



Punch: The Delights (and Dangers) of the Flowing Bowl

By David Wondrich

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An Authoritative, historically informed tribute to the punch bowl, by the James Beard Award-winning author of *Imbibe!*.

Replete with historical anecdotes, expert observations, notes on technique and ingredients, and of course world-class recipes, *Punch* will take readers on a celebratory journey into the punch bowl that starts with some very lonely British sailors and swells to include a cast of lords and ladies, admirals, kings, presidents, poets, pirates, novelists, spies, and other colorful characters.

It is a tale only David Wondrich can tell-and it is sure to delight, amuse, and inspire the mixologist and party-planner in everyone.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Wildly entertaining and fantastically instructive..."

-*Bookforum*

"Most punches have fascinating back stories - at least they do when Wondrich is in charge."

-*The New York Times Book Review*

"Mr. Wondrich's noble effort to restore Punch's good name offers sound advice on the basics of Punch-making along with a variety of vintage recipes."

-*The Wall Street Journal*

"A lively, fascinating history of punch[...]. Wondrich is a tremendously witty writer."

-*The New Yorker*

"Wondrich peels punch's image off the sticky fraternity house floor and reinstates it into the more dignified annals of drinking tradition."

-*The Boston Globe*

"It's fair to say there's nobody in the country who knows more about drinking than David Wondrich."

-*New York Magazine*

"*Punch* stays true to the antique, but by no means staid, spirit of its old timey, black-and-white-etching-illustrated subject matter, while somehow managing to keep current, relevant, and fresh. [...] A rollickingly fun read."

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"[Wondrich's] interest in history runs as deep as his thirst for beverage experiences on the banks of the mainstream[...]."

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"Punch lovers are in luck[...]. These aren't the fruity, simplistic punches of recent times. They're complex, subtle concoctions...."

-*The Oregonian*

"The best part of the book isn't the history-it's the 40-plus detailed recipes of how to make your very own authentic Punch."

-*The New York Post*

About the Author

David Wondrich is one of the world's foremost authorities on cocktails and their history. A contributing editor at *Esquire* and at *Wine and Spirits*, he has also written for numerous other publications on the subject, including the *New York Times*, *Saveur*, *Real Simple*, and *Drinks*. Dr. Wondrich holds a Ph.D. in comparative literature, and is a founding member of The Museum of the American Cocktail and a partner in Beverage Alcohol Resource, the world's first advanced education program in spirits and cocktails. He lives in

Brooklyn, New York, with his wife and daughter.

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Preface

This book is about Punch. And by “Punch,” I don’t mean the stuff sluiced around at fraternity mixers—several 1.75-liter handles of whatever hooch is the cheapest, diluted with a random array of sodas and ersatz juices and ladled elegantly forth from a plastic trashcan. Nor do I mean the creative concoctions proffered by feature articles on stylish entertaining, the sort where a near-homeopathic quantity of liquor is thrown into a desperate rearguard action against an army of berries, tropical fruits and such, only to succumb to a fizzy wave of cheap cava. In short, there are lots of Punches this book isn’t about. But you wouldn’t expect a serious book on the Martini (such things do exist) to waste a lot of time on the so-called chocolate Martini, or in fact anything not containing gin, vermouth and practically nothing else that tries to pass itself off as a Martini—to say nothing of the “x-tini,” where x= “Mar.” And this is a serious book about Punch. Well, as serious as a book can be that tells the story of a means of communal inebriation and its associated traditions, supported by a slew of sometimes rather fiddly formulae for re-creating drinks that haven’t been tasted by humankind in at least a century and a half. In any case, it’s the first of its kind, and as such, it’s going to discriminate.

