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Tu B'Shvat Cocktail: The Arbor and the Ale

By [Naomi Major](#)

To celebrate Tu B'Shvat, a fig-scented cocktail. Photograph by Jon Wunder.

Writing for the Forward, I've learned so much. My education continued this week when I was asked to create a cocktail recipe to celebrate the upcoming holiday of Tu B'Shvat. I am delighted to write about Tu B'Shvat, mainly because up until several days ago my thought was "Tu B'Sh *what?*"

I knew nothing about it.

To research this lesser-known holiday, I turned to my favorite holiday experts, [Fannie Engel and Gertrude Blair](#), my chosen "first ladies of Jewish history and traditions."

Tu B'Shvat, or Chamishah Asar B'Shvat, simply means the 15th day of the month Shvat. It is the "New Year of the Trees."

What? An actual holiday, with rituals surrounding it, celebrating trees? That's a holiday I can get behind! Arbor Day is good and all, but this is a full-on holiday. And who doesn't want to celebrate trees? Dorothy, from the Wizard of Oz, is probably arbor-averse, but that's understandable because she was attacked by trees. (That wasn't really the trees' fault; the onus there lies fully with the Wicked Witch of the West.)

But I digress.

In early observance of the holiday, cedars were planted for boys, and cypresses or pines for girls. Years later, when the children were to be married, branches from the trees were cut to serve as posts for their chuppah. Nice. Generally the annual holiday celebration centers around the serving of fruits and nuts for the meal. Engel and Blair don't talk about the Seven Species traditionally served at this time, so I had to rely on the Internet for information. Depending on which site you are on, there are anywhere from four to 10 traditional species. (The Internet is in serious need of an editor, but that's a different story.)

I'm going with the following seven, as they appear most often: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates. I really wanted to make a dish with all these foods combined, but there were a few problems. First, I don't really eat wheat, because it makes me cranky and sick. Second, figs are out of season, and I do try to eat seasonally. And finally, I'm a lousy cook at best when trying to follow a recipe and a full-on train wreck when improvising. I'll stick with making cocktails.

I love figs, and was delighted to find a fig liquor under the brand name [Mahia](#). I immediately went and purchased* a bottle (\$42.99). I was even more delighted when I discovered that Mahia, which was [previously featured in the Forward](#) is made by an independent distillery, Nahmias & Fils.

And now a few words on Mahia: This is a liquor "distilled from figs and aniseed," and to be clear, it is *not* a sweet liqueur; it is hard liquor. The flavor is very potent, you get both the figs and the aniseed, but also a very strong taste of alcohol. Drinking it straight was not a pleasant experience for me. This is a liquor that will appeal to some and cause others to cringe.

Jon, my trusty assistant on this project, and I tried lots of different combinations of mixers and citrus to come up with a drink that didn't mask the flavor of the Mahia but would allow it to come through in a subtle fashion. I really wanted to incorporate maple syrup, in keeping with the tree theme, but alas it didn't work. After trial and error, and error and error, I'm delighted to present to you, The Arbor and the Ale.

The Arbor and the Ale

2 ounces bourbon
1 ounce Mahia spirits
1 ounce honey simple syrup (See note below.)
1 ounce fresh-squeezed lime juice
2 ounces ginger ale

1) Fill a shaker with ice, bourbon, Mahia, simple syrup and lime juice. Shake well.

2) Pour over ice, into highball glasses — or any glass that you like. Add the ginger ale and give it a stir. Garnish with a lime round.

To make honey simple syrup: In a small pot, mix equal parts honey and water (half a cup of each will last you a while), stir occasionally until well combined. Bring to just a simmer, don't let it boil, then remove from heat. Store in your fridge.

*All liquor is purchased with personal funds. I have never been paid by any company to promote its products. All opinions are mine and mine alone.

Naomi Major is a writer living in the Inwood neighborhood of Manhattan. You can find more of her writing at naomimajor.com.

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