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HOW'S YOUR DRINK | JUNE 6, 2009

A Cocktail for What Ails You

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By ERIC FELTEN

Nearly a century ago, essayist Irvin Cobb decried the visual vagaries of modern art, a complaint that still has some resonance today: "I am one who is very easily satisfied," he wrote in 1913. "All I ask of a picture is that it shall look like something." Cobb griped about walking through miles of galleries in vain search of representational painting—and that was well before the age of Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. "Once in a while we behold a picture of something that we can recognize without a chart," Cobb wrote, "and it looms before our gladdened vision like a rock-and-rye in a weary land."

What is this Rock and Rye that serves as a metaphor for a balm in a barren wilderness? A drink of rye whiskey sweetened with rock candy and perhaps some fruits and bitter herbs, Rock and Rye was once believed to be a cure-all for the common cold. So famous were the phlegm-fighting qualities of the drink in days gone by that children used to be given rock-and-rye-flavored cough drops at the first sign of hacking and whooping. Now the drink is being revived by bartenders who see it as a cure for the common cocktail.



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Dylan Cross for The Wall Street Journal

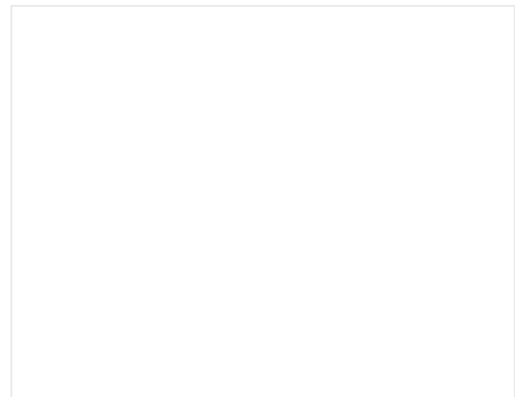
Rock and Rye's medicinal reputation was a great boon to the thirsty looking for an excuse. In 1890, the Memphis Medical Monthly tut-tutted that when a man "gets within twenty yards of the door of the saloon he commences coughing, and he puts his hand over his chest with an agonized expression and slips in the door and takes some 'rock and rye.'"

Such cynicism notwithstanding, Rock and Rye held on to its reputation as a cure-all well

into the 20th century. No. 434 in "The American Credo," George Jean Nathan and H.L. Mencken's biting 1920 catalog of things Americans believed in, was "That rock-and-rye will cure a cold." At a 1952 conference of the Common Cold Foundation, a prominent Johns Hopkins virologist, Dr. Thomas G. Ward, was asked what medicine could do against the stubborn rhinovirus. "Personally, my favorite treatment is old Maryland Rock and Rye," he replied.

Rock and Rye has always been seen as distinctively American—it was one of the few domestic liquors presented at the American pavilion of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. When sociologist Edward Alsworth Ross wrote about immigrants in his 1914 text "The Old World and the New," the drink was the very symbol of assimilation: "In the Italian home the bottle of 'rock and rye' is seen with increasing frequency by the side of the bottle of Chianti."

As befits a rock-solid piece of Americana, the drink found its way into a succession of popular songs. There was a "Rock and Rye Rag," a "Rock and Rye Polka," and barrelhouse piano man Charlie Spand belted out a blues in praise of "Rock and Rye," marveling that "You got good stuff/ I can't drink enough." Blind Lemon Jefferson, in the "Big Night Blues," hollered "Wild women like



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their liquor/their gin and their Rock and Rye.”

The most demonstrative ode to the pleasures of Rock and Rye came in the 1948 ditty of that name sung by Tex Ritter: “When there’s worry on your mind, here’s what you should try/Go to bed and rest your head and take some Rock and Rye.” Soon old Tex is slurring the drink’s praises, and in-between giddy hiccups there comes the declarative clank of ice in a glass, followed by the satisfying gurgle of liquor being poured.

Rock and Rye

Adapted from LeNell Smothers

- 1 bottle rye whiskey
- 3-5 tbsp rock candy
- 2 slices orange
- 2 slices lemon
- 2 pieces dried apricot
- 1 slice pineapple
- 1 tea bag full of dried horehound

Combine whiskey and sugar in a jar or decanter. All other ingredients optional. Allow all—except for horehound tea bag—to steep for a day or two or more. Leave horehound in for no more than two hours. When sugar is finally dissolved, strain and bottle. Cough a few times and clutch your chest in distress. Then serve the Rock and Rye on the rocks.

Jacquín’s, have continued to make versions of the obscurity. But there is no reason to search it out, given how easy it is to make one’s own. Nineteenth-century bar manuals gave the simplest of methods—put some sugar syrup in a whiskey glass, provide a spoon, “and allow the customer to help himself to the whiskey.” Awfully accommodating, that. But the American Druggist and Pharmaceutical Record in 1900, treating Rock and Rye as a medicinal compound, recommended using rock candy instead of simple syrup as the sweetener, because the water in the syrup reduces the proof of the final concoction.

Rye whiskey with rock candy in it is plenty good on its own, but the drink can also be far more elaborate. LeNell Smothers’s now-shuttered Brooklyn liquor boutique, LeNell’s, was known for its selection of rye whiskies. While she tries to find a new storefront, Ms. Smothers has been putting her bartending skills to use, and she’s come up with a recipe for Rock and Rye. She puts a six-inch string of rock candy into a jar with a bottle’s worth of rye whiskey, to which she adds slices of orange, lemon and pineapple, along with dried apricots, fresh pitted cherries and a tea bag full of dried horehound (a bitter herb renowned as a cough suppressant, commonly used in Rock and Rye during the drink’s medicinal heyday).

Out on the West Coast, Greg Lindgren of the San Francisco bar Rye has a different approach to the liqueur. Instead of using rock candy and dried horehound, he puts horehound candy drops (an old-fashioned cough lozenge) in the whiskey. In a perforated metal “tea ball” he inserts dried lemon peel and cloves, which gets to steep for the better part of a day. He also adds a cinnamon stick, some slices of fresh citrus and a little syrup from a jar of Luxardo marasca cherries.

I’ve been brewing up some Rock and Rye of my own this week, and I think it’s ready to go. So am I. I’ve got some Earl Hines and Benny Goodman cued up on the stereo, and—oh my, what’s that rattling in my chest?—yes, I think I feel a cough coming on.

—Mr. Felten is the author of “How’s Your Drink?” (Agate Surrey), now available in paperback. Email him at eric.felten@wsj.com.

But the greatest musical tribute to the sugared whiskey concoction came in 1934 when Earl Hines and his Orchestra recorded a hard-charging dance chart called “Rock and Rye,” penned by arranger Jimmy Mundy. It was the sort of swing anthem that would soon catapult Benny Goodman and his band to fame. That’s because, in 1935, Goodman hired Mundy away from Hines, and the killer-diller Mundy style on display in “Rock and Rye” would distinguish many of Goodman’s biggest hits, including the definitive Swing Era epic, “Sing, Sing, Sing.”

Rock and Rye is no longer a robust liquor category. It’s probably better known today as a retro flavor from the Faygo soda-pop people. Two liqueur brands, Mr. Boston and

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