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# The Allure of "Old Spirits": An <u>Interview with Edgar Harden</u>



I met Edgar Harden through the magic of the Internet. Edgar owns a business very near and dear to my heart. He has magic at his fingertips in the form of the procurement of classic liquors, many of which pre-date his customer's date of birth. His stock-in-trade is "gently-used" liquor in the original bottles, all sourced from around the world.

The bottles that have sat in your grandparent's bar for fifty years without being opened are of exceptional interest to Edgar. His methods of sourcing are private; he then sells them at a premium to millionaires around the globe. It's a tough living, but a very satisfying one.

Since reading through Edgar's answers to my questions, I realized that we have several connections from our past in common. The most profound is my birth and upbringing in New Jersey. Edgar, although born in Canada, spent his formative years at the Lawrenceville School in Princeton, New Jersey which is only an hour or so from where I grew up in Morristown.

After Lawrenceville, Edgar attended Richard Nixon's alma mater, Whittier College. I too attended Whittier, for a year in 1980. At that time, Orange County, California hadn't changed much from the ultra-conservative sixties, so it really wasn't a good fit for me educationally. I find it intriguing that Edgar attended the very school that brought me out to California, so many years ago, when I was just starting out in life.

Edgar deals in dreams, just like the movie industry loves fantasy. In fact, many of his historically correct bottles have made their way into the motion picture industry. Authenticity is very important in period pieces, especially filmic ones. Right down to the liquor bottles. And they have to come from some place.

That's where Edgar comes in. With his alchemical ability to find ancient history in a bottle, his clients can have instant "ancestral" liquor cabinets, with a few quick clicks on the computer mouse. No one has to know that the bottles were stored half way around the world?

Warren Bobrow: I get your emails daily. Thank you for filling my mind's eye with liquids I could never afford—outside of your emails. How did you get into fine "aged" spirits? What was your influence?

Edgar Harden: By accident. I was asked to do a cellar clearance by an aristocratic family and they said something like, "Sell the '82 Mouton, but get rid of the gin. So, I did. I took that case of 1960s Gordon's home and tried a bottle. It was light, smooth, and citrusy, and perfectly suited to make an almost neat extra dry Martini straight from the freezer. I said: "Wow! There's something to this." I looked into spirits more and more as opportunities presented themselves to taste or acquire vintage versions of a brand we know, and that is how the business was born in 2008. This was lucky as wine was beginning to lose its charm during this era.

I had been a specialist in the European Furniture Department at Christie's Rockefeller Center and learned about wine from the Wine Department next door on our hallway. This involved being taught how to taste at presale tastings where fabulous vintage treats were being opened. To go from this to a market where it had become all about Bordeaux futures and wine changing hands three times before it was even in bottle and then spending its entire life in a bonded warehouse. This was not for me. Vintage Spirits opened up a new and exciting world, and allowed me to combine my two businesses, antique furniture and wine. My influence was, I guess, seeing how immediately people responded to vintage spirits when I brought that first case of gin home. I sold it quite quickly.

# WB: When did you first realize that you enjoyed liquor? Do you remember what you had to drink first?

EH: I had seen my parents and their friends drink as I grew up. Extra Dry Beefeater Martini straight up with a twist was my dad's drink and sometimes a Manhattan or Cognac. And of course wine with dinner.

I bought my first bottle when I went away to Lawrenceville. In true Canadian fashion it was a bottle of CC [Canadian Club] that I hid in the flue of the chimney in my room. I also remember having a bottle of Smirnoff while there. Much later in high school and college was beer, but with a lot of tequila as well. I was in a co-ed society called Sachsens at Whittier College and tequila and mezcal were the drinks. After graduation from Whittier I spent a year abroad in Paris further delving into art history, and it was there that I discovered good red wine. I attended graduate school at Bar in New York [Bard Graduate Centre for Studies in the Decorative Arts]. After that I found myself in LA with my first real job in the art world [at the J. Paul Getty Museum]. During this time I mostly drank beer and wine. Moving back to NY I worked at Christie's. It was there that I got into cocktails. This was early in the cocktail renaissance, 1999, but we loved to go out and have mixed drinks at bars.

#### WB: Did your teachers influence you? Do you have a business background?

EH: I certainly remember a lot of my teachers from elementary school right through to graduate school and bosses at various jobs. It is very hard to say what influence they had on me, but what I took away from being with them is how I manifested into the person that I have become to date.

#### WB: What is your favorite cocktail, made by whom?

EH: Ah, the drink that makes me swoon is a Martini Vesper, made by the esteemed barman Alessandro Palazzi at the world renowned Duke's Hotel in London, England.

To learn more about Harden and the Old Spirits Company, go to:

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Warren Bobrow was born and raised on his family's organic farm in Morristown, NJ. After a childhood rich in European travel, he discovered a passion for the culinary arts. He is a former chef turned banker turned author. He released his first book "Apothecary Cocktails" in 2013, followed by "Whiskey Cocktails" (2014), and the recent "Bitters and Shrub Syrup Cocktails" (2015). He can be found at www.thecocktailwhisperer.com

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