The fact that nobody’s published a real book about Punch before is in and of itself a remarkable thing. Open just about any volume written in English between the late 1600s and the mid-1800s that deals with the details of day-to-day life and odds are sooner or later somebody’s going to brew up a bowl of the stuff—Behn, Defoe, Addison & Steele, Swift, Pope, Fielding, Richardson, Smollett, Sheridan, Boswell, Burney, Edgeworth, Austen, Byron, Thackeray, Dickens, world without end. The rakes of the Restoration knew it, William and Mary’s subjects drank it readily, the reigns of the three Georges were damp with it, very damp, and the Regency was well steeped indeed. George Washington enjoyed it and Thomas Jefferson owed a part of his property to it. For some 200 years, Punch¹—at base a simple combination of distilled spirits, citrus juice, sugar, water and a little spice—was the reigning monarch of the kingdom of mixed drinks. If nothing else, it has stories to tell.

Most of Punch’s stories are of warm fellowship and conviviality and high-spirited evenings afloat on oceans of witty talk. But it would be disingenuous to pretend that there aren’t also plenty of battles and brawls and all the other products of the temporary madness that overtakes even the strongest-headed when they’ve consumed more distilled spirits than they can keep track of. For every cozy evening like the ones in the settled Sussex townsman and diarist Thomas Turner used to spend, back in the days of George III, drinking Punch made from smuggled French brandy with his fellow tradesmen, there was one like Captain Drake’s in early 1709, when he sat up drinking arrack Punch with three fashionable whores in his cell in London’s Newgate prison, where he was being held for treason under arms. “On a sudden some difference arose between the ladies,” he later recalled, causing them to engage in “bloodshed and battery” until they were exhausted and their clothes and coiffures in tatters—at which point they patched themselves up as best as they could, rearranged their hair and called for another bowl.

But sufficient as it may be, the chance to retail a mess of moist anecdotes is far from the only reason to write a book about Punch. Recent years have seen public interest in the fine art of mixing drinks fizz up to an almost alarming level, spawning a number of surprisingly sober books on the subject; books that focus almost obsessively on the craft and history of the cocktail. (I myself have written three.) Almost without exception, these books have focused on the American part of the story, the part that begins with the Sling, the Cocktail, the Mint Julep and all the other ancestral “American sensations,” progenitors of pretty much every mixed drink we lap up today save vodka and Red Bull—and you could even squeeze that one in among the slings, if you were to rub it with a little Vaseline first.

We don't know who first came up with the Julep or the Cocktail or indeed almost any of the foundational American drinks. But somebody had to teach those anonymous folk geniuses how to mix drinks. Mixology might be simple enough, as far as crafts go, but it still has its secrets, its right ways and wrong ways, tricks and traditions. Indeed, by 1803, when the cocktail first appeared in print, concerned men and women had already been grappling for two centuries and more with all the issues of balance, potency, and proper service that mixing drinks with distilled spirits raises. Admittedly, in the larger scheme of things, these are pretty trivial. Unless, that is, you've just laid down good coin for a drink, coin that was earned by the sweat of your brow (or whatever other part of your body you sweat with). In that case, it has real meaning whether the drink you're about to taste was made by a ham-handed ignoramus who's making it up as he goes along or someone who has spent a few years absorbing the best practices of the job from people who really know their onions.

In the early days of the American republic, when this quintessentially American art was first finding its legs, the best practices with which the wide-awake young men behind the bar had been indoctrinated were British, developed across the Atlantic and transplanted in American soil, and the laboratory in which they had been developed was the Punch bowl. We don't know precisely who invented Punch in the first place, nor are we ever likely to. But we don't know who invented the Martini, either, or the original Cocktail. Such is the history of mixed drinks. We do know that if Punch wasn't the first mixed drink powered by distilled spirits, it was certainly the first globally popular one—spirits drinking's killer app, as it were—and that its first unambiguous appearance in writing was in a letter by an Englishman. Whoever might have invented it, it was Englishmen, or at least Britons, who fostered the formula, spread it to their neighbors and took it all around the world.

