

Recipe for an Irish Cocktail ***(Mountains of Mourne, Whitsun 2005)***

Judith Brown

The goal set for the trip seemed impossible, a dream, an objective born of the arrogant hubris of a group of women who thought they could achieve anything they wanted. Fifty-seven cocktails in one weekend! OK, it was a long weekend, but honestly, this seemed a tall order even by hardened Pinnacle Club standards.

The rucksacks being unloaded from the cars at Tory Cottages clinked with climbing gear whilst the dark clouds swirling around the mountains suggested that their contents might be redundant. Then came the Sainsbury's bags and the clinking that emanated from them was of a different order, the slightly edgy ring of glass on glass, the noise that sets that guilty doubt in your mind as you drive to the bottle bank that surely you couldn't possibly have drunk that much since the last visit. Unlike the rucksacks which were unceremoniously dumped wherever there was room, the bright orange bags were secreted away in the second cottage.

Among the maps and guidebooks on the table, there lurked *The Ultimate Cocktail Manual* and a bottle of Angostura's Bitters. Clearly some kind of witchcraft was afoot.

Cottage Number One rose to an unpromising day and set off into impending Irish gloom, our efforts rewarded by superb ridge walking and delightful (if intermittent) views. At one point our route took us along the picturesquely named Brandy Pad, a smugglers route. No Sainsbury's bags back then, just barrels of the stuff spirited through the mountains in the depth of night. As the mist thickened on the summit of Slieve Donard we almost imagined ourselves back in those turbulent times except that the thought of the Excise Men visiting Cottage Number Two was too scary to contemplate.

Dinner preparations started with the interweaving of crockery and glasses from the two cottages and the transmigration of chairs. Then

we were summoned to the laboratory to sample the first results of the alchemical experiments under way in Cottage Two. There was a slightly possessed look in Fred's eye as she decanted strange liquids from the silver measure. Maureen looked more serene - no doubt due to pre-prandial experimental sampling. Was it Tequila Sunrise that night? Memories are as cloudy as the mountains.

The next day was very windy and not entirely due to the indulgences of the night before. Breakaway groups slipped off in various directions. For some, reconnaissance of the crags on the promise of a sunny day tomorrow, for others a visit to the supermarket for more essential supplies.

Dinner was an action replay of the night before, but in reverse, as chairs and crockery were shuttled across the lawn to Cottage Two. This time we were staying in the lab. There was some serious drinking to be done. Fred and Maureen were keeping count, for most of us an impossible task after the ingestion of several Harvey Wallbangers.

However, there are some hard heads in the Pinnacle Club, so when the day dawned bright, wall banging was exactly what we did, on superb granite. The walk-in up the Annalong Valley was short and of a gradient amenable to slight headaches, but Lower Cove had all the imposing atmosphere of a high mountain crag. Classics were knocked-off with all the nonchalance and style of confirmed luses. It was a grand day of climbing. Something to celebrate. So, of course, we did.

It was the last night, we had conquered the imposing heights of the Mountains of Mourne, and Maureen and Fred were sharing a birthday. Indiscrete to say which, but there's a clue in the number of cocktails we had set out to consume. The birthday girls were "cooking on gas". Corks popped and sugar-cubes dropped, as brandy glugged and bitters were measured by Fred, no longer looking like a sorcerer's apprentice, more like the Master Alchemist who has truly discovered the secret of turning base metal into gold. It's a champagne cocktail. One or three of those and life itself is gilded. Tasteful little cocktail umbrellas sprouted from glasses and behind ears. Certain people who normally know better began to sing. Such was the mysterious magic of the champagne cocktail that no-one objected.

There was even applause. It's a well-known fact that alcohol can make you go blind; that night was testimony to the fact that it can also make you deaf.



Left to right: Val Hennelly, Judith Brown, Helen Copeland, Fred Reynolds, Diana Proudfoot, Sue Williscroft, Maureen Foster, Dee Gaffney, Sally Macintyre, Pamela Holt

Climbing blood was up for our last morning, but first of all we had to undertake the Great Unravelling. Chairs and plates and casserole dishes, not to mention glasses, were redistributed between our households in a vague semblance of their original deposition. It was a task almost as complex as trying to separate the constituent parts of a cocktail once it's been through the shaker. Unravelling the three star routes at Pigeon Mountain crag was simple by comparison. The morning was overcast but not our spirits. Maureen put on her rock boots and floated up the classic severe, still imbued with the magic of

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the night before. Then, reluctantly, we went our separate ways homeward by air and sea, Belfast a stark counterpoint to the Irish mist and mystery of the mountains.

Cocktails are made through the careful blending of mutually enhancing ingredients to create something that is strong, exciting and greater than the sum of its parts. Certainly an appropriate metaphor for the Pinnacle Club that weekend.

Editor's note: as she admits, Judith is a little hazy on some of the details. I am happy to maintain historical accuracy by reporting that Harvey Wallbangers were not in fact consumed. Having checked with my fellow alchemist I can confirm that the cocktail to which Judith refers is called Damn the Weather. I say no more.