

ELEMENTS OF STYLE

Drink Time for Hitler

Stephen Visakay's awesome cocktail—shaker collection even features loot from Berchtesgaden

A new item is about to arrive at Stephen Visakay's house, and the collector's words echo the lite porn of romance novels: "My heart leaps with joy. I can't wait to get it in my hot hands. God, I have been lusting and longing for twelve years."

The man is talking about a cocktail shaker.

Visakay's passion was kindled at age 5, when his mother yelled "Get away from that closet!" The object under her protection was a chrome cocktail shaker she'd won in a roller-skating contest. Years later, Visakay found a tarnished but otherwise identical one at a flea market. It was not unlike Proust and the madeleines. He shone his treasure to its former effulgence and regressed to childhood. Today that 50-cent bargain shares shelf space with some priceless shakers in what is the world's largest collection of the things (more than 1,000)—testimony to twenty years of a man defying his mother.

Like the characters in *Close Encounters* who are smitten by alien light and see the same peaked mountain shape everywhere, Visakay tends to see cocktail shakers throughout the landscape. "The Chrysler Building, in 1930, and the Empire State Building, in 1931, both were built in the shape of cocktail shakers," he contends. "Okay, not really. But the skyscraper was the new deity of architecture, and cocktail shakers took *their* shape." Others may watch World War II documentaries for historical scholarship or psychological epiphanies; Visakay wants to catch Hitler at a cocktail party. Three years ago, he bought the Führer's shaker, a silver-plated job engraved with an eagle whose talons grasp a swastika, and a matching lemon squeezer initialed "A.H." (Visakay's purchase has been authenticated by Mohawk Arms, the premier military auction house.) The set had been a thank-you from an American Army major to a woman in the postwar diplomatic service who

used to entertain the GIs in Vienna. The major had "liberated" plenty of loot from the Eagle's Nest, Hitler's retreat at Berchtesgaden, in April 1945, and had an embarrassment of Adolf riches.

Visakay still mourns the ones that got away, like the silver-

topped glass shaker that had belonged to famed spy Kim Philby, part of the detritus of a double life gathered from his Moscow apartment by his Russian widow and offered at auction in London this year. Two years ago, Visakay bid (irritably) on the shaker from the Palm Island, Florida, estate of Mr. and Mrs. Al Capone. "It was plain old chrome with dents, and the handle was broken off and stuffed inside," he grouses. "It sold for \$2,000. One highball glass with the letter C sold for \$2,000. If it had been a martini glass, I would have gone for it." The provenance of most shakers is more elusive. So many of these beauties were Twenties and Thirties wedding presents (Mary McCarthy wrote such a gift into *The Group*), and they were kept in the family until relegated to the flea market by some obdurate great-nephew, thereby to join a rabid collector's booty.

Visakay shakes his booty, entertaining often in his upstate New York replica of a 1950s rec-room bar. From nine to five he's the production manager of a sheet-metal factory, but upon turning into his driveway, he turns into the Thin Man with a ponytail, deconstructing the martini. (Not even the loan of a Visakay shaker helped the 1991 Broadway bomb *Nick & Nora*.) Hawkeye Pierce of *M*A*S*H* liked his martini so dry you could see dust on the olive; Visakay is still testing recipes. "Every night before dinner, I'm trying to make the perfect martini," he says. "You've got to have the shaker cold. You want fresh, hard, dry ice, and never use the same ice twice. Every- (continued on page 76)



ABOVE: Visakay's array of shakers makes an eye-popping display. LEFT: *Der Führer's* shaker, "liberated" from the Eagle's Nest.

DANNY CLINCH

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(continued from page 66) body likes a different ratio of gin to vermouth—I like about 6-to-1—but the secret is using the original orange bitters from West Indian oranges that bartenders used in the 1920s. Fee Brothers, in Rochester, New York, are the only people who make them. They're nice guys. About six bucks for four-fifths of a pint."