Like all the best and most enduring culinary preparations, Punch was a simple formula that could grow in complexity with its executor's skill and available resources. During the two centuries of its hegemony, British Punch-makers, generously endowed with both, used them to develop a good many of what we consider today to be the hallmarks of the American school of mixing drinks. The appreciation of which liquors and wines complement each other and which don't; the ins and outs of balancing sweet and sour; the use of liqueurs and various flavored syrups for sweetening; the salutary effects of champagne and sparkling water on drink and drinker; the affinities between certain citrus fruits and certain spirits (e.g., the orange and brandy, the lime and rum); the use of eggs, dairy products and gelatin as smoothing agents—the list is both long and technical, descending into the minutiae of proportion, technique and even garnish.

The chance to explore the British foundations of modern mixology and, even better, to delve into the rich and mostly unmined quarry of anecdotes that stemmed from it, is certainly motivation enough to write a book, and, I hope, to read it. Yet there's another, even better reason, but to explain it I'm going to have to stoop to autobiography.

How to Win Friends and Intoxicate People

Ten years ago, I fell into a job writing about cocktails. It began as an amusing sideline, something to have a little fun with while I pursued a career as professor of English literature. but it turned out mixing up Sazerac Cocktails and Green Swizzles, researching their histories and writing anecdotal little essays about them for *Esquire* magazine's website was not only more fun than grading comp papers and trying to keep classes full of hormone-buzzed sophomores focused on the tribulations of King Lear, it was also—to me, anyway—considerably more satisfying. Perhaps I lacked academic seriousness. In any case, before very long the sideline metastasized into a career.

Being a professional cocktail geek brought its own peculiar challenges. one of them was what to do at parties. Spending all this time in the company of delightful drinks, I wanted to share— friends don't let

friends drink vodka tonics, not when they could be absorbing iced dew-drops crafted from good gin or straight rye whiskey, fresh-squeezed juices, rare bitters and liqueurs and, of course, lots of love. But bartending is hard work, and after a couple of years' worth of parties spent measuring, shaking, stirring, spilling, fumbling for ingredients, fielding requests for vodka tonics and, worst of all, never getting a chance to actually talk to anyone, I was willing to relinquish the spotlight and the performative glory of mixing drinks in front of people for a little hanging out and cocktail party chitchat. Perhaps it might be time to take a second look at Punch. After all, all the old bartender's guides I'd been steadily accumulating had clutches of large-bore recipes tucked away at the back, and if these were anything as tasty as the cocktails I'd been successfully extracting from them . . .

My first attempts to fill the Punch bowl, however, were cavalier at best. I treated the recipes as mere guidelines, changing things for convenience, cost and because surely I knew better than the mustachioed old gent who wrote the recipe. Used to making cocktails, where dilution is a no-no, I would cut back the seemingly excessive amounts of water the recipes called for. The result, of course, was chaos. 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. 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. Other times, I'd skimp on the ice, think nothing of using powdered nutmeg instead of grating it fresh, splash in Technicolor arrays of clashing liqueurs, substitute cheap bourbon for good cognac or ginger ale for champagne, and a host of other things too embarrassing to relate. Amateur stuff.

Eventually, though, I began to learn. I had help, thank God. Friends shared their expertise, their space, their liquor and, most important, themselves. It's not Punch if there's nobody to drink it. Ted "Dr. Cocktail" Haigh, who had put in some sterling work at the Punch bowl, was happy to share the fruits of his experience (for the record, his Bimbo Punch is a thing of beauty). Sherwin Dunner, friend to every living hot jazz musician, hosted some memorable evenings where the Punch flowed like ditchwater and the music reached an authentic speakeasy-era level of abandon. Nick Noyes and Jessica Monaco provided guinea pigs in their dozens and in their hundreds and the booze with which to water them—and, even better, an appreciation for precisely the sort of *recherché*, historic formulae that appealed to me. There's something stirring about gazing across a sweeping lawn full of people all mildly intoxicated on Captain Radcliffe's Punch, a recipe that hadn't seen the light of day since England was ruled by a Dutchman. I could go on, but I'll save everyone else—as many as I can remember—for the acknowledgments.

