

BOURBON

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This is not written by a connoisseur of Bourbon. Ninety-nine percent of Bourbon drinkers know more about Bourbon than I do. It is about the aesthetic of Bourbon drinking in general and in particular of knocking it back neat.

I can hardly tell one Bourbon from another, unless the other is very bad. Some bad Bourbons are even more memorable than good ones. For example, I can recall being broke with some friends in Tennessee and deciding to have a party and being able to afford only two-fifths of a \$1.75 Bourbon called Two Natural, whose label showed dice coming up 5 and 2. Its taste was memorable. The psychological effect was also notable. After knocking back two or three shots over a period of half an hour, the three male drinkers looked at each other and said in a single voice: "Where are the women?"

I have not been able to locate this remarkable Bourbon since. Not only should connoisseurs of Bourbon not read this article, neither should persons preoccupied with the perils of alcoholism, cirrhosis, esophageal hemorrhage, cancer of the palate, and so forth—all real enough dangers. I, too, deplore these afflictions. But, as between these evils and the aesthetic of Bourbon drinking, that is, the use of Bourbon to warm the heart, to reduce the anomie of the late twentieth century, to cut the cold phlegm of

Wednesday afternoons, I choose the aesthetic. What, after all, is the use of not having cancer, cirrhosis, and such, if a man comes home from work every day at five-thirty to the exurbs of Montclair or Memphis and there is the grass growing and the little family looking not quite at him but just past the side of his head, and there's Cronkite on the tube and the smell of pot roast in the living room, and inside the house and outside in the pretty exurb has settled the noxious particles and the sadness of the old dying Western world, and him thinking: "Jesus, is this it? Listening to Cronkite and the grass growing?"

If I should appear to be suggesting that such a man proceed as quickly as possible to anesthetize his cerebral cortex by ingesting ethyl alcohol, the point is being missed. Or part of the point. The joy of Bourbon drinking is not the pharmacological effect of C_2H_5OH on the cortex but rather the instant of the whiskey being knocked back and the little explosion of Kentucky U.S.A. sunshine in the cavity of the nasopharynx and the hot bosky bite of Tennessee summertime—aesthetic considerations to which the effect of the alcohol is, if not dispensable, at least secondary.

By contrast, Scotch: for me (not, I presume, for a Scot), drinking Scotch is like looking at a picture of Noel Coward. The whiskey assaults the nasopharynx with all the excitement of paragonic. Scotch drinkers (not all, of course) I think of as upward-mobile Americans, Houston and New Orleans businessmen who graduate from Bourbon about the same time they shed seersuckers for Lilly slacks. Of course, by now these same folk may have gone back to Bourbon and seersucker for the same reason, because too many Houston oilmen drink Scotch.

Nothing, therefore, will be said about the fine points of sour mash, straightigs, blends, bonded, except a general preference for the lower proofs. It is a matter of the arithmetic of aesthetics. If one derives the same pleasure from knocking back 80-proof Bourbon as 100-proof, the formula is both as simple as $2 + 2 = 4$ and as incredible as non-Euclidean geometry. Consider. One knocks back five one-ounce shots of 80-proof Early Times or four shots of 100-proof Old Fitzgerald. The alcohol ingestion is the same:

$$\begin{aligned} 5 \times 40\% &= 2 \\ 4 \times 50\% &= 2 \end{aligned}$$

Yet, in the case of the *Early Times*, one has obtained an extra quantum of joy without cost to liver, brain, or gastric mucosa. A bonus, pure and simple, an aesthetic gain as incredible as two parallel lines meeting at infinity.

An apology to the reader is in order, nevertheless, for it has just occurred to me that this is the most unedifying and even maleficent piece I ever wrote—if it should encourage potential alcoholics to start knocking back Bourbon neat. It is also the unfairer: Because I am, happily and unhappily, endowed with a bad GI tract, diverticulosis, neurotic colon, and a mild recurring nausea, which make it less likely for me to become an alcoholic than my healthier fellow Americans. I can hear the reader now: Who is he kidding? If this joker has to knock back five shots of Bourbon every afternoon just to stand the twentieth century, he's already an alcoholic. Very well. I submit to this or any semantic. All I am saying is that if I drink much more than this I will get sick as a dog for two days and the very sight and smell of whiskey will bring on the heaves. Readers beware, therefore, save only those who have stronger wills or as bad a gut as I.

The pleasure of knocking back Bourbon lies in the plane of the aesthetic but at an opposite pole from connoisseurship. My preference for the former is or is not deplorable depending on one's value system—that is to say, how one balances out the Epicurean virtues of cultivating one's sensory end organs with the greatest discrimination and at least cost to one's health, against the virtue of evocation of time and memory and of the recovery of self and the past from the fogged-in disoriented Western world. In Kierkegaardian terms, the use of Bourbon to such an end is a kind of aestheticized religious mode of existence, whereas connoisseurship, the discriminating but single-minded stimulation of sensory end organs, is the aesthetic of damnation.

Two exemplars of the two aesthetics come to mind:

Imagine Clifton Webb, scarf at throat, sitting at Cap d'Antibes on a perfect day, the little wavelets of the Mediterranean sparkling in the sunlight, and he is savoring a 1959 Mouton Rothschild.

