



THE HIGHBALL

Whiskey and . . .

THE FIRST TIME I HEARD the word “highball” was in a children’s book (appropriately enough, since I was a child at the time), *Mr. Twigg’s Mistake*, by the noted illustrator and author Robert Lawson. Lawson had a gift for writing books that appealed to children without talking down to them (and an absolute genius for illustration), so his books often included adults, having adult conversations.

In this case the main character’s father made highballs for visiting town officials, who had come to complain about the boy’s giant mole. The highballs made everyone friendly and I wondered what kind of drink they were to be so good, and so effective!

I would keep wondering for a while. *Mr. Twigg’s Mistake* was written in 1947, in the American golden days of this tall, refreshing style of drink, and by the time I started drinking, 30 years later, no one near my age had any idea what I was talking about. It would take another 10 years before I got hold of a cocktail book and figured it out: a highball is simply liquor, a mixer (juice, water, club soda,

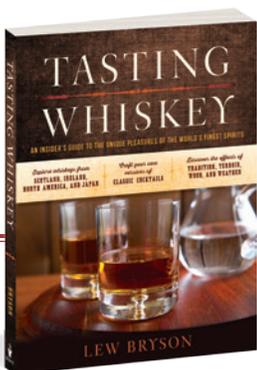
or a soft drink), and ice in a tall drink. It was a leisurely drink, something you could sip or gulp, a way to stretch the enjoyment of your drink by making more of it.

There are plenty of nonwhiskey highballs — the Cuba Libre, the Moscow Mule, the humble yet perfect gin and tonic. Even the Wisconsinite’s beloved Brandy Old-Fashioned Sweet is a highball with cherry juice and bitters. But let’s stay on topic. The best thing about this cocktail category is that everyone gets to play. It’s time for the Whiskey Roll Call!

SCOTCH! Let’s have a big glass of Scotch and soda, the classic champion of hot-weather Scotch drinks. Pour a couple of ounces of blended Scotch into a tall glass, fill it with ice, and top off with club soda. (I’ve been drinking the Compass Box Great King Street Scotch recently, a project by this whisky blending company to bring back respect for the blends, and it’s tasting great in Scotch and soda.)

This so-called cocktail is actually pretty interesting: what you get is more than what you put in, which is essentially whisky and water. You’d think you’d just get diluted whisky, not all bad when you’re pacing or refreshing yourself. There’s more to it, though. Of course there’s the physical snap of the bubbles from the club soda, which your tongue feels as effervescent tweaks, but it also turns out that some of the carbon dioxide is converted in the mouth to tiny bursts of carbonic acid, which tweak those same nerves in your tongue as your old friend ethanol. It gives Scotch and soda a bite that Scotch and water just doesn’t have. Add the extra aroma carried up from the bubbles, and you can see why this drink is so popular. Try one soon.

IRISH! Irish whiskey had been quite resistant to the idea of highballs, because an amazing



amount of the stuff is polished off neat, often with a glass of beer nearby. I've only recently been able to train myself to stop saying "and a shot of Powers" whenever I order a Guinness; it had become a reflex because the combination was so good.

But the crafty sons of fun at Jameson have hit on a highball that people love: Irish and ginger ale. It actually started at a bar in Minneapolis, called The Local, where they were serving a highball made with ginger ale and Jameson that they called Big Ginger. It went over *so* big that they became the biggest Jameson account in North America . . . so big they decided to cut out the Jameson middleman and went direct to Ireland, developing their own Irish whiskey brand, 2 Gingers. After reaching a legal settlement about the drink last year — a legal settlement over a *highball*? — Jameson is pushing the drink all over the world. And you know, it is quite tasty. Ginger ale works pretty well with a lot of different whiskeys!

BOURBON! If you've ever heard of "bourbon and branch" and wondered just what "branch" was, it's water. "Branch" is a Kentucky term for a small creek flowing into a larger one. Branch water is cool and pure — if you're lucky! — and thus a good addition to whiskey. I do like adding cold water to bourbon (I might even chill the bourbon) for Kentucky tea, a 2:1 ratio that is quaffable and still tastes clearly of the whiskey. It's great with a meal, and you can pace yourself on a hot day. If you've never had it, do yourself a favor.

Today, though, the big highball with bourbon is made with cola, but it's most famously connected to another whiskey, so it's time for . . .

TENNESSEE! Jack and Coke is the call. I've been told that as much as 70 percent of Jack Daniel's

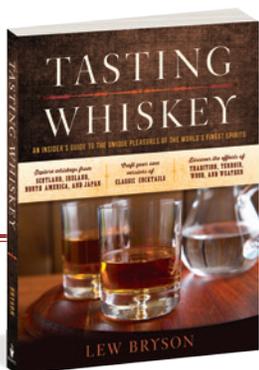
is consumed with Coca-Cola or ginger ale, and I'm willing to believe it. Drop in any bar in the country, and it's almost even money that someone will be drinking a Jack and Coke.

