

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Milk With a Punch

A group of friends gathered in New York this past Thanksgiving and wandered down to the King Cole Bar, in the St. Regis Hotel. Most of them ordered a milk punch. The writer among these imbibing pilgrims proclaimed:

“Although lots of people presume milk punch is generically southern, my suspicion that it was a New Orleans libation is confirmed by Rick, a top-drawer food historian.”

Rick Ellis’ conclusions:

1. Its appearance in the very first drink manual ever published in the United States (1862), Jeremiah (Jerry) P. Thomas’ *Bar-Tender Guide* (alternately titled *How to Mix Drinks* or *The Bon-Vivant’s Companion*). Jerry bartended from Connecticut to California (with the Gold Rush) and back to New York City in 1851. He toured Europe and bartended in New Orleans. At the Occidental Hotel in San Francisco, he was earning \$100 a week—more than the Vice President of the United States. Ellis observed that the first recipe in Jerry’s book is very similar to recipes seen today, using brandy and rum instead of bourbon. “One is served hot and the two others are for a rather elaborate preparation called ‘English Milk Punch’—both served cold,” Rick elaborated.
2. By 1906, a recipe appeared in the third edition of New Orleans’ *The Picayune’s Creole Cook Book*. “I don’t have a copy of the first edition (1901),” Rick stated longingly. “But I wouldn’t be surprised to see it there.” The recipe, subtitled “*Ponche au Lait*,” calls for milk, sugar, brandy or whisky, and crushed ice. The book’s sesquicentennial edition suggested the adding of a sprinkling of grated nutmeg.
3. “Mary Land in her *Louisiana Cookery*—that’s 1954—includes a 30-page chapter devoted to ‘beverages,’” Rick added. “But the

only recipe for milk punch is 'A Milk Punch for the ILL!'—one pint milk, one cup sugar, and two cups sherry. Serve hot."

Even Wikipedia's entry for "Milk punch" begins:

"Milk punch is a milk based bourbon beverage that is common in New Orleans. It consists of milk, bourbon, sugar, and vanilla extract. It is served cold, and usually has nutmeg sprinkled on top."

This, of course, makes no mention of how many New Orleanians choose brandy over bourbon for this classic New Orleans brunch cocktail. The New Orleans Ritz-Carlton's master mixologist Chris McMillian makes his with a jigger of 1 ½ ounces brandy, 1 ounce simple syrup, ½ bar spoon high quality vanilla extract and a couple of ounces of Half-and-Half over cubed ice topped with grated nutmeg.

But is milk punch truly a New Orleans invention? Further investigation proves that it was not born in New Orleans, but like so many things in the Crescent City, it was there that milk punch had its "rebirth". Just as those who brunch at Galatoire's, Brennan's or Commander's might need a little "rebirth" themselves, milk punch is the perfect "hair of the dog" drink.

Milk punch may have had its origins in medieval Ireland. Some say the art of distilling was invented by the Arabs, or in Ireland that it was taught by St. Patrick himself. In any event, when the process was brought to the Emerald Isle from the Mediterranean (about 1500 years ago), the Irish developed a drink called *uisce beatha*, the water of life. Irish monks brought the recipe to Scotland, where it came to be known as *uiscebaugh*. When the Normans arrived in Ireland they liked *uisce beatha* a lot, and the word eventually became Anglicized as whiskey. Irish whiskey (always spelled with an e) first entered recorded history in the *Annals of the Four Masters*, 1405, wherein we discover that one Richard MacRaghnaill of Leitrim overdosed on it.

Originally employed for medicinal purposes, *usquebaugh* (the water of life) was often flavored with licorice, and usually drunk hot. One Irish medieval punch, known as *scáiltín*, contained whiskey, hot milk, melted butter, sugar, honey, cinnamon nutmeg or cloves (the original milk punch).

Curiously, one of the more interesting contenders for the inventor of milk punch is the ever-intriguing Aphra Behn (1640–1689), spy, *bon vivant* and prolific author and dramatist of the Restoration. Working as a spy for Charles II, Behn became the lover to a prominent and powerful royal, and from him she obtained political secrets to be used to the English advantage. It is said, however, that she held a larger attraction to women than to men. This English Sappho was one of the first English professional female writers. George Woodcock wrote:

“Her talent for companionship evidently extended beyond conversation and music, for she is credited with having introduced into England that liquor favoured of eighteenth-century toppers, milk punch.”

