





## CZECH, PLEASE

BY DAVID FARLEY || PHOTOS BY JOÃO CANZIANI

“I RECOMMEND YOU TAKE A MIDNIGHT POOP,” said the vest-wearing twenty-something bartender. The advice caught me off guard, but after all, I was in Karlovy Vary, a historic Czech spa destination where, since the 14th century, princes, potentates, artists, and ordinary people have been coming to restore their health. This town of about 60,000, known as Carlsbad in German, overflows with curative waters that trickle from a dozen different public fountains.

Six seconds into my perplexed stare, the bartender opened the drink menu and ran his finger down the page until it landed on the words “Midnight Pupp.” I was in a place called Jan Becher’s Bar, located in the basement of the Grandhotel Pupp. Ah—it was the pronunciation of that last word. A Midnight Pupp, a cocktail. It all made sense now.

The distinctive Pupp ingredient is Becherovka, a local liqueur that has long been considered medicinal. When I lived in Prague in the 1990s, I acquired a taste for Becherovka. In 2003, the French company Pernod Ricard bought Becherovka and expanded its global distribution. I began to see the brand stocked in liquor stores and bars at home in New York City and quickly started keeping a bottle of it in my freezer at all times.

Made up of around 20 herbs and spices, Becherovka has a tingly and bitter flavor profile that can be summed up as “essence of forest.” The recipe has been a secret since its first concoction in the early 19th century, and supposedly, only a handful of people on the planet know exactly what goes into it. So during a recent visit to Prague I decided to make the hour-and-a-half journey west to meet one of those people, Vladimir Darebnik, director of operations at Becherovka. Every Wednesday, either Darebnik or master blender Bohuslav Pich, another person in on the secret, spends two to three hours in a sealed room, weighing and hand mixing all the herbs and spices for a new batch.

Within minutes of meeting Darebnik in the Jan Becher Museum (which housed the original commercial Becherovka distillery before a shiny new one was built in 2010), I called out names of ingredients to see if any would stick:

Ginger?

Darebnik laughed and shook his head from side to side.

Clove?

He bit down on his lower lip and looked away. Was I onto something?

Cinnamon?

“OK,” he said. “You got one, but that’s all you’re going to get.”

I switched gears, asking about the alleged health benefits of Becherovka. Darebnik, though, was equally uncomfortable with this line of questioning. “Because Becherovka was created by a pharmacist in a spa town, it



## Midnight Pupp

(MAKES 1 COCKTAIL)

Based on the recipe from Jan Becher's Bar

### INGREDIENTS

2/3 ounce Becherovka  
2/3 ounce Amaretto  
2/3 ounce apricot brandy  
5 ounces orange juice  
Grenadine

### MAKE IT

**1.** Pour the Becherovka, Amaretto, apricot brandy, and orange juice into a cocktail shaker with several ice cubes. **2.** Shake well. **3.** Strain into a tall glass and add a dash of grenadine.



In Karlovy Vary, Becherovka is imbibed both straight and in cocktails, including the gin-and-tonic-like Beton, as presented at FooPaa, previous page, and the Midnight Pupp, mixed and poured at Jan Becher's Bar, this page.

## WHERE TO DRINK BECHEROVKA IN KARLOVY VARY

### Jan Becher Museum

Take a tour of the birthplace of Becherovka, where the liqueur was distilled from 1867 until 2010, then sample the herbal drink.  
T.G. Masaryka 282/57, 420/359-578-142, [becherovka.cz](http://becherovka.cz)

### Jan Becher's Bar

The basement of the historic and stately Grandhotel Pupp is dedicated to Becherovka. The extensive menu of cocktails includes a dozen or so made with Becherovka, some of which, including the Midnight Pupp, are signature creations of the bar.  
Grandhotel Pupp, Mírové náměstí 2, 420/353-109-111, [pupp.cz](http://pupp.cz)

### FooPaa

This chic cocktail bar attracts Karlovy Vary's bold and beautiful residents. There are several Becherovka cocktails on the menu, including the classic Beton (Becherovka and tonic).  
Jaltská 7, 420/722-658-334, [www.foopaa.cz](http://www.foopaa.cz)

has an obvious connection to medicine," he said. "But that's not something we want to promote."

The year of creation was 1807. Josef Becher, a local pharmacist, and Dr. Christian Frobrig, who accompanied Count Maximilian von Plettenberg on a visit to Karlovy Vary, discovered they shared a passion for mixing herbs, aromatic oils, and alcohol (and, really, who doesn't?). Legend has it that after experimentation in Becher's lab, Frobrig left Becher with a parting gift—the recipe. Two years later, Becher was selling English Bitter, later renamed Becherovka, in his pharmacy.

Almost any Czech (other than Darebnik) will tell you ways that Becherovka is somehow good for you: It eases colds; it loosens arthritic joints; it relieves asthma. And Roman, my former ESL student in Prague, once told me it works as a laxative. Which brings us back to Jan Becher's Bar, where I'd planted myself after the distillery visit. As soon as I finished the better-than-it-sounded Midnight Pupp, the bartender poured me a glass of Becherovka straight up.

The Czech expression for "cheers," *na zdraví*, doubles as "to health." As I raised a glass of the elixir, it never seemed more appropriate. **A**