

drink·ol·o·gy

THE ART AND SCIENCE
OF THE COCKTAIL

JAMES WALLER

with contributions by
ANDREW MILLER

Illustrations by
GLENN WOLFF

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Champagne

ISAAC NEWTON WAS TRYING TO CATCH SOME Z'S WHEN GRAVITY hit him over the head. Christopher Columbus set sail for India but collided with the New World. And Dom Pérignon was just trying to bottle some homebrew.

Winters in Champagne, a region of northeastern France, are fierce—so cold that the wine often stopped fermenting in its wooden casks. But the yeast of Champagne is especially hardy, and the small grapes of Champagne are especially sweet. The yeast goes dormant in the winter chill, but awakes in the spring to a sugary little snack, and the wine begins to ferment again. For centuries, monks kept their wine in big oaken barrels, and the effervescent byproduct of that second fermentation escaped without notice. But in the seventeenth century, Brother Pérignon, the cellar master at the Benedictine abbey in Hautvillers, decided to bottle his efforts for safekeeping. The flimsy French glass began exploding a few months later.

Pérignon sensed he was on to something. The good brother's genius was to figure out how to keep the lid on the fizz. He manipulated the timing of the fermentation with the addition of sugar,

sent away to England for better bottles, and stopped them up with mushroom-shaped Spanish corks. It took him until he was 60 to get it right. But at last, champagne was born. *Vive la Champagne!*

Some years later, a certain young, local widow, *la veuve* Clicquot, was left to run her husband's wine business. Not satisfied with being a mere vintner, she revolutionized champagne by inventing riddling, the process by which sediment is removed from the bottles. Crafting the first *table de remuage*, or riddling board, out of her own kitchen table, she angled the champagne bottles into holes in the board, turning them by hand several times a day and repositioning them until they were upside-down. The sediment collected near the neck of each bottle, where she froze it. It shot out of the bottles *en masse* when she uncorked them. Mme. Clicquot re-stoppered the bottles, then matured the wine in the labyrinthine tunnels dug under the chalk quarries of Reims by the Romans. Her exports won praise throughout Europe. Though the method has been automated somewhat, champagne today is still made in much the same way.

The French knew a good thing when they saw it, and kept this *méthode Champenoise* secret as long as possible. But that proved as difficult as keeping those bubbles in the bottle. Today, fine sparkling wines are produced worldwide, but only those made in northeastern France can be labeled “Champagne.”

BRUT ET DOUX

Champagnes are distinguished from one another by differences in sweetness. Champagne marked *brut* is exceptionally dry, containing less than 2 percent sugar—just enough is added to make it fizzy. Champagne *doux* (sweet) can be up to 12 percent sugar. Most

champagne is somewhere in between: *sec* (dry) or *demi sec* (semidry). Most years, champagne is blended with wine from prior harvests to ensure a consistent quality in a winemaker's output. But if the grapes are especially good, vintage champagne will be pressed and fermented from a single year's grapes. Whatever its year, don't wait too long to drink it: champagne and other sparkling wines do not benefit from aging, and can go flat in the bottle.

Its sweetness and provenance have long made champagne a celebratory, sophisticated drink. Few Bowery bums have drowned their sorrows in a bottle of bubbly. Throughout the West, it is used to salute a new year, to christen a new boat, and to toast a new marriage. In *Casablanca*, Victor Laszlo ordered Champagne Cocktails for Ilsa, although given the political climate in Morocco at the time, it's as likely they were drinking Spanish *cava*, Italian *spumante*, or even German *Sekt*—as the sparkling wines of those countries are called. The bubbly has even inspired its own Broadway production number, in which flute-wielding Parisians “fly to the sky on champagne.” (Leslie Caron reprises champagne's praises in *Gigi* every night at your local video store.)

There are nearly half a billion bubbles in a bottle of sparkly, with enough internal pressure to keep a truck tire inflated, so watch where you point the thing when you open it. A big pop is festive, sure, but the idea is to keep the fizz in your glass. With a towel draped over your hand and the bottle at ten o'clock, hold the cork firmly while rotating the bottle with your other hand. Twist until the cork is loosened. It won't make as much noise as prying the cork off with your thumbs, but the golden liquid will dance across your palette like Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire on a ballroom floor.