It wasn't just laziness that kept me making Punch, although Lord knows I can be plenty lazy. But if you're spending the hour and a half before party time assembling a baroque concoction that was originally created for European royalty and calls for fifteen ingredients, half of them prepared from other ingredients, sloth doesn't really enter into it. Nor was it the utter deliciousness of most of these old Punches. G&Ts are delicious, too, and they take a lot less work. But over the last seven or eight years, I've made historic Punches dozens and dozens of times, for groups as small as four and as large as 250; for friends coming over to chat, backyard barbecues, Christmas parties, book parties, weddings (a massive bowl of Punch makes a fine wedding present, and happy wedding guests); for Victorian societies and Museums and clubs and too many lectures to count. Every time, it happens the same way.

First, while everyone else remembers those fraternal garbage cans and decides that they'll stick to the wine, thanks anyway, the veterans, those who have shared a bowl of real Punch before, step smartly up to the sideboard and ladle themselves a cup. Meanwhile, a few adventurous or unusually bibulous newcomers sniff around the bowl, examining the unpromising, brownish liquid within (frat and food-magazine Punches are always as bright and cheerful in their coloration as drinks marketed for toddlers) and studying the vets for signs of liver disease or just plain bad character. Then one of these will give in and ladle herself a glass,

taking a tentative sip as the others look on with concern. Okay, so it's not poisonous. In fact—well, soon the knot by the bowl is making a joyful little noise and the rest of the folks are beginning to reconsider their policy of sticking to the Grüner Veltliner. One by one, what the heck, they drift over to see what the fuss is about, soon to be joined by whomever it was they were talking to before they excused themselves for the minute that has turned into ten or fifteen. Before you know it, everyone's chattering away with tipsy animation and it's a party. Sure, there are always a few holdouts, but sooner or later all but the most stridently resistant will get sucked in. Nobody likes to be the odd person out, particularly if all it takes to participate is to stand around sipping something truly delightful, made from a formula that Charles Dickens used to enjoy.

But that's the true beauty of Punch. The "flowing bowl," as its devotees used to call it, makes itself the catalyst for, and focus of, a temporary community of drinkers, not unlike the one you'll find on a good night at a really good neighborhood pub. Admittedly, some will have drunk a little more than they're used to; the limpid balance of good Punch makes that easy. One or two might have been grievously overserved, but if so, it was by their own hands. the Punch bowl holds dangers as well as delights; it is freedom, and freedom is a test that some must fail. But Punch isn't cocktails. The cocktail is an unforgiving drink, with a very narrow margin of safety. Two Martinis and you're fine, three and you're on the redeye to Drunkistan. The little glasses of Punch—the traditional serving is about a sherry-glass full; just a couple of ounces—mount up, to be sure, but it's easy to pull back before you've gone too far. Whatever their octane, though, there's something particularly exhilarating to drinks based on distilled spirits, and Punch will always share that. as the eighteenth-century song put it:

*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.*

There's the crux. Without merriment, life is scarcely worth living. I know there are people who will disagree with that statement—the ethereal, contemplative ones; the efficient, purpose-driven ones; the solitary, the angry, the superior. Punch is not for them. But for the rest of us, the ones who find solace in this grim world in the humor and good nature of our fellow humans, there's no surer way of concentrating those qualities than around a bowl of Punch.

Dr. Salmon's Punch

This simple, early and quite tasty recipe for brandy Punch appears in the *Husbandman's Jewel*, a 1695 collection of remedies, recipes, and household and agricultural hints issued under the name of Gervase Markham, the pioneering agricultural writer who had died in 1637 (and therefore had nothing whatsoever to do with the book). The "Salmon" to whom the recipe is attributed must be Dr.—or rather "Dr."—William Salmon, who was, by the standards of the day, a self-taught quack (by our standards, of course, so were all his educated contemporaries) and a sort of Grub Street polymath with a strong medico-astrological slant. The use of lime juice instead of lemon marks it as an early recipe and one that is not fully assimilated to European conditions.

