

PUNCH

The Unstoppable Appeal of the Cream Liqueur

Baileys—the shelf-stable cream liqueur so often associated with spiked coffee and suggestive shooters—is the number one selling liqueur in the world. Leah Mennies on the strange appeal of the cream liqueur, and the new crop of brands taking the market by storm.

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photo: LIZZIE MUNRO



Jason Barrett was at a Rochester farm bureau meeting in October of 2013 when he was approached by a local dairy farmer, who asked him: “Why don’t y’all make Baileys?”

Barrett, who runs an area farm distillery in New York called Black Button Distilling, hadn’t considered it before—since his spirits focus on local products, he had no idea how one would go about making a cream liqueur to the same specifications. Then the farmer told him that he sold his milk to a local co-op that produced the same style of ultra-pasteurized, shelf-stable cream (the kind found in coffee creamer pods) used by Baileys.

Nearly two years later, Black Button released its Bespoke Bourbon Cream, a combination of the co-op’s aseptic cream and Barrett’s own bourbon. “It has been doing well for us ever since,” Barrett says. “I feel like I owe him a bottle.”

Black Button, it turns out, is part of a small but burgeoning craft cream market. In 2012, Headframe Spirits out of Butte, Montana, debuted a bourbon cream called Orphan Girl, which now outsells Baileys in the state nearly two to one. Kringle Cream, a joint venture from Wisconsin's Death's Door Distillery and Don Q Rum, debuted to big Midwestern success in October of 2013, while this past October, Boston Harbor Distillery added a rum- and maple-based Boston Cream liqueur to its lineup of rums and whiskeys; it's already outsold the rest of the portfolio.

"Baileys is ordinary, and there's really nothing special about it anymore," says Boston Harbor Distillery's Rhonda Kallman, who co-founded Boston Beer Co. (which produces Sam Adams). "I think we have a new gold standard."



GARNISHES GONE WILD: THE CHANGING AESTHETICS OF THE COCKTAIL

Once a utility player in the cocktail game largely used to add flavor to a drink, garnishes have gone from understudy to center stage. Robert Simonson on how the garnish became theater and what it says about the state of cocktails today.

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Despite the growth in this category, it's tough to chip into the global juggernaut that is Baileys. While any spirit can be blended with cream and sometimes sugar and dubbed a cream liqueur, the genre is synonymous with Irish cream, which was introduced to the market in 1974 when Gilbey's of Ireland figured out how to emulsify Irish whiskey with cream without it curdling; they called the product Baileys, inspired, allegedly, by the Bailey's Hotel in London. Now owned by Diageo, the meteoric rise of the brand began in the '80s with the help of a slew of questionable cocktails and shots (the Slippery Nipple, the Russian Quaalude, the Screaming Orgasm), not to mention countless Mudslides and Irish Coffees. Today, it's the number one selling liqueur in the world.

The biggest threat to Baileys' stronghold is Rumchata, a dairy-based, horchata-flavored elixir that debuted in 2009; it sold 600,000 cases in 2015 alone thanks to clever marketing and a massive social media presence, including nearly 25 million views on YouTube. Though founded by former Jim Beam executive Tom Maas as a way to target Hispanic drinkers, Maas credits Rumchata's mass appeal to millennial nostalgia.

"Millennial consumers said it tasted like Cinnamon Toast Crunch cereal," Maas says, noting that Rumchata's two largest core consumers are 30-year-old males who drink it in shot form (where it's often paired with Fireball) and 25- to 40-year-old females who prefer it on the rocks or in coffee. "The one thing that we have that Baileys doesn't is that their consumer is 40 to 80 years old, but ours is legal drinking age to 80," Maas says.

Rumchata's success has demonstrated a new kind of cream liqueur's cash cow potential. Baileys copycats tend to perform poorly, but more niche international cream products—like popular South African Amarula Cream; Averna Cream, launched as a new amaro subcategory dubbed "cremamaros" in 2013; and Francesco, a gelato-inspired cream liqueur out of Italy—are increasingly available stateside.

"The market right now is prime for creams, as far as we are concerned, because we saw the success of Rumchata," says Carmen Bazzini, owner of 750 Brands, a wine distributor that just added Francesco to its portfolio. "We know there is that interest."

In bars, Rumchata is typically consumed in shot form, while at home the category has succeeded thanks to its pour-it-and-drink-it nature. The question is whether or not this new wave of craft liqueurs can find their way into more serious cocktail bars.

In spite of the '70s and '80s cocktail revival—on view at spots like Jeffrey Morgenthaler's Pepe Le Moko in Portland, Oregon—cream liqueurs have yet to make inroads with craft cocktail bartenders. "Honestly, I love Baileys so much. I love Baileys in coffee and on the rocks and neat. But all of the drinks I've ever had that would call for Baileys are dumb," Morgenthaler says. "That's one sub-category of those kind of drinks that we do at Pepe Le Moko that we can't improve upon."

For Eamon Rockey, who manages the bar at Betony in New York, the only answer was to make an alternative himself, using demerara sugar, a higher concentration of whiskey and quality cream. "When we serve it, we pour a creamy, sweet, cold, boozy liqueur into a frozen [stoneware] cup," he says. It's been popular with Baileys drinkers and non-Baileys drinkers alike, and Betony goes through approximately 20 liters of the stuff every month and a half.

There's a marked difference, however, between denying a customer request for Baileys while offering a housemade alternative, and denying a customer request for Baileys and offering a different brand instead. "Saying, 'You can't have the brand you like because you are going to have another brand' is not as positively received," Rockey says. That said, it's also highly unlikely that a high-end bar will stock more than one variety of cream liqueur at a given time. "Personally, in a modern back bar, I don't think there is room for more than one cream liqueur, just like I don't think there is room for more than one cachaça or pisco," Morgenthaler says.

While it's tough to imagine a cream liqueur revival on the cocktail bar level given this context, there's still a worthwhile opportunity for craft producers. For Black Button Distilling, the payoff is as simple as watching consumers switch to a locally made version of something they've drunk their whole lives. "My dad has been a lifelong Baileys drinker," Barrett says. "To get that out of the house and have something of mine that he drinks, that's reason enough for me."

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