

Home Town Radio Kitchen with Chef Steve Muni

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CHRISTMAS CHEER

Not only does the holiday season mean wonderful food, it also means enjoying some festive holiday cheer. One of the oldest holiday beverages that we know about was the Roman *calda*, which was a watered wine, heated, sweetened with honey, and flavored with aromatic spices. That gave way to the Old English *wassail*, which is Old English for “good health”, and is the subject of a couple of my favorite Christmas carols.

While today’s wassail more closely resembles mulled cider, the Old English version was more likely a mulled beer. Ale, sugar, ginger, cinnamon and nutmeg would be put into a large bowl and heated up by sticking a red-hot poker into the mixture. Sometimes pieces of toast would be floated on the top as “sops”. By the way, today many microbreweries produce a spiced beer for the winter holidays which is pretty close to the traditional wassail.

In the American south, they make wassail by simmering sweet tea with some orange and pineapple juice, a little lemon juice, some cinnamon and whole cloves. Not traditional, but a delicious drink nevertheless. For a delicious modern wassail, core 10 small apples and fill each with about a teaspoon of brown sugar. Place in a baking pan with about 1/8 inch of water in the bottom, and bake in a 350 degree oven for about half an hour. Meanwhile, in a large kettle combine two bottles of dry sherry with ½ teaspoon of grated nutmeg, a teaspoon of ground ginger, 3 whole cloves, 3 allspice berries, an inch stick of cinnamon, 2 cups of superfine sugar, and half a cup of water. Heat, without letting the mixture boil. Strain the mixture into your punch bowl and add a cup of brandy. Float the baked apples on top and enjoy!

Of course, mulled wine is still popular all over Europe, from northern Italy to Scandinavia. There it’s called glogg, and the Scandinavians often add some stronger liquor, like vodka, aquavit or brandy, to the glogg, along with orange peel and blanched almonds. In German-speaking countries the drink is called gluhwein. The basic recipe calls for a hearty red wine, which is heated and spiced with sugar, cloves and cinnamon. Sometimes raisins are added, as well as other spices like ginger and allspice. In Eastern Europe black pepper and honey are added to the mix.

Eggnog is an old English drink, made with milk, cream, sugar, beaten eggs, and rum or brandy. It became a popular winter holiday drink, especially in America. But the peculiarly American version is the Tom and Jerry, which was invented back in the 1820s. Essentially it’s a type of eggnog, flavored with rum and brandy and served hot. And no, the name has nothing to do with the cartoon characters! The drink was concocted to publicize a book by a man named Pierce Egan—an early example of a marketing tie-in!

To make yourself a Tom and Jerry, separate an egg into two bowls. Add an ounce each of dark rum and brandy into the egg yolk, and whip until frothy. Then whip the egg white until it peaks, then add a teaspoon of sugar and continue beating until the egg white is stiff. Fold the egg yolk mixture into the stiff egg white, put the whole thing into a mug and add about 6 ounces of hot milk.

Mulled cider is a popular winter drink as well. To make mulled cider, simply heat some apple cider (as opposed to bottled apple juice) with some orange peel, nutmeg, clove and other spices. More specifically, heat a couple of quarts of fresh apple cider with the peel of one orange, (being careful to avoid as much of the white part as possible), a couple of bay leaves, a quarter-cup of light brown sugar, 2 cinnamon sticks, and a half teaspoon each of whole cloves, ground cardamom, and ground nutmeg. Don’t let the mixture boil. Serve in mugs. If you want to spike it up, try adding a shot of brandy, rum, or even Calvados which is apple brandy, to each mug.

And on Christmas morning I used to like a hot buttered rum. Simply put 1 ½ ounces of dark rum in a coffee mug, add a teaspoon of brown sugar, and fill up the mug with hot water or hot milk. Then grate some nutmeg over the top and add a pat, about a teaspoon, of butter.

However you serve your Holiday cheer, please be careful to drink responsibly and make sure you have a designated driver. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen, wishing you all a hearty *wassail*.