It seems that English antiquary William Oldys, a specialist in the history of the stage, heard an old actor state that “the first person he ever knew or heard of, who made the liquor called Milk Punch” was none other than Aphra Behn. This particular thespian, John Bowman, should have known, having appeared in at least three of Behn's plays (including the bawdy, punch-sodden *The Widow Ranter*). Bowman's character utters these words,

“Punch! 'Tis my Morning's Draught, my Table-drink, my Treat, my Regalio, my everything.”

But Aphra Behn may have just promoted the drink, for milk punch's first mention was in English statesman William Sacheverell's account of his visit to the Scottish island of Iona in 1688 (during her lifetime). Milk Punch then went into hiding until the middle of the eighteenth century, when it once again became all the rage, remaining so for almost a hundred years, particularly in its bottled form. Mr. Pickwick was thrilled to take “a most energetic pull” on a bottle of it, and a young Queen Victoria so enjoyed the version Nathaniel Whisson & Co. bottled that in 1838 she had them named “Purveyors of Milk Punch to Her Majesty”.

Benjamin Franklin had his own recipe. Preparing to depart Boston for Philadelphia on October 11, 1763, Benjamin Franklin wrote to James Bowdoin, taking his leave and enclosing a recipe for “Milk Punch”. Franklin's recipe shares characteristics of two types of beverages—possets and syllabubs. Possets combine hot milk with ale, wine, or brandy, sugar, and spices. Heat and alcohol curdle the milk. Possets were used as remedies for colds. Syllabubs combine milk with wine and lemon juice (or other acids); the acid from the wine and juice curdle the milk.

Ben's recipe exists today in his own hand, but the oldest extant recipe for milk punch (also with lemon juice) is over fifty years older. According to Montague Summers, who unearthed this recipe in 1914, it hails from “a tattered manuscript recipe book, the compilation of a good housewife named Mary Rockett, and dated 1711.”

The word *punch* was first recorded in British documents dating back to the year 1632. It is either a word derived from the Hindi (*panch*, which in Hindi is five for its five ingredients: sugar, *arrack*, lemon, water and tea or spices), adopted by sailors of the British East India Company or, alternately, it may have derived from “puncheon”, a cask holding seventy-two gallons (perhaps the first punch bowl). *Arrack* is an alcoholic beverage distilled from fermented sugarcane, fruit, grain or the sap of coconut palms.

Lin Turner, expert on numerous culinary subjects, reflects on the English origins of milk punch:

"English Milk Punch, pretty well says all there is to be said about the origins of this festive beverage, but doesn't beg the deeper question of 'Why?' As a strengthener for those made invalid by illness, milk was the beverage of choice back in the days of yore. A dollop of honey, a tot of whiskey and Aunt Gertie perks up. The alcohol was added to sterilize the unpasteurized milk of the day. There's not much worse than the side effects of medicine, and I for one will demand whiskey in my medicinally ordered, Milk Punch!"

In *Early American Beverages* there is an 1860 recipe for a brandy or rum milk punch in which the spirits are steeped in oranges and lemons; and an 1884 recipe that is sherry-based and calls for milk "warm from the cow". And like so many milk punch recipes dating all the way back to medieval Ireland, the latter recipe calls for grated nutmeg to taste.

There are so many variations of milk punch through the years, and how the traditional New Orleans recipe came into being the current international version of choice, one can only guess. But being a cosmopolitan port city with sailors, diplomats, authors, *bon vivants* and spies, it is only natural that the very best milk punch would be therein concocted.

Today New Orleans chef Susan Spicer (of Bayona, Herbsaint and Mondo restaurants) has a unique variation on the city's beloved milk punch. It adds to the brandy base the addition of Herbsaint, New Orleans' original absinthe substitute. The anise-flavoring of the Herbsaint goes back to the days when licorice was added to the *usque baugh* for medicinal purposes. At least one now has an excuse for imbibing New Orleans' classic brunch cocktail.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Milk With a Punch"
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2010