

The Moment

Case Study is a bimonthly posting on all things alcoholic by Toby Cecchini, T's spirits columnist.



The Jack Rose is the classic cocktail that never got invited to the oldies reunion. While other sours, such as the daiquiri, the Daisy, the Sidecar and select others, are revered and reinterpreted in their doctage, this mainstay of the 1920s and '30s has fallen so far out of circulation that few still know its name. More's the pity, for when properly made it is one of the canon's stronger pillars, and a perfect sip when the post-equinox winds set in.

The drink is simply a sour made from apple brandy — or applejack, as it was known from Colonial times through Prohibition — with grenadine syrup as the sweetener. Its name is attributed to any number of colorful characters, including a famous gangster stool pigeon, but it most likely comes from the shortening of applejack and the dusty rose color the drink attains from the grenadine and citrus.

Two circumstances combine, I believe, to keep this once widely known drink under wraps: the current dearth of applejack, long one of the most widely consumed spirits in America, coupled with the cloying impostors that now pass for grenadine. Once so routinely distilled in the backwoods repairs of New Jersey during Prohibition that it was known as “Jersey Lightning,” true applejack is now on the endangered species list.

Laird, the oldest distiller in the nation, still offers several apple brandies from its Scobeyville, N.J., distillery. What it doesn't list on its Web site, however, is the real prize: 100-proof Straight Apple Brandy, with its original “Bottled in Bond” label intact from the '40s. Made in small quantities and maddeningly difficult to find, each bottle contains the distillation of roughly 23 pounds of apples, according to Lisa Laird Dunn, the company's ninth-generation vice president. This drink finds its voice in the raw, crisp tang of young American apple brandy. It might seem that Calvados would work just as well, but generations of bartenders agree that in a Jack Rose it is not interchangeable.

While finding real applejack can make for some sleuthing, you can easily make your own grenadine, the pomegranate-based simple syrup that was favored in many cocktails in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It turns out to be a vast improvement on the red-dyed sugar water in markets. Once you've rounded up the materials, 15 minutes' light work will make enough to last you well into winter.

Historically, Jack Rose recipes vary wildly in strength, sweetness and the use of lemon or lime juice. My preference is for lime, but the best recipe I found was also the most elastic, counseling a bit of jiggering to find one's preferred median. This drink's triumvirate of strong, sour and sweet, fleshed out with apple and pomegranate, resonates with its vibrant, autumnal balance. Stop mourning the past and spring this treasure from the nursing home.

Jack Rose

1.5 ounces Laird 100-proof Straight Apple Brandy,

1 ounce fresh lime juice

0.5 to 1 ounce grenadine syrup (adjust according to taste).

Shake over ice and strain into a stemmed cocktail glass. Garnish with a twist of lemon or nothing. *Serves 1.*

Grenadine Syrup

1 quart pure pomegranate juice

1/2 pound demerara or other good raw sugar

1 tablespoon rose water (see Note)

1 tablespoon orange-flower water (see Note).

Pour roughly half of the pomegranate juice into a saucepan. Heat over medium, taking care to remove from the flame before it boils. Stir in the sugar until dissolved, then add the other half-quart of juice, the rose water and orange flower water. Mix well and decant into a clean bottle to refrigerate. Adding 2 ounces or so of high-proof vodka or Everclear will allow it to keep longer. *Makes 1 quart.*