Rum

SMASH, SMASH, SMASH! SMASH THE DEMON RUM!” HER BATTLE cry echoed off saloon walls from Kansas City to New York. While the good sisters of the Women's Christian Temperance Union stood by singing hymns, the axe-wielding prohibitionist Carry Nation took aim at bottles of Caribbean rum and left their contents drizzled over many a barroom floor. She had her reasons. This most American of spirits had been wreaking havoc ever since 1493, when Columbus swiped sugarcane from the Canary Islands and planted it in the West Indies. It didn't take long for the locals there to figure out that this tall, reedy grass tasted even better fermented. Debauchery ensued.

American colonists knocked back 12 million gallons of the stuff each year—nearly four gallons each—giving “sugar high” an altogether different meaning long before M&Ms came on the market. Although Lord Byron claimed it brought him closer to the divine (“There's nought, no doubt, so much the spirit calms/As rum and true religion”), rum was singularly responsible for much of the drunkenness across the pond from where he waxed poetic. Rum's nefarious effects were, unfortunately, not limited to those who imbibed. New Englanders

turned West Indian molasses into the first commercially distilled spirit in the Colonies. They sold a lot and drank even more. But they always saved some rum to ship to Africa, where it was exchanged for slaves. Demonic, indeed.

Rum was also at the root of early calls for a kind of campaign finance reform. None other than George Washington distributed untold gallons of rum among the voters of Virginia, who subsequently elected him to the House of Burgesses in 1758, amid cries of foul play. Rum even played a part in inspiring revolution: a 1765 tax on non-British molasses helped fuel the outrage that ultimately found its voice in the Boston Tea Party. The following decade, one Paul Revere would use it to fortify his galloping *cri de guerre*. Rum's long association with smuggling ("rum runners"), piracy, and drunken sailors has not helped its reputation. People thought it so low that its very name, lengthened to "rummy," became a stand-in for wanton inebriates of all stripes. What a complicated, unsettling history for a liquor that's so simple and so good.

RUMS, YOUNG AND OLD

Although rum can, in fact, be made from sugarcane, it's usually distilled from molasses, a byproduct of refining sugarcane into the white crystals we put in coffee and tea. Rum is characterized as light, medium, or heavy: the longer molasses, water, and yeast are allowed to stew, the darker and more flavorful, or heavy, the rum. The heaviest rums are fermented for about three weeks; the lightest for only a few days.

The yeast cultures themselves are peculiar to each distillery, and because they contribute to the rum's ultimate taste, they are guarded

like gold. In fact, the finest distilleries no longer add yeast, but instead use *dunder*, the residue left in the stills after decades and decades of cooking this goo. The distillate is aged in oak anywhere from six months for the clear, light rums, to six years for the heavier varieties. Rum that has been aged for six years or more is labeled *añejo*, which is simply a Spanish word for "old." (Highly aromatic, añejo rums are delicious sipped neat from a sniffer.)

Jamaica is known for its dark rum; Haiti and Barbados for their medium-bodied varieties. Cuba produces some of the world's best light rum—if you can get it. Puerto Rico's light rum is mighty fine, too, and far easier to find in the States. "Overproof" rum (generally referred to as 151-proof rum, or, if it's distilled in Guyana, as Demerara rum) is a wickedly strong distillation; in cocktails, it's generally used to add potency and bite to the drink.

Befitting a liquor with a checkered past, no one is quite sure where rum's name comes from. One theory links it to *saccharum*, the Latin word for sugarcane, but there's a whole mess of Latin nouns that end in -rum, and a more likely abbreviation would be "sac," anyway. A more colorful explanation has groggy British sailors naming it after Old Rummy, a kindly old admiral who plied them with the demon water to treat their scurvy. (It turned out the real remedy was the lemon juice the sailors mixed it with, but they downed it in quantities that left them stupefied anyway.) But it seems more likely that his nickname derived from Old Rummy's drinking habits, and not the other way around. The most credible derivation is from *rumbustiousness*, meaning uncontrollable exuberance, or the British slang *rumbullion*, a rambunctious uproar or melee; Carry Nation would undoubtedly agree with these etymologies.

