DIY SHRUBS

These intensely flavorful drinking vinegars are great in cocktails—and that’s just for starters. By Elaine Johnson

AS A FORMER fashion designer, cooking teacher Mary Karlin keeps an eye on trends. So when she saw shrubs—a sweet-tart infusion of vinegar and fruit—appearing on cocktail menus, she was intrigued. Soon, her counters were covered with jars of homemade shrubs, and eventually, her experiments blossomed into a topic for her latest cookbook, Mastering Fermentation (Ten Speed Press, 2013; $30).

“I love shrubs’ vibrancy and versatility,” says Karlin, a founding staff member of Ramekins Culinary School in Sonoma, California. “They reflect all the seasonal brightness of the fruit, herbs, and vinegar in each combination.” And their applications go far beyond mixology. At her home kitchen in Petaluma, Karlin showed us her basic shrub-making method and then used the zingy results in a spritzer, seafood glaze, salad dressing—and a fine cocktail.

Building blocks of shrubs

“Once you’ve got the basics of making a shrub,” says Karlin, “look at cocktail menus to riff on the formula with different fruit-vinegar combos.”

FRUIT Start with any seasonal fruit—strawberries in spring, say. “You want something ripe that can give off juice,” Karlin says.

RAW VINEGAR An unpasteurized vinegar that still has its “mother,” or starter, is the key for fermenting. Karlin uses store-bought raw cider vinegar (for a zippy flavor) or coconut vinegar (which is more subtle).

FLAVORINGS Add ginger, fresh mint or basil, or even savory herbs or hot chiles for complexity.

SUGAR This provides the sweet to go with the sour of the vinegar and creates a syrupy texture.

CLEAN EQUIPMENT To keep any undesirable bacteria from ruining your shrub, sanitize your workspace with 1 tbsp. bleach dissolved in 2 qts. water. Wash jars and cooking tools in hot soapy water, then rinse in bleach solution followed by tap water; air-dry on a cooling rack set over a baking sheet.
PINEAPPLE GINGER MINT SHRUB

MAKES 1 QT. / 20 MINUTES, PLUS 15 DAYS TO FERMENT AND MELLOW

Once you create this tropical-flavored shrub, you will be able to use it for months in the recipes that follow. You’ll need a widemouthed 1-qt. canning jar and a piece of cheesecloth.

1 cup thinly sliced fresh ginger with peel scraped off (use a spoon)
1 cup packed fresh mint leaves, plus a sprig
2 cups fresh pineapple chunks (1/2 by 1 in.)
About 1 3/4 cups raw (unpasteurized), unfiltered apple cider vinegar*, such as Bragg, or raw coconut vinegar, such as Coconut Secret
1 cup freshly squeezed lime juice (7 or 8 limes)
1 cup raw, unrefined cane sugar*

1. Put ginger and mint leaves in a clean widemouthed 1-qt. canning jar. Bruise them with a wooden potato masher or pestle (if you have one; or use a wooden spoon) until very fragrant (A). Add pineapple and enough vinegar to cover (B). Close jar tightly and shake vigorously for 10 seconds. “This gently macerates the fruit, releasing the flavors into the vinegar,” says Karlin. Push pineapple, mint, and ginger down so they’re completely covered by vinegar and it can draw out their flavor. (It’s also important to keep the fruit completely submerged to prevent undesirable bacteria or mold from growing on it.)

2. Replace lid with a piece of cheesecloth (so air can get in and help start fermentation) and securely attach with a rubber band or the jar ring. Leave at room temperature, 12 hours or overnight.

3. Discard cheesecloth. Replace lid and ring, secure tightly, and repeat the shaking daily for 3 days, keeping at room temperature. “I usually stick a Post-it on the jar that allows me to keep track of where I am in the process,” says Karlin.

4. Pour mixture into a wide strainer set over a bowl. Discard mint, then return solids and liquid to jar (C). Shake well each day for 4 more days at room temperature. “There’s not much of a visual indicator, but it will be done after seven days total,” Karlin assures.

5. Strain out solids over a bowl and set aside for salsa (recipe on opposite page), or another use. Return liquid to jar, using a funnel. Add lime juice and sugar (D), cover, and shake until dissolved, about 2 minutes. Add the mint sprig.

