GENTLEMEN PREFER PUNCH

Jeanne Schinto

A Herd of Planters on the ground,
O'er-whelmed with Punch, dead drunk we found...
—Ebenezer Cooke, "The Sot-Weed Factor; or,
A Voyage to Maryland" (1708)

THERE'S AN OLD SAYING THAT WHEREVER YOU FIND TWO ENGLISHMEN, you'll find three gardens, one for each man and a third for their club. This propensity of the English to form social organizations came with the colonists to America, where, in Maryland's Anne Arundel County, the South River Club lays claim to being the oldest such society in the Western Hemisphere. Named after a 10-mile-long tributary of the Chesapeake Bay, what is also known as the Ancient South River Club was founded prior to 1700, well before any of its members had thought about independence, much less revolution. They were Englishmen. That date is, however, unverifiable, since the club's records, along with its clubhouse, caught fire and burned down around 1740. Two years later, on February 11, 1742, the Marylanders opened a new clubhouse on the same land, about eight miles southwest of Annapolis. A simple, one-room clapboard structure, it was set in a grove of great red oaks on a half acre by the eponymous river, where the club continues to meet a few times a year for "feasts" of food, booze, and storytelling.

English club life evolved from tavern life. Drinking was its realm. Many readers have probably heard of another venerable social organization and sampled its famous alcoholic concoction, Fish House Punch. It was invented by Pennsylvania's Schuylkill Fishing Company (also known as the State), founded in 1732—and they have the documents to prove it. A combination of rum, black tea, sugar, lemon juice, Cognac, and peach brandy, it is a near-classic punch—i.e., made with distilled spirits, citrus, something bitter, something sweet, and usually, although not in this case, a spice, often nutmeg. The origins of punch in general have not been determined, but an alcoholic spiced fruit drink enjoyed in India was likely introduced to England by British mariners and merchants. By the early seventeenth century, the beverage had already made its way to the American colonies.

I found a recipe for Fish House Punch in *The Joy of Cooking* when, in 1977, my husband and I decided to serve it at a now legendary Halloween party to a gorilla, a black cat, Groucho and Harpo Marx, and many other costumed friends. Today, recipes for the punch are as legion on the Internet as the hangovers it produces—a result of its deliciousness and its caffeine, which inspires imbibers to stay up late and keep drinking.

The South River Club has its own high-octane punch. The recipe, however, is secret—or supposed to be, although club members will reveal that its main ingredient is rye whiskey. So what to make of a magnanimous moment in 1952 when members divulged the formula to another club, the Walpole Society? An über-exclusive organization founded in 1910 for collectors of American antiques and their well-placed professional friends, the Walpoleans were invited to the Marylanders' clubhouse one weekend in late May. The invitation itself was remarkable. At the time, shortly after the death of King George VI, the club hadn't entertained a "group of outsiders" since 1746, during the reign of George II. Having a few nonmember guests at each feast was customary, but not an entire organization.

THE SOUTH RIVER CLUB'S EARLIEST MEMBERS WERE "MEN OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD," AND YES, THE CLUB WAS AND REMAINS ALL MALE.

With the South River Club's permission, the Walpoleans printed the punch recipe in their 1952 *Note Book*, a self-published journal historically distributed only to the club's members. Even today, that number is limited to 30, and one must die, resign (a rare occurrence), or be designated "inactive" (usually due to illness) before another is admitted. Similarly, the South River Club's roster is capped at 25, with preference given to progeny of the deceased. But little did the Marylanders foresee that more progressive, open-minded Walpoleans would replace the midcentury brethren and deposit full runs of the *Note Book* in several research libraries—for anyone to see. At those same libraries, I found not only the *Note Book* but the papers of a man voted into both organizations, the Walpole Society in 1968 and the South River Club three years later. In addition, I was able to secure via interlibrary loan—from Fort Hays State University in Hays, Kansas, no less—a copy of *The Ancient South River Club: A Brief History,* written by the club's Historical Committee and published in a surprisingly generous edition of 300 in the same year of the Walpoleans' visit.