The Original Formula

To make Punch

Take two Quarts of Water, one pint of Lime Juice, three quarters of a Pound of fine Sugar, mix and dissolve

the Sugar, then put three Pints of choice Brandy; stir them well together, and grate in a Nutmeg. This Liquor cheers the Heart, and revives the Spirits beyond any other Liquor, Moderately drunk helps Digestion, restores lost Appetite, and makes the Body profoundly Healthful, and able to resist the Assaults of all Diseases. Salmon.

Source: Quoted in “Gervase Markham,” *The Husbandman’s Jewel*, 1695

Notes

This recipe is as close to self-explanatory as any from the seventeenth century I’ve seen. The only real issue here is the balance of sweet and sour, and that depends on the interpretation of a pint. If Salmon was using the earlier 12-ounce wine pint, there’s no grounds for complaint. If it’s the later 16-ounce one, this will need a little more sugar or a little less lime juice (say, a pound of the former, or 12 ounces of the latter). If only the last part of the recipe were true. What a wonderful world it would be.

Yield: 16 cups

Billy Dawson’s Punch

There are those in this topsy-turvy world of ours who insist that a margarita—essentially, nothing more than a glass of strong tequila Punch—is greatly improved by having a portion of Budweiser or other vaguely beerish beverage incorporated in its fabric. That technique, smacking as it does of frat-house experimentation, is nothing new. And I don’t just say that because Chita Rivera was already teaching the bartender at Sardi’s how to make ’em in 1985. It’s a good deal older than that: in his 1807 exegesis of Glasgow Punch, John Sinclair noted that some believed “half a pint of old strong beer, in a moderate bowl of Punch, will mellow the fire of the spirit considerably.”

Billy Dawson—who was known as Bully Dawson—was a Restoration-era thug-about-town, famous for brawling and punking and roistering and bullying his way through the lower reaches of coffeehouse society. One thing that’s clear is that he knew how to make Punch: his method makes for a peerlessly smooth, integrated bowl with a great depth of flavor. Kangaroos indeed.

The Original Formula

The man who sees, does, or thinks of anything [else] while he is making Punch, may as well look for the North-west Passage on Mutton Hill. . . . I can and do make good Punch, because I do nothing else; and this is my way of doing it. I retire to a solitary corner, with my ingredients ready sorted; they are as follows; and I mix them in the order they are here written. Sugar, twelve tolerable lumps; hot water, one pint; lemons, two, the juice and peel; old Jamaica rum, two gills; brandy, one gill; porter or stout, half a gill; arrack, a slight dash. I allow myself five minutes to make a bowl on the foregoing proportions, carefully stirring the mixture as I furnish the ingredients until it actually foams; and then, Kangaroos! how beautiful it is!!

Source: [Henry Porter and George E. Roberts], *Cups and Their Customs*, 1863

Suggested Procedure

In a stout earthenware bowl that holds at least a quart and a half, muddle the peel of 2 lemons with 4 ounces Demerara sugar. Add 8 ounces boiling water and stir until sugar has dissolved. Add 3 ounces lemon juice, 10

ounces Jamaican rum, 5 ounces VSOP cognac, 1 ounce Batavia arrack and 3 ounces good porter or Guinness stout, stirring all along. Finish by slowly stirring in 12 ounces boiling water. Grate nutmeg over the top and serve.

Notes

In this, I like the rum to be a mixture of equal parts Smith & Cross or Inner Circle or Wray & Nephew and Gosling's, for mellowness. When using porter in Punch, the proportion used here—roughly 1 part to 12 of everything else—shouldn't be exceeded. You don't want to taste it so much as feel it. If this is to be made in advance and let cool, put all the hot water in before the lemon and spirits and add a block of ice at the end.

Yield: 5 cups

James Ashley's Punch

At the beginning of 1731, Ashley, a 33-year-old “wholesale dealer in cheese,” abandoned that line of work, it “not suiting his turn” (as the *Monthly Magazine* wrote in 1796), and opened a public house on the north side of Ludgate Hill, right next to the old medieval gate. And what a good career move that was. Ashley, you see, was the world's first celebrity mixologist; the first man to become famous for compounding and selling a mixed drink.