Tequila

LET'S GET THE WHOLE WORM THING STRAIGHT RIGHT NOW, *muchachos*. If there's a worm at the bottom of your tequila bottle, you've either purchased gag-inducing hooch aimed at gullible gringos, or your top-shelf booze is infested by some kind of alcohol-breathing, alien bug.

There *is* sometimes a worm—or, more correctly, a pickled caterpillar—inside bottles of mezcal, a liquor made from a plant related to the blue agave, from which tequila is distilled. There is no mescaline in mezcal (the words are unrelated), and although eating this worm, or *gusano*, may freak out your friends and provide you with a portion of your minimum daily protein requirement, it won't, despite irrepressible legends to the contrary, bring you any closer to seeing God or make you sexually irresistible. If you have visions after swallowing this larva, it's because it's been soaking in very strong alcohol for years. If suddenly everyone at the party wants to bed you—well, remember they're probably drinking heavily, too.

There *is* mescaline in peyote, which comes from a cactus that often grows alongside blue agave, but agave is not a cactus, and Mexicans do not make alcohol from cacti of any kind. Agave is related to the lily and amaryllis, and looks like a basketball-player-size aloe plant with a 200-pound pineapple at its core. There are more than 130 species of agave, which is also known as maguey, but just one may be used to make tequila, and it grows only in the Mexican state of Jalisco and a few communities neighboring its capital, Guadalajara.

The Aztecs and their descendents have been making moonshine from different agave plants for thousands of years, but it was the Spanish who introduced them to distilling. Still, concocting tequila is so difficult and complicated it's a wonder that anyone ever bothered to figure out how to do it. The heart of the plant, or *piña*, named after the fruit that it resembles, must first be harvested. This in itself is no small feat. The *piña* usually weighs more than the *jimador* (he's the poor guy picking it), and it is surrounded by hundreds of seven-foot-long, thorn-covered spikes—so it's kind of like trying to wrangle a giant, sugary porcupine. Once corralled, the *piña* is steamed, baked, roasted, shredded, juiced, cooked, ground, crushed, and otherwise clobbered. These giant nuggets are so tough and fibrous that distilleries often sell their discarded pulp to construction companies, which use them to make bricks.

Each distillery uses its own method to humble its *piñas* into submission, and the variation in technique and timing accounts, in part, for the difference in taste among tequilas. The juice strained from the resulting mash is known, poetically, as *aguamiel*, or honey-water; after it's extracted, it's mixed with pure H₂O, fermented, and twice distilled.

Tequila *blanco* (white tequila) is filtered and bottled immediately. Bottles marked *joven* (young) or *oro* (gold) are merely white tequila colored with caramel or other additives. As it ages in wooden casks, tequila darkens and its flavor sharpens. Tequila *reposado*, or rested, is ripened for between two months and a year. *Añejo*, or aged, must be mellowed for at least one year.

The Mexican town of Tequila, founded in the sixteenth century by a Spanish conquistador, is where it all began, and almost all its residents are still involved in the tequila industry—from agave cultivation to tequila sales and marketing. The origin of the word *tequila*, however, is open to debate. In the language of the indigenous Nahuatl, the word means (depending on who you ask) “the place of harvesting plants,” “the place of wild herbs,” “the place of tricks,” or even “the rock that cuts,” supposedly for the jagged obsidian in the hills surrounding the town. But trust *Drinkology*. Once you’ve begun drinking tequila, you won’t care about the etymology of its name.

Vodka

AMERICANS DITHER ABOUT STICKS AND STONES. IN RUSSIA, they say, “Call me what you like, only give me some vodka.” While Poles, Ukrainians, Russians, Byelorussians, Balts, and Scandinavians will all argue that *their* ancestors invented vodka, it was probably introduced to all of them by Genoese merchants, who learned about distilling from early Italian explorers visiting the East. Vodka was, however, perfected by northern and eastern Europeans, who made the drink their own.

Vodka was first introduced stateside by the Smirnoff family, who had been the exclusive vodka supplier to the czars but fled Russia after the Bolshevik revolution. We Americans resisted its charms, however, until World War II was well under way. A Los Angeles bartender who’d ordered too much ginger beer tried to get rid of it by mixing it with gin and with whiskey, but never received requests for another round. When this alchemist added it to vodka and squeezed in a little lime, however, he struck gold: the Moscow Mule was born, and with it Americans’ enduring love affair with this most durable liquor. Even

as the cold war iced relations with vodka's mother country, the great thaw in America's relationship with its enemy's number-one pastime was on. It is now the most popular liquor in the States, accounting for over 20 percent of all distilled spirits consumed.

