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The Golden Bowl

An inspired and amusing exploration of that nearly forgotten British nautical necessity: punch.

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'Tis the season, and I suspect there is no one on earth capable of embracing it more festively than David Wondrich. His first book about cocktails, *Imbibe!* (2007), is a rousing call to the bar in the form of the life and times of pioneering nineteenth-century bartender—and author of *The Bartender's Guide*—Jerry Thomas, recipes included. To it he now adds the wildly entertaining and fantastically instructive *Punch: The Delights (and Dangers) of the Flowing Bowl* (Perigee, $24). Who knew that a book about the history of a drink that is, after all, just "a simple combination of distilled spirits, citrus juice, sugar, water and a little spice" could be a page-turner? But it is, from the moment when Wondrich quotes an eighteenth-century song I can easily imagine yowling around the Christmas tree in my dining room come December, a dram of something boozy in hand:

> You may talk of brisk Claret, sing Praises of Sherry,
> Speak well of old Hock, Mum, Cider and Perry;
> But you must drink Punch if you mean to be Merry.

I will sing, however, only if Wondrich promises to drop by for a cup of his own Royal Hibernian Punch and belt this little ditty out with me, because I have rarely enjoyed the company of an author as much as I do his. This is largely due to the fact that, in addition to being an enthusiast and a tireless researcher, he is a true romantic when it comes to punch, a man unafraid to wax poetic—or perhaps alcoholic—about the pleasures of providing friends with drink even as he acknowledges the potential pitfalls thereof. "I remember, dimly, one summer afternoon when I made the famous Philadelphia Fish-House Punch for the first time, leaving in the copious amounts of rum and brandy but omitting most of the water," he ruminates. "Fortunately, it was at a house party out in the country and nobody had to drive. Or even walk, for that matter. Even staying pantsed was somewhat of a challenge."

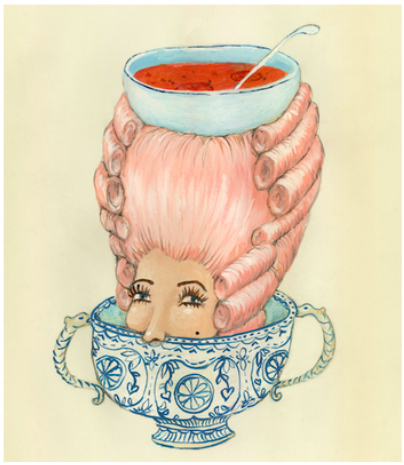

Illustration by Martha Rich

He's equally romantic, not to mention pragmatic, about the history side of things. Armed with all the relevant information about punch's beginnings as a seventeenth-century British nautical necessity—the citrus warded off scurvy, and distilled liquor took up far less space on board than wine or beer, which often spoiled anyway—he moves through the decades at a steady clip, focusing on the extreme circumstances that brought about his beloved beverage. It was, among other things, the fuel behind the great discoveries of the East India Company and its kin, and Wondrich takes us out on the high seas and to the strange outposts where adventurers found themselves much in need of a taste of oblivion.

> Few abstained from drinking Punch and many abused it. Yet one can hardly blame them. . . . Thirteen thousand miles and six months at sea from home, pent up in a claustrophobic little compound . . . perched on the rim of an alien land whose people, languages and way of life were utterly foreign to anything

> in [their] experience, with little to occupy [their] time for weeks on end but waiting for ships to come in and trying not to think about the disease and death that were claiming all too many of [their] comrades.

Not that he wants to linger on the negative. "Fortunately, this being a drink book," he practically sighs with relief, "we can skip over most of the fear, pain, and drama and concentrate on the carousing with which an often intolerable existence was solaced."

He skips us right ahead, then, to 1700, by which time the "Age of Punch" had arrived, "cast[ing] many of the other traditional compound drinks of Olde Englande, those turbid, egg-rich brews based on ale and wine, into the outer darkness, where is wailing and gnashing of teeth." From there, it's just a few more pages, a quick trip to America, and about a hundred years until punch is pretty much on its way out.

Which is precisely where Wondrich swoops in with his magnificent rehabilitation project; he wants to restore punch to its rightful place in the drinky firmament, and that means spreading the word about how to make it. The remaining two-thirds of his book are given over to instruction. First comes "A Concise but Comprehensive Course in the Art of Making Punch," which its author suggests skipping "unless you're a total mixology geek," but which I wouldn't have missed for, well, all the punch in the world. And then there's a recipe section, which he prefaces with this caution: "A cup of Punch is four eighteenth-century-sized glasses, after which many people will stop. Others will get much deeper into the bowl. In other words, you'll have to figure out how much your friends are good for; I can't help you with that. They're *your* friends." Among the offerings are delectable brews with names like Major Bird's Brandy Punch, Spread Eagle Punch (whiskey), and Yale College Punch ("In 2007: Trashcan Punch. In 1869: Yale College Punch. Enough said"), as well as that notorious Philadelphia Fish-House Punch, for whosoever shall be brave enough to risk their trousers.

Throughout, Wondrich delights in the language of drink as much as in drink itself. "Above all things," he declares, "Punch must be moreish," a proclamation explicated in a footnote that reads: "Drinks writing has few terms of art entirely its own; this is one of them, and it is indispensable. It simply means 'it makes you want to drink more of it.'" Was a neologism ever so useful?

Much like a good punch, which, according to Wondrich, is all about proportion, the mix of comedy, history, technique, and recipe here is perfectly calibrated. Then it's brightened by Wondrich's total refusal to take himself and his undertaking too seriously. Here's his explanation of how he's chosen what to include in the recipe section of the book: "If a recipe is here, it's because it's historically important, it helps to illustrate the techniques and practices of the Punch-maker's art or it's just plain delicious."

He is as helpful on the how-to as he is on the history; he has fun making punch and he wants us to, too. At times, he can be hilariously stern—"Some people obsess about getting the block of ice to look just right, even going so far as to fill it with flowers, slices of fruit, and so on. I do not"—but he's generous when it counts. For exemplary punch, you do need a "serious" juicer (he even recommends a specific model), but the rest is kismet. "I've made Punch successfully in silver bowls, ones of fine china and of expensive cut glass," he informs us briskly. "I've also made it successfully in pasta pots, Le Creuset Dutch ovens, plastic bowls, melamine bowls, tin buckets, spackle buckets, salad spinners . . . nameless orange plastic things from Home Depot, large earthenware flowerpots, galvanized washtubs and a host of other miscellaneous vessels I'm not recalling. I have not made it in a washing machine, but I know someone who has." I'm hoping he'll bring that person to my holiday party, too.

Washing machine or no, we've come a long way from the early 1700s, when one of the few ways to figure out the alcohol content of liquor was to test "whether or not a portion of gunpowder wet with it [would] catch fire." This was the preferred method in Coleridge's day, and one can quite easily imagine him coasting toward Xanadu on a fiery wave of punch. Speaking of which, I'm sorely tempted to include the entire "Suggested Procedure" section of the recipe for *Punschglühbowle* (printed here in translation from a book belonging to Kaiser Wilhelm II called *Bowls and Punches for the Use of the German Army in the Field and on Maneuvers*), but I won't bother, as I'm fairly certain the gist is conveyed by just the final sentence: "Serve flaming in teacups."

"The Punch bowl . . . is freedom," Wondrich writes in the knowing tones of a hangovers veteran, "and freedom is a test that some must fail." And though you should be prepared to be rendered "somewhat unfit for waltzing or quadrilling after supper" if you decide to whip up a batch of Punch Jelly (essentially nineteenth-century Jell-O shots) with this book in hand, you'll have a fighting chance at much more important things.

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