6. Chill 7 days for flavors to meld, giving the bottle a good shake every day to be sure sugar is dissolved. Discard mint. Use, or chill up to 4 months (shake before using). The shrub will get more syrupy with time.

* Find raw, unfiltered cider vinegar at many grocery stores and natural-foods stores, and raw coconut vinegar at natural-foods stores (see a store locator at coconutsecret.com).

Karlin likes Trader Joe’s raw organic evaporated cane juice sugar.

MAKE AHEAD Up to 4 months, chilled.

VARIATION

Grapefruit Shrub

Follow directions for Pineapple Ginger Mint Shrub, but omit ginger and mint, and don’t bruise fruit. Instead of pineapple, use suprems* from 3 large red grapefruits. Use coconut vinegar (about 1 1/3 cups). In step 5, use 1 cup freshly squeezed red grapefruit juice instead of lime juice.

* To make suprems, cut off outer peel and membrane of fruit, then cut between inner membranes to free segments.

“For a bright color in the shrub, use a raw sugar that’s on the light side.”
Pineapple Shrub Glaze
Karlin marinates shell-on shrimp with a generous splash of the shrub for 20 minutes. She drains and cooks them in a lightly oiled cast-iron skillet, brushing them with this glaze, and serves extra on the side.

Makes ½ cup / 15 minutes

In a small frying pan, cook 1 cup Pineapple Ginger Mint Shrub (preferably made with coconut vinegar) and ⅛ to ¼ tsp. red chile flakes at a low boil, swirling often, until reduced to ½ to ¼ cup, 12 to 15 minutes. Sauce thickens as it cools.

Pineapple Shrub Vinaigrette
The shrub’s flavors add complexity to this easy dressing. Karlin likes it over a salad of romaine, radicchio, red onion, avocado, feta, and toasted pumpkin seeds.

Makes 1 cup / 10 minutes

In a small bowl, whisk together ⅓ cup Pineapple Ginger Mint Shrub and 3 tbsp. lime juice. Stir in 2 tbsp. minced shallot. Vigorously whisk in ½ cup fruity extra-virgin olive oil in a stream. Whisk in ½ tsp. kosher salt and ¼ tsp. pepper. Taste with a piece of lettuce; add more lime juice, salt, and pepper as needed. Make ahead: Up to 1 week, chilled.

Pineapple Salsa
Karlin turns the strained fruit into a tart salsa that’s especially good over seared pork chops.

Makes 1½ cups / 45 minutes

In a medium bowl, combine 2 tbsp. each honey and lime juice. Stir in 2 tbsp. diced, seeded jalapeño chile, 1 cup drained pineapple chunks (from step 5 of Pineapple Ginger Mint Shrub; discard ginger), ¼ cup each diced red onion and red bell pepper, 1 tsp. grated fresh ginger, ½ tsp. whole coriander seeds, and ½ tsp. fine sea salt. Let sit 20 minutes. Adjust salt to taste. Just before serving, stir in 2 tbsp. roughly torn fresh mint leaves.

Cocktail
Island Breeze
With a shrub as the foundation for this drink (shown above), “you’ve got the sweet and the tart covered,” says Karlin. “It doesn’t take much more to create a cocktail.”

Serves 1 / 5 minutes

In a cocktail shaker, shake 2 tbsp. Pineapple Ginger Mint Shrub, 3 tbsp. vodka, and ¼ tsp. grenadine with ice. Strain into a chilled rocks glass, top with 6 tbsp. tonic water (Karlin likes Q tonic) and garnish with a mint sprig.

Spritzer
Shrub Fizzy
Five parts mixer to 1 part shrub is a good place to start for this spritely drink (inset above), but feel free to play with the ratio so it’s milder or more bracing.

Serves 1 / 5 minutes

Pour ¼ cup cold Pineapple Ginger Mint Shrub or Grapefruit Shrub into a tall glass. Top up with 1¼ cups cold sparkling water, and stir. Taste and adjust proportions if you like. Garnish with a pineapple spear or red grapefruit wedge.

You can swap in rum for vodka, or leave out the alcohol for a mocktail.

More ways with shrubs