Illustration by Mike Houston

The South River Club's earliest members were "men of the neighborhood," the history says. And yes, the club was and remains all male, just like the Walpoleans, who, for their part, have no club punch. Nor do they have a clubhouse. Instead, they go on field trips together, to public and private collections, enjoying the hospitality of other clubs, such as Boston's Club of Odd Volumes, New York's Century Association, and Newport's Clambake Club, along the way. But despite its nomadic nature, the Walpole Society has always been an august collective. To the Maryland riverside on that day at the tail end of Harry Truman's term in the White House came the likes of Henry Francis du Pont, whose former home is the Winterthur Museum, Garden, & Library, near Wilmington, Delaware. Other Walpoleans who emerged from their "monster bus" (the *Note Book*'s phrase) were Arthur Amory Houghton Jr., whose progenitor founded Corning Glass Works and who himself built and endowed Harvard's Houghton Library; Irving Sands Olds, chairman of U.S. Steel; Morgan Bulkeley Brainard, vice president of the Aetna Life Insurance Company (his grandfather founded it); and Theodore Sizer, a former "Monuments Man," who was director of the Yale University Art Gallery.

As for the Marylanders, most had once been "planters"—the regional term for farmers—tobacco being the favored crop of these owners of vast tracts and slaves to tend them. In 1952, the fertile land, a veritable garden, was still a rich tobacco district, but instead of planters, club members included J.A.W. Iglehart, a financier and banker who invested in such entities as the group that in 1953 and 1954 would buy the St. Louis Browns, move the franchise to Baltimore, and rechristen them the Orioles; Oden Bowie Duckett, a retired Maryland circuit court judge; Harry W. Hill, a U.S. Navy admiral who served during World War II; Amos F. Hutchins, a local physician; and Benjamin Watkins III, a dairy and cattle farmer, who would later get into a tiff with neighbors about rezoning and encroaching development that would be reported in the *Washington Post*. "Everybody who came down that road, we knew at once, and if we didn't we found out who they were," he would tell the *Post*.

As the Walpoleans approached the little clapboard clubhouse, they greeted the Marylanders, some in white shirts and bowties, others wearing the club tie (navy blue dotted with American and British flags), and noted Maryland's flag flying above the door. Inside, above the fireplace, hung the Stars and Stripes crossed with the Royal Standard of England. Prominently displayed on the dining table was a china punch bowl, perhaps the very one the club had bought in 1799. Given the date of purchase, the bowl would likely have been Chinese export porcelain, similar to the one depicted in William Hogarth's circa 1732 caricature *A Midnight Modern Conversation*, which shows 11 inebriated men in breeches, waistcoats, and powdered wigs, one of them splayed on the floor beside an overturned chair.

In past centuries, members ("all derived from the same racial stock," as the history has it) had enjoyed the bounty of the river—fish, oysters, crabs, wild ducks, as well as the wild turkeys and deer they hunted in the woods. "The weight of wild pigeons roosting on forest trees broke off great branches," the history says. "All of these, as well as beef and mutton, came often to club dinners." In 1952, the Walpole Society's *Note Book* tells us only that the food was "a delicious cold lunch." Of far more interest to the Walpoleans anyway was "the delectable and authoritative" punch, whose "official" ingredients were recorded by the *Note Book* scribe to be thus: three fifths of rye whiskey, one quart of rum, one pint each of peach brandy, lemon juice, and water, and a pound of "cut sugar"—all to be mixed and left to stand for three weeks before being deemed drinkable.

Rye whiskey–based punch came relatively late to the club, after the Revolution, says the history. Members enlivened their meetings until then by drinking colonial America's most favored drink, rum—the main ingredient of Fish House Punch. When they did devise the rye punch, the spirits were undoubtedly Maryland-made, for there is a symbiotic relationship between rye grain and tobacco. Planters used rye as a cover crop, and they found it both practical and profitable to distill the surplus. A combination of rye, corn, barley malt, and rye malt was aged in barrels from four to eight years at Maryland distilleries, which enjoyed several heydays. One came after the Civil War, and another after Prohibition, when, by 1936, the state produced more rye whiskey than any other.

