drinks. And that's what most of the drinks in *Imbibe!* are: just super simple. The thing that I couldn't predict about the cocktail revolution is this jump into making complicated, weird drinks. That is now the norm if you go to a cocktail bar. These drinks are wildly free-styled, creative, and often not very good.

I've always been excited by bars. I used to read P. G. Wodehouse books when I was a teenager, and Bertie Wooster's always having whiskey and soda. So I'd read a lot of, you know, all the Raymond Chandler books, and all those take place in bars. And James Bond, all that stuff. There's always something, to me, about walking into a properly equipped bar with a bartender who knows what they're doing waiting for you. You walk in, and it's like, "Oh my god." It's like a ship pulling into harbor. There were so many bars that couldn't get it right just 20 years ago.

They looked good, and then you just get so disappointed. And I think we've managed to pull out of that. And that's amazing. I mean, there will always be places where you'll be disappointed, but now every town has at least one place that's doing it right.

David Wondrich recommends:

Books: In the interest of better understanding the history of rum, I've been reading a lot about the early days of Portuguese colonization of Asia and Brazil, which is kind of like watching *Alien* from the alien's point of view. I found Roger Crowley's *Conquerors: How Portugal Forged the First Global Empire* to be a useful and very readable overview. Also the Hakluyt edition of the *Suma Oriental* of Tome Pires (ca. 1515).

Music: I used to listen to a lot of Umm Kulthum back in the 1980s, when I could buy her cassettes at Rashid Sales, the Arab record store on Atlantic Avenue here in Brooklyn. I just found that I had a couple of them—*Fat al Ma'ad* and *Thawrat al Shak*, both seminal—on CD and I've been playing the hell out of them.

Drinks: Acqua cu' Zammu, a specialty of Palermo, which knows hot-weather drinks: a glass of ice water with about a half-ounce of really strong, dry anisette dashed into it (the Palermo stuff, Anice Unico Tutone, is 60% abv; you're better off substituting absinthe for it than, say, sambuca).

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