

From Wine to Whiskey

This month, I'm a whiskey drinker. Last month I was a red wine drinker, but I decided to upgrade.

I've always associated drinking whisky with a more "manly" lifestyle than quaffing wine or mixed drinks. When I have a whiskey in my hand, I feel oddly sophisticated. And tipsy.

That's because by law, whiskies must be at least 40% alcohol – that's roughly 10 times more potent than Bud Light. It's odd feeling buzzed without at least 36 ounces of some kind of liquid in me, but whiskey is a very efficient ethanol delivery system.

After you've had a few, you can impress your friends with the tale of how "proof" came to be a measure of alcohol content; it is two times the Alcohol By Volume (ABV) percentage. They actually will be bored stiff, but you won't notice this in your condition.

In case you are able to articulate, the term originated in the 18th century when payments to British sailors included rations of rum. To ensure that the rum had not been watered down, it was "proved" by dousing gunpowder with it and then testing to see if the gunpowder would ignite.

If it did not, then the rum contained too much water and was considered to be "under proof". Gunpowder would not burn in rum that contained less than approximately 57.15% ABV. Therefore, rum that contained this percentage of alcohol was defined to have "100° (one hundred degrees) proof".

That doesn't explain how the 2:1 ratio came into use, but it begins with a complex formula that nobody can remember, even if they haven't been drinking.

Learning to appreciate whiskey ("barley juice," for you health nuts) was a big decision for me. After devoting most of my adult life to becoming an oenophile (wine snob), I hated to throw it all away and start over with hard alcohol.

I was as confused as anyone when I began. Bourbon, rye, Scotch and Irish whiskey were all distinctly different in my mind, but it turns out they are way more similar than dissimilar. First of all, they are all whiskeys, which are defined as any booze distilled from fermented grain mash.

The key for beginning whiskey drinkers is to avoid scotch. If you have any teenage children that you'd like to swear off of hard alcohol indefinitely, I recommend forcing them to slowly drink a shot of Islay single-malt scotch. It tastes like rubbing alcohol poured out of a used ashtray.

I started there myself, which was a mistake. It only became tolerable after several shots had numbed a sufficient number of my taste buds. For neophytes I recommend the lighter Irish whiskies until you get the hang of it. Jameson's, Kilbeggan or Bushmill's cheapest blends are a good way to begin, and if even those are too abrupt you can go for something like Bushmill's Irish Honey, which is akin to training wheels in the whiskey world.

Veteran scotch or bourbon drinkers won't be impressed with those choices, but unless they have tried one of the more complex peated Irish whiskies (like Redbreast), don't listen to their condescending comments.

After much trial and error, I have distilled (ahem) the proper way to enjoy any whiskey into four simple steps. Give this a try:

Step 1 - pour 2 ounces of whiskey into a clear glass.

Step 2 - add 2 more ounces of whiskey to the same glass.

Step 3 - add whiskey to taste.

Step 4 – drink.

Repeat as necessary.

Knock yourself out (so to speak).

Writers Group member Dave Parsons drinks responsibly - despite what you may think – and recommends you do the same. Nevertheless, he has seven opened bottles of various whiskies on his kitchen counter, if you feel like stopping by.