The Walpoleans, mercifully, were served coffee before boarding their bus at the feast's end. They had other places to go that afternoon, including the pre-Revolutionary Annapolis home of Samuel Chase, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, from where they could hear the crowd roar at the annual Army-Navy baseball game being witnessed by President Truman (Navy won). They weren't finished drinking for the day, however. At dinner in the dining room of Baltimore's Belvedere Hotel, they savored a 1947 Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

Baltimore-born Richard Harding Randall was the man voted into both clubs, and considering the odds, the only one who probably ever will be. He studied at Princeton and Harvard, then after stints at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, became director of the Walters Art Gallery (now Walters Art Museum) in his hometown. When he died at age 71 in 1997, an obituary described this leading authority on medieval ivory carvings as "a captivating raconteur." A conversational gift was considered an asset for a South River Club candidate and

a would-be Walpole Society man. The latter's members, besides being connoisseurs of fine objects, must also be, as often stated in nominating papers, "clubbable."

No doubt thanks to Randall's dual membership, the Walpoleans were invited back for feasts twice more, in 1969 and 1982. On the first of those occasions, the Marylanders gave the Walpoleans the recipe again, and again they published it. Essentially it is the same, the main difference being that the standing time has been extended to two months to give the flavors even more time to meld. The idea of a simple mixing of ingredients followed by a carefree, if lengthy, aging process must have appealed to these prosperous, privileged men; South River Punch was likely the only thing they ever "cooked."

For the club's feast on September 21, 1978, Randall, as the designated punch maker, was allowed to invite the customary few nonmember guests. One invitee was his good friend John P. "Scott" Remensnyder Jr., then chief of Massachusetts General Hospital's division of plastic and reconstructive surgery. The handwritten letter of invitation ("Dinner at 1 P.M. — party 12-3") survives in Randall's papers, archived at Harvard. Randall explained the origins of the club, promised that the doctor could "recover" from the afternoon at "Chez Randall," then added reassuringly, "The rules are simple. Come hungry & thirsty, and with at least one good story to tell." Such rules are the basic ingredients for any successful social gathering of two or more—preferably more when punch, any punch, is to be served. For this tasty intoxicant, made from a secret recipe or not, is a communal drink, meant to be served by the gallon to a crowd.

Here are the official recipes as published by the Walpole Society. The first, from the 1952 Note Book, *describes the punch as "delectable and authoritative." The second, from 1969, calls it a "sturdy brew."*

