

# The Washington Post

## At Tiki TNT, Bar Legend Todd Thrasher Develops a Sweet New Way To Experience Rum

By Tim Carman | Food reporter/columnist



Owner Todd Thrasher pours cocktails at Tiki TNT on the Wharf. (Doug Kapustin/For The Washington Post)

From the moment he latched onto the idea of [making his own rum](#), Todd Thrasher harbored a not-so-secret desire to create a molasses-based spirit that would behave more like gin. A rum that would be low on sugar but fragrant with cardamom, lemongrass, spearmint, lemon verbena and more. A rum that would serve as the base for his signature cocktail at Tiki TNT on the Wharf: a rum and tonic.

Foreign, perhaps, to those whose palates have been trained to brace for the pine-cone bite of a juniper-forward G & T, rum and tonic has long been enjoyed as a tippie in more tropical latitudes. Thrasher himself has been known to throw back an R & T, or three, after scuba diving off Bonaire or some other turquoise paradise in the Caribbean. But for his cocktail, he wanted a rum that has more botanicals, and less added sugars, than your standard bottle of Bacardi on the rail.

Enter Thrasher's Green Spiced Rum, a spirit with the faintest verdant hue, a gift from the aromatics used during distillation. The rum is, not to resort to hyperbole so early in this review, a brilliant sip, soft and syrupy on the tongue, with hints of citrus, ginger and mint. Mixed into Indian tonic water, with a splash of lemon bitters, the spirit is unlike any other rum you'll press to your lips. One evening in early October, I sat at the rooftop bar at Tiki TNT, thankful for the tender mercies of Thrasher's rum and tonic: It cut through the thick, humid air, offering something that bordered on relief on this ungodly hot night.



Thrasher's green spiced rum goes into an off-menu rum and tonic. (Doug Kapustin/For The Washington Post)



Signature drinks at Tiki TNT. (Doug Kapustin/For The Washington Post)

The only off note about the drink is the fact that it's nowhere to be found on the menu. It may be the first signature cocktail that its creator purposely keeps hidden from the public. At least for now. "I wasn't prepared to have it on the menu," Thrasher tells me. "I didn't know if I would keep up with the demand for green spiced rum."

If there's a common theme that runs through Tiki TNT and its life-sustaining organ, Potomac Distilling Co., it is Thrasher's ability to roll with, even manage, the volatility of his first venture without partners Cathal and Meshelle Armstrong. The trio were the creative team behind the [Eat Good Food Group](#), a once-dominant force in food and drink in Alexandria, most notably Restaurant Eve and PX, both influential in their time, both now closed. Thrasher's first act of improvisation was to build the three-story tiki bar, restaurant and distillery without his old collaborators. Thrasher and his wife and business partner, Maria Chicas, turned to Michael Saccone, a former understudy at the proto-speakeasy PX in Old Town, who is both partner and general manager at Tiki TNT.

Things didn't get easier for Thrasher, who had to learn how to use his combination pot-and-column still without guidance from its Idaho manufacturer, Corson Distilling Systems, which quickly slid into insolvency [amid numerous lawsuits](#). He also had to cobble together a kitchen team once it became clear that chef Cathal Armstrong, a multiple James Beard Award nominee, would not be the one responsible for the small, anything-goes menu. Thrasher tapped, among others, two former cooks for Erik Bruner-Yang: Ewa Fraszczyk (Brothers and Sisters) and Matt Crowley (Spoken English), whose operating philosophy could be summed up like so: Name a bar food, and we can tiki-ize it. Or at least throw diced pineapple on it.



Tiki TNT features back-end views of the Wharf. (Doug Kapustin/For The Washington Post)

Thrasher will be the first to tell you that Tiki TNT is his giant sigh of relief after two decades in the rarefied world of fine dining and hushed cocktail bars, with their insatiable demands and attendant stresses. Thrasher wanted a place where he could have fun, where he wouldn't live and die by every critic and self-appointed Yelp head hunter whose opinion could impact the microscopic margins of white-tablecloth restaurants. He wanted a craft tiki bar with decent drunk food. He didn't want it to be too serious.

What he got was a Polynesian-themed dock bar with back-end views of the Wharf, the \$2.5 billion playground overlooking the city's fanciest swamp, the Washington Channel. Thrasher also got a lesson in volume. In the first weeks, bartenders were hopelessly in the weeds, trying and failing to keep up with drink orders that could number 800 or more on a busy Saturday. Thrasher had reinvent his systems. He had to develop batch recipes, with multiple liquors measured out and ready to pour from a single bottle, so his crew could cut down the many steps demanded of craft tiki drinks.

The prep-system reinvention is all but invisible from a bar stool. The mai tai, prepared with 12-year-old El Dorado, not one of Thrasher's rums, is so beautifully balanced it could dance on the head of a pin. The 11:11, with its mix of Thrasher's white rum and pineapple rum, is a fight for supremacy between the sweetish spirits and their tart foes, including lime juice and spiced hibiscus. The frozen rum "in" Coke is a clever riff on a Cola Icee, for those who like to put a drunken spin on their childhood. There are, in short, many ways to drink in style here.



Tiki "al pastor" tacos. (Doug Kapustin/For The Washington Post)

Eating is another thing altogether. The fluctuations between the highs and lows could cause acute motion sickness. I can't recall a time when I had a dish as uninspired as the lime chicken, these pale, underseasoned and characterless strips of breast meat skewered and paired with a sweet, gloppy sauce that just made things worse. The veggie "yum yum" flatbread at least had the benefit of pepperjack cheese to inject life into the sleepy snack. The poke bowl treated its firm cubes of tuna to an asphyxiating amount of sesame oil and salt.

My favorite plates are dressed for the occasion. The tiki tots come topped with pineapple, mango, chiles and other vibrant garnishes to keep you pounding the nuggets. The tiki "al pastor" tacos, like their Mexican namesake, share an affection for pork and pineapple wrapped in a tortilla; I would have liked the tightly packed tacos even more with a bright salsa to tie them together. The garlicky shrimp need nothing to improve upon the shellfish, each curl expertly cleaned and smothered in butter and the usual tropical accoutrements. The chicken flatbread, given a kind of tiki-barbecue treatment, is a fine example of good drunk food. The real outliers here are the rum buns, a dessert created by [Bayou Bakery](#)'s David Guas. They have nothing to do with tiki culture but instead are a sweet, very sweet, nod to Hogate's, a [waterfront institution long departed](#).

The question I have to ask myself is this: Does it even matter what I think about Tiki TNT? With its trendy location, cool views and killer cocktails, Thrasher may have very well created that rare spot: a critic-proof destination.



Chicken flatbread. (Doug Kapustin/For The Washington Post)

If you go

**Tiki TNT and Potomac Distilling Co.**

1130 Maine Ave. SW, 202-900-4786; [tikitnt.com](http://tikitnt.com).

**Hours:** 3 p.m. to 1 a.m. Monday through Friday; 11 a.m. to 1 a.m. Saturday; 11 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. Sunday.

**Nearest Metro:** Waterfront, with a 0.7-of-a-mile walk to the restaurant and distillery.

**Prices:** \$3 to \$24 for all dishes; \$4 to \$69 for cocktails, including shareable ones.