

## FROM BAR TO BOTTLE

### How Bittermilk redefined Charleston's cocktail craft

MariElena Raya fell in love with the culture of cooking growing up working in the kitchen of Robert's of Charleston, her father's cherished restaurant (see Flashback, page 176). While attending the Culinary Institute of America in New York, she met and later married Joe Raya, whose hospitality background and training in wine and spirits through London's WSET program gave him a sharp eye for beverage craft.

In 2005, the husband-and-wife duo returned to Charleston, and five years later, transformed Robert's into The Gin Joint, one of the city's first craft cocktail bars. The couple soon discovered a **need for high quality mixers** curated with the same care as the drinks. "We thought, 'We're making all these syrups behind the bar, let's just make really awesome cocktail mixers that customers can take home and use,'" MariElena recalls.

Now handcrafted in North Charleston, **Bittermilk cocktail mixers** launched in August 2013. The nonalcoholic mixers bottle the base elements of a cocktail: bitterness, sweetness, and acidity. In 2017, Joe and MariElena sold The Gin Joint to pour their energy into the craftsmanship behind every bottle.

With an audience of bartenders and home cocktail makers in mind, the couple later **introduced Tippleman's**, a line of syrups made for professionals seeking high-quality flavor. They followed with **Barcoop Bevy**, an all-natural mixer line for casual drinkers who want quality without the fuss.

This year, the Rayas are taking on more private-label work, expanding a coffee syrup collection, and exploring developing soda lines and a Bittermilk canned line, an addition that brings their mixers even closer to being ready-to-enjoy.

—Alyssa Driggers



Bittermilk founders MariElena and Joe Raya, one of their cocktail mixers

PHOTOGRAPHS BY [RAYAS] ANDREW CEBULKA & [MIXER] CAMERON WILDER



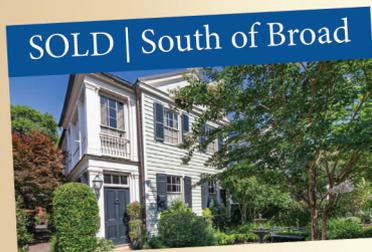
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