South River Club Punch

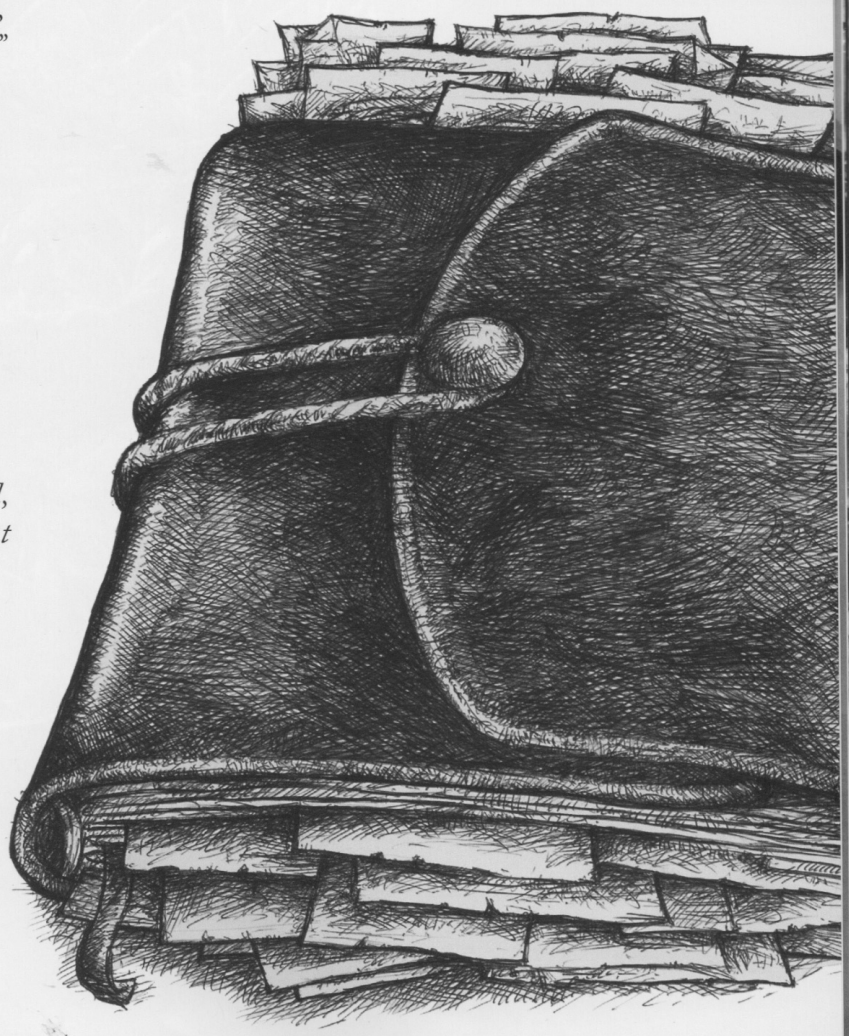
3 bottles (fifths) of Rye Whisky
1 pint of Bacardi Rum
1 pint of Jamaica Rum
1 pint of Peach Brandy
1 pint of Lemon Juice
1 pound of Sugar,

to which quantity half again as much water is added, the whole being left for three weeks, the slight sediment then removed, and the punch served very cold.

South River Punch

3 quarts of Maryland rye whiskey
1 quart of Jamaica rum
½ pint of peach brandy
1 pound cut sugar
1 pint fresh lemon juice
1 pint water

Let stand for two months to blend.

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An Annotated South River Punch

Thad Vogler

We asked Thad Vogler, the mastermind behind San Francisco's Bar Agricole and Trou Normand, for his take on South River Punch. Here's what he has to say.

We used exactly the same proportions as the original recipe and aged for two months. I think it's a winner.

3 quarts of Maryland rye whiskey

The recipe calls for Maryland Rye. This is an important distinction, because these earlier ryes utilized a lovely, more floral strain of rye. The Pennsylvania strains that came to dominate are much hardier, though a little less high-tone while being sweeter and earthier. Leopold Bros. Maryland-Style Rye Whiskey is perfect for this. Sadly, it is a limited release each year as it is made from an heirloom grain and, like many delicious things, in minimal quantities.

1 quart of Jamaica rum

The specification of Jamaican rum is also significant. You can be sure the original rums used were pot distilled and had deep, earthy, almost sulfurous aromatics. As a second spirit in the punch it would have an undeniable influence. The great Ed Hamilton imports a number of small-batch, pot-distilled Jamaican rums. The one I settled on is Ed Hamilton's Jamaican Pot Distilled Gold Rum. Bottled at just over 90 proof, it has the spine to inform the punch while not being the dominant ingredient.

½ pint of peach brandy

My least loyal interpretation of an ingredient is the use of peach whiskey instead of peach brandy. The Leopold Brothers are historicists as well as distillers, and they do not disappoint with their Georgia peach whiskey, produced only seasonally, once a year. It has a beautiful analog, handmade flavor that, like the other ingredients, speaks to how everything must have tasted in pre-industrial America.

1 pound cut sugar

Be sure to use raw, organic, sugar, not refined, brown, or demerara sugar.

1 pint fresh lemon juice

1 pint water

Let stand for two months to blend.

Photograph by Pete Deevakul; food styling by Krista Ruane & Jeannie Chen