Visakay borrowed the James Bond aphorism "shaken, not stirred" to name the exhibit of his cocktail shakers earlier this year at the Museum of Our National Heritage, in Lexington, Massachusetts. "It's a piece of Americana, an original American invention," he says. "If you had to pick one object to represent the period between the two great wars, 1920 to 1940, it would have to be the cocktail shaker. It had sex appeal, glamour, glitz. Now we watch *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. In those days, they went to the movies and watched Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Every movie in the 1930s had one, and every family in the 1930s had one. It was an affordable symbol of the good life."

Ironically, the Volstead Act of 1919, a.k.a. Prohibition, heightened the popularity of cocktails and shakers: A mixed drink could stretch a meager

amount of precious alcohol or disguise the taste of bathtub gin. And bartenders who didn't want to work illegally went to "wet" countries, where Europeans embraced the crazy New World invention of the cocktail. The repeal of Prohibition fourteen years later (by FDR, himself a "glance of vermouth" man, according to Visakay) really shook up shaker production, until Pearl Harbor, when all metal was needed for the war effort, and companies that had once made cocktail shakers suddenly were in the artillery business. After the war came the push-button age, and the shaker was replaced by an abomination whose mention causes Visakay to turn a whiter shade of pale: the blender.

He's plotting ways to invade the old MGM prop rooms. And, not to be too ghoulish about it, he'd like to know what

happened to the effects of John Candy, another cocktail-shaker connoisseur. Visakay's own collection has expanded to include old bartenders' guides, coasters and glasses, including his "bottoms up" group, carved to resemble the orbs of female buttocks and thus unable to sit flat on a table. He has the first airline drink cart, rolled down the aisle of a DC-3 in the 1930s.



ABOVE: The collector embraces a cherished recent acquisition. **RIGHT:** He has the first airline drink cart, which rolled down the aisle of a DC-3 in the 1930s.

The father of the cocktail shaker is anybody's guess, and nobody's grandchildren are living off the residuals. Visakay has traced the first patent to 1888, for an improvement on an existing model. "At the turn of the century, all the great hotels had the English custom of five o'clock tea," he says, "and it was a short leap to the five o'clock happy hour, so it's no wonder that [then] all cocktail shakers looked like teapots." But a whole lot of shaking went on by the Twenties designers. Visakay has models shaped like golf bags, barbells,

bowling pins, women's legs—the accoutrements of activities for which he has no time (well, scratch that last one). "I saw a sign: 'EATING, SLEEPING, FISHING,'" he says. "For me, it's 'Eating, sleeping, cocktail shakers.'"

His favorite is usually his most recent purchase. The one he's waiting to get in his "hot hands" now is a silver Spiderman design he's chased for years, through historical archives and Art Deco societies. "If this shaker could only talk," he says wistfully. "Must have been at some swank parties." A perennial favorite is the sleek "skyline" shaker made in 1933 by renowned stage designer Norman Bel Geddes, in his day even more famous than his daughter Barbara, who played J.R.'s mother on *Dallas* and had once inspired a critic to write "One of the things wrong with *Vertigo* was that it was difficult to believe that any normal man could prefer Kim Novak to Barbara Bel Geddes." The ne plus ultra of shakerdom is a 1928 German airplane that's a portable bar—its innards conceal decanters, cups, corkscrews and spoons. "I bought it from a toy collector who gleefully told me he'd paid \$20 for it," says Visakay. "I

coughed up \$4,000, but I know it's worth \$6,000 to \$8,000 now. If I go to a flea market, there's a hundred dealers. If I go to an antique show, there's a hundred dealers. I figure they're all working for me, buying me cocktail shakers, and I have to pay them a finder's fee."

But in case of fire, he swears he would grab a rather prosaic and inexpensive model—a sentimental choice since it's the one that introduced him to his girlfriend. As legend would have it, they

met at 5:30 A.M., reaching for the same shaker at a flea market. He said, "Let go and I'll buy you breakfast." The first time she saw his collection, she said, "Oh, phallic symbols." Or aphrodisiacs. "When I take one down and start making drinks," he says, beaming, "she knows she's in for trouble."

—AIMEE LEE BALL