Everybody knew James Ashley. Some did from drinking Punch at his establishment, which was called the London Coffee-House and Punch-House: Hogarth was a patron, the young James Boswell stopped in one night in 1763 for “three threepenny bowls” in between bouts with sixpenny whores, Oliver Goldsmith took the temperature of the town there, and Benjamin Franklin's “Club of Honest Whigs” was, for a time, one of the many it hosted.

The London Punch-House's titular beverage was not only retailed by the glass (even if that glass was called a “sneaker,” “tiff” or “rub”), but going by the claims in Ashley's ads, it was also mixed to order—“the sherbet is always brought by itself, and the brandy, Rum or Arrack in the Measure”—and so quickly that “Gentlemen may have it as soon made as a Gill of Wine can be drawn.” To make a system like that work, Ashley had to prepare his shrub in advance—the “acid” in it being “all Orange Juice”—and bottle it. Then it was easy: show the customer the spirit in the measure, pour it into the proper size bowl, pour in two measures' worth of shrub (I would've used the same measure), nutmeg and done.

Ashley's skills were keen enough to keep him in business an impressive 45 years: when he died, on July 7, 1776, the London Punch-House was still going strong.

The Original Formula

Advertisements.

At the Foreign Brandy, Rum and Arrack Cellars, under my House on Ludgate Hill, Are to be sold, choice and good as ever were imported, and warranted entirely neat, brandy and Rum at 7 s. 6 d. per Gallon, but in no less Quantity than five Gallons; all under 8 s. per Gallon.

A parcel of superfine Batavia Arrack, at 12 s. per Gallon.

This house I opened solely for making of Punch (*and was the first that undertook to make it in small*

Proportions, and reduced the extravagant Price.)

Where, to the greatest perfection, the said most excellent brandies, Rum and arrack made into Punch, viz.

A Quart of arrack made into Punch for 6 s. and so in proportion to half a Quarter for 4 d. half penny.

A Quart of Rum or brandy made into Punch for 4 s. and so in proportion to half a Quarter for 3 d.

And, that the Fairness of this undertaking may appear to every one, the sherbett is always brought by itself, and the brandy, Rum and arrack in the Measure; by means whereof there can be no imposition either in the Quality or Quantity.

As also, for the better accommodating Gentlemen at their own houses, I do undertake (by a peculiar Management in the acid, which is all orange Juice) to make any Quantities of the said most excellent brandies or Rum into Punch, as they shall order, at 4s. per Gallon, (one third whereof to be brandy or Rum;) and I will warrant it to keep so, that there shall not be the least Variation or alteration for 12 Months, and shall retain the same Life, Quickness and Perfection, to that Time, as no person can discover but that its [sic] just made.

Buy and sell for Ready Money only, *London Punch-House*

J. Ashley.

Source: *Grub Street Journal*, January 1736

Suggested Procedure

Prepare an oleo-saccharum with the peels of 4 Seville oranges and 1 cup of light raw sugar such as Florida crystals. Add 16 ounces of warm water and stir to dissolve sugar. Add 8 ounces of strained Seville orange juice and stir. Add enough water to bring this up to a full quart, pour it into a clean bottle, seal and refrigerate.

To serve, pour equal quantities “sherbett,” cold water and proof-strength (i.e., around 57% alcohol by volume) VS-grade cognac, Jamaican rum or Batavia arrack into a bowl and grate nutmeg over the top. If you wish to add ice, add ice. This is enough for 1 treble or 3-quart bowl.

Note

This Punch can be served hot (use boiling water, obviously). More important, Ashley’s specialty being Brandy Punch, this allows us to do it justice by compensating for the understrength brandy we usually get. For that treble bowl, simply use 44 ounces cognac and cut the added cold water back to 20 ounces.

Yield: 12 cups

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