Except, of course, that I should say Jack and cola, because my first experience with Old No. 7 was a Jack and Pepsi. It was fizzy, it was sweet — it's Pepsi! — and the vanilla-corn sweetness of the whiskey tasted a lot better to me than the syrupy Cherry Cokes the girls at work were always drinking.

It's a combination that goes way back, and it even found its way into Prohibition. H. L. Mencken's account of visiting the Scopes trial (in 1925) gives a moonshine account: "Exactly twelve minutes after reaching the village I was taken in tow by a Christian man and introduced to the favorite tippie of the Cumberland Range: half corn liquor and half Coca-Cola. It seemed a dreadful dose to me, but I found that the Dayton illuminati got it down with gusto, rubbing their tummies and rolling their eyes." They still do; they just age the liquor a while now.

RYE! When it's hot and sticky in my far southeastern corner of Pennsylvania — and Lord, does it get humid here in the summer — and I have to tend the grill (or laze about in the hammock), I don't turn to beer. Beer's good up to a point, but when the dewpoint hits 80, I look at a cold beer and start to think about death, and where its sting might be.

That's when I turn to a big tumbler, plenty of ice, a good ginger ale, and cheap rye whiskey. Whenever I cross the border into Maryland, I'll pick up a handle of Pikesville Rye, and that's my hot weather buddy. I've heard the drink called a Rye Presbyterian (the original's made with Scotch), but I just call it a Rye and Ginger. The spice of the rye, the zing of the ginger: rye is just amazing, baby. How did you old guys do without it for so long?



There's another rye drink I wanted to tell you about, if only because of its nickname. The Black Water Cocktail is another one from the fertile minds at Deep Ellum, the place I mentioned in our discussion of Manhattans. It's equal parts Old Overholt and Moxie over ice, with a generous squeeze of lemon on top. "It's *gentian soda*," Max Toste says gleefully. "It doesn't even need bitters!" Max's bartender, Dave Cagle, calls it — and this is the nickname that grabbed me — "the thinking man's Jack and Coke."

I had to try it, and you know, it's quite savory. In fact, I was moved to add more Moxie to bring it up to a more highball-like ratio. It may be the best whiskey aperitif I've ever had, come to think of it. Moxie's weird gentian assault grabs the rye by the scruff of the neck — rye whiskey, pushed around! — and drags it into your mouth like a dog on a leash, and then makes it do tricks in there, the best of which is making Moxie taste good. It doesn't work without the lemon, though; the citrus crimps the Moxie's sweetness, and without it, the drink's a sickening mess.

CANADIAN! The big quiet guy on the American whiskey scene. We drink an amazing amount of Canadian whisky, but it's largely under the radar because mixologists haven't discovered it (and mainly it's your dad who's drinking it).

Here's a funny thing: it's also the favorite booze of my son and his 20-something friends. When they found out I had a cabinet full of Canadian samples, we became fast friends, and I learned a little something about what "those kids up at college" are drinking. Too much, actually, because they drink Canadian mixed with anything that comes in a two-liter bottle. I've tried to help by buying them good ginger ale and a bottle of Crown Royal.

Because despite the bizarre drinking habits of the folks I served at the Timberline



bar in Iva, Pennsylvania, back in the 1980s, who drank Canadian with grapefruit soda — except for the one woman who stipulated grapefruit juice, because "it's healthy" — I think that's the way to mix a Canadian highball: with ginger ale. As the Canadian whisky guru Davin de Kergommeaux insists, the stuff's usually chock-full of rye; serve it up like rye! I do tend to give it a squeeze of lemon to deal with Canadian's usually sweeter character. But ice it, pour it big, and let's have a party. **JAPANESE!** We've already talked about this one. The Japanese highball is blended whisky and soda, the "soda-wari." They mix it, they put it in cans, they even serve it on tap in some bars, because it's huge, and people drink it by the mug. They really get the whole highball thing, pushing it down to beer-strength levels. I love that idea: whisky cocktails by the mug.

CRAFT! Really? The wonderful handcrafted whiskeys that the distillers slaved over, sang to, and did only the best things for: you're going to put them in a highball? You bet you are, because one of the biggest things going for craft whiskey is the money-making white whiskey — unaged or lightly aged spirit — and that stuff, like Mencken's Tennessee tittle, is just begging for something to turn it into a drink. Get an unpretentiously good and reasonably priced one, like Finger Lakes Distilling's Glen Thunder corn whiskey, ice down a couple of ounces, and top it up with Pepsi, Dr Pepper, or cream soda. It's darn near a blank canvas, so paint the boozy drink of your dreams.

