

WHAT IS A TOM & JERRY?



One of the indisputable highlights of winter in a cold climate, in my opinion, is hot beverages. I'll never grow out of the childlike delight I feel when I come in from a snowy day to savor a mug of steaming hot cocoa. Another no-alcohol favorite, especially with the teens and college students I know, is a spicy chai latte. Yeah, it's got caffeine in it, but it warms with cinnamon, cardamom and pepper, too.

As for booze, I'll never forget the unmitigated wonder and gratitude I felt when, on a gusty, sub-zero night in Toronto, my husband and I sought refuge in a bar on Yonge Street and ordered snifters of tawny port