That impressive figure pales, however, in comparison to the gusto with which Russians guzzle the stuff. If you've heard the old saw that they drink vodka like water, . . . well, believe it. The word itself is a diminutive form of *voda*, Russian for "water," and by the mid-1990s, annual Russian vodka consumption was equivalent to more than 30 liters for every man, woman, and child.

The Russians' relationship with vodka has not been entirely one-sided, however, as evidenced by another age-old Russian proverb: "Vodka spoils everything but the glasses." Although Ivan the Terrible invented the officer's club in the sixteenth century, building *kabaks*, or taverns, exclusively for his palace guard, subsequent czars were ambivalent, and ordered them closed and reopened according to their own morals and whims. But the genie was already out of the bottle, so to speak, and one economically minded czar nationalized vodka production, monopolized its sale, and levied heavy taxes on it, using the proceeds to finance conquest and repression. This proved to be as habit-forming as the alcoholism that decimates characters in the novels and plays of Dostoyevsky and Chekhov.

A need for sober troops during World War I saw the introduction of prohibition, which was supported wholeheartedly by Lenin, a notorious teetotaler. But despite the father of Soviet communism's belief that "the proletariat has no need of intoxication, because it derives its strongest stimulant from the communist ideal," the production and sale

of "rotgut," was soon a revenue stream for Russia's socialist leaders, too. (In the mid-twentieth century, it was the sales tax on vodka that put Cosmonauts in orbit.) Then, in the 1980s, political reformer Mikhail Gorbachev—much more popular in the West than in his homeland—curtailed vodka production and gamely tried to control his people's propensity to abuse the stuff. Gorby's *perestroika* worked, but—guess what?—his prohibitionist efforts failed miserably.

COLORLESS, ODORLESS, TASTELESS (WELL, ALMOST)

If liquor were religion, vodka would be Zen Buddhism. It is valued for its lack of exactly those things prized in other spirits: aroma, color, and palate. Vodka is allowed to distill until its alcohol content is quite high, then filtered through charcoal to remove any remaining impurities. Because it is distilled and redistilled until nearly every trace of its source has dissipated, vodka's base materials are more or less irrelevant to its flavor, and vodka is generally classified only by its country of origin. While Poles sometimes make it from potatoes, it is more often distilled from rye, wheat, barley malt, sugar beets, or (especially) corn. Though some Polish and Russian vodka is aged in oak, most vodka-drinkers' preference is for double- or triple-distilled vodka straight from the tap.

Vodka's most pronounced characteristic is not taste, but its inefably smooth, buttery mouth-feel—a sensation that's enhanced when the liquor is chilled. Drunk neat, vodka should be ice cold: keep it in your freezer and leave it there until you are ready to serve it. And if you *are* drinking it straight, never pour it over ice—the

cubes may impart unwanted flavor to this most minimalist of spirits.

Its spiritual agnosticism makes vodka the perfect mixer. The drink of the czars combines equally well with vegetable juice, fruit juice, tonic water, soda water, and, of course, other liquors. Flavored vodka, too, is quite popular. Russians are fond of peach and cherry; the Scandinavians of *akvavit*, a vodka that's been flavored and redistilled with caraway and dill. Americans are becoming partial to lemon-, vanilla-, pepper-, and orange-flavored vodkas. For the twentysomething set, vodka—flavored or not—has replaced gin as the base of most Martinis, which are now being mixed in combinations and colors that would make James Bond cringe.

But 007 be damned. Drink it any way you please. And to insure any toast made with vodka, do what the Russians do: smash your tumblers in the fireplace afterward. Just don't use the good crystal. It seems that vodka spoils the glasses after all.

AGENT ORANGE



When choosing your poison, you might try this strongly orange-flavored concoction.

- 🍊 orange peel
- 1½ ounces vodka
- ¾ ounce Grand Marnier
- ¼ ounce Cointreau or triple sec
- ½ ounce orange juice

Rim a chilled cocktail glass with the orange peel. Combine other ingredients in a cocktail shaker, with ice. Shake well, and strain into the glass. Garnish with the orange peel.