

The Fascinating History of Swizzle Sticks

by

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Before electric mixers, how did folks mix ingredients? In the 17th, 18th, and into the 19th centuries, they used a process called **swizzling**, which involves holding the handle of a utensil between your palms and spinning it back and forth as you move the business end of the utensil up and down in the ingredients.

Both food and drink recipes called for swizzling. One drink was even named after the process: the **swizzle** is “six parts of water to one of rum and an aromatic flavouring.”

This drink was taken to the Caribbean by the British in the 1800's. Once there, the locals used twigs pulled from the *Quararibea turbinata* tree to swizzle the drink. These twigs were particularly appropriate for the task, because the ends are tiny spokes. When used for swizzling, they work almost like tiny immersion blenders.



[Image from <https://www.vintageinn.ca/2017/09/the-kitschest-of-them-all-the-swizzle-sticks/>]

These twigs were, quite literally, swizzle sticks.

In the early 1900's, swizzle sticks made their way to Britain, where the Queen and others would use them in champagne to decrease the carbonation. (Can't be displaying royal burping, after all.)

In the USA, drink stirrers were made from glass and the newly-invented Bakelite plastic. The upper crust carried their own swizzle sticks with them, usually made of silver or gold.

But then World War One came along, and temperance activists successfully made arguments for prohibition: the grains used for making alcohol could be used to feed the troops, the evil Germans were renowned for their alcoholic beverages (and you don't want to be like them), everyone needed to be sober for the war crisis, etc. War measures were enacted, from complete prohibition in Russia, the USA, and most of Canada to restrictions by Great Britain and across the European continent.

When prohibition was lifted and alcoholic beverages flowed once again, American inventor Jay Sindler realized that he needed a way to remove the olive from his martini. And that's when he realized that if he could use such a device, so could all the bars that were starting to reestablish themselves after Prohibition.

In 1933, Sindler invented a plastic stick with a pointed end that bartenders could use to stir drinks and customers could use to poke olives. Or, depending on the drink, the pointy end could be changed to a spoon, or a paddle, or whatever was appropriate. In addition, they could be printed on, so customers taking their swizzle sticks home would see the name of the bar they came from every time they were used. He formed a company (Spir-It, Inc., now known as Spirit Foodservice), was granted a patent on Feb. 19, 1935, and went into business.



[Image from Pinterest]

Sindler's swizzle sticks were a huge success. Eventually, plastic swizzle sticks were made in a huge variety of colors and styles. Bars in Florida, for example, would use swizzle sticks in the shape of palm trees. Golf course bars would use swizzle sticks in the shape of golf flags or golf clubs. As manufacturing techniques improved (largely due to progress in injection molding made during WWII and the space race) swizzle sticks started being made in thousands of different designs.

But culture, as it invariably does, changed. The 1980s saw the rise of a new health-conscious lifestyle, cocktail consumption plummeted, and swizzle sticks almost disappeared.

Until the late 1990s.

Fueled in part by TV shows like *Sex and the City* and later *Mad Men*, martinis and cocktails made a resurgence that continues to this day. And with the cocktails came new swizzle sticks.

These days, you can buy swizzle sticks made of plastic, glass, wood, metal, sugar, and more, in all types of designs. You can also find vintage swizzle sticks on Ebay and other websites.

If you're interested in swizzle sticks, you might want to visit [The Museum of the American Cocktail](#) in New Orleans, join the [International Swizzle Stick Collectors Association](#), or perhaps just view all of the results that come back when you perform a Google Image search for "swizzle sticks". You just might be amazed to discover all that has developed from the twigs of the *Quararibea turbinata* tree, which has also become known (for some reason) as the swizzlestick tree.