Then imagine William Faulkner, having finished *Absalom, Absalom!*, drained, written out, pissed-off, feeling himself over the edge and out of it, nowhere, but he goes somewhere, his favorite hunting place in the Delta wilderness of the Big Sunflower River and, still feeling bad with his hunting cronies and maybe even a little phony, which he was, what with him trying to pretend that he was one of them, a farmer, hunkered down in the cold and rain after the hunt, after honorably passing up the does and seeing no bucks, shivering and snot-nosed, takes out a flat pint of any Bourbon at all and flatfoots about a third of it. He shivers again but not from the cold.

Bourbon does for me what the piece of cake did for Proust.

1926: As a child watching my father in Birmingham, in the exurbs, living next to number-6 fairway of the New Country Club, him disdaining both the bathtub gin and white lightning of the time, aging his own Bourbon in a charcoal keg, on his hands and knees in the basement sucking on a siphon, a matter of gravity requiring cheek pressed against cement floor, the siphon getting going, the decanter ready, the first hot spurt into his mouth not spat out.

1933: My uncle's sun parlor in the Mississippi Delta and toddlers on a Sunday afternoon, the prolonged and meditative tinkle of silver spoon against crystal to dissolve the sugar; talk, tinkle, talk; the talk mostly political: "Roosevelt is doing a good job; no, the son of a bitch is betraying his class."

1934: Drinking at a Delta dance, the boys in bi-swing jackets and tab collars, tough-talking and profane and also scared of the girls and therefore safe in the men's room. Somebody passes around bootleg Bourbon in a Coke bottle. It's awful. Tears start from eyes, faces turn red. "Hot damn, that's good!"

1935: Drinking at a football game in college. UNC versus Duke. One has a blind date. One is lucky. She is beautiful. Her clothes are the color of the fall leaves and her face turns up like a flower. But what to *say* to her, let alone what to do, and whether she is "nice" or "hot"—a distinction made in those days. But what to *say*? Take a drink, by now from a proper concave hip flask (a long way from the Delta Coke bottle) with a hinged top. Will she have a drink? No. But it's all right. The taste of the Bourbon

(Cream of Kentucky) and the smell of her fuse with the brilliant Carolina fall and the sounds of the crowd and the hit of the linemen in a single synesthesia.

1941: Drinking mint juleps, famed Southern Bourbon drink, though in the Deep South not really drunk much. In fact, they are drunk so seldom that when, say, on Derby Day somebody gives a julep party, people drink them like cocktails, forgetting that a good julep holds at least five ounces of Bourbon. Men fall face-down unconscious, women wander in the woods disconsolate and amnesiac, full of thoughts of Kahili Gibran and the limberlost.

Would you believe the first mint julep I had I was sitting not on a columned porch but in the Boo Snooker bar of the New Yorker Hotel with a Bellevue nurse in 1941? The nurse, a nice upstate girl, head floor nurse, brisk, swift, good-looking: Bellevue nurses, the best in the world and this one the best of Bellevue, at least the best-looking. The julep, an atrocity, a heavy syrupy Bourbon and water in a small glass clotted with ice. But good!

How could two women be more different than the beautiful languid Carolina girl and this swift handsome girl from Utica, best Dutch stock? One thing was sure. Each was to be courted, loved, drunk with, with Bourbon. I should have stuck with Bourbon. We changed to gin fizzes because the bartender said he came from New Orleans and could make good ones. He could and did. They were delicious. What I didn't know was that they were made with raw egg albumen and I was allergic to it. Driving her home to Brooklyn and being in love! What a lovely fine strapping smart girl! And thinking of being invited into her apartment where she lived alone and of her offering to cook a little supper and of the many kisses and the sweet love that already existed between us and was bound to grow apace, when on the Brooklyn Bridge itself my upper lip began to swell and little sparks of light flew past the corner of my eye like St. Elmo's fire. In the space of thirty seconds my lip stuck out a full three-quarter inch, like a shelf, like Mortimer Snerd. Not only was kissing out of the question but my eyes swelled shut. I made it across the bridge, pulled over to the curb, and fainted. Whereupon this noble nurse drove me back to Bellevue, gave me a shot, and put me to bed.

Anybody who monkeys around with gin and egg white deserves

what he gets. I should have stuck with Bourbon and have from that day to this.

POSTSCRIPT: Reader, just in case you don't want to knock it back straight and would rather monkey around with perfectly good Bourbon, here's my favorite recipe, "Cud'n Walker's Uncle Will's Favorite Mint Julep Recipe."

You need excellent Bourbon whiskey; rye or Scotch will not do. Put half an inch of sugar in the bottom of the glass and merely dampen it with water. Next, very quickly—and here is the trick in the procedure—crush your ice, actually powder it, preferably in a towel with a wooden mallet, so quickly that it remains dry, and, slipping two sprigs of fresh mint against the inside of the glass, cram the ice in right to the brim, packing it with your hand. Finally, fill the glass, which apparently has no room left for anything else, with Bourbon, the older the better, and grate a bit of nutmeg on the top. The glass will frost immediately. Then settle back in your chair for half an hour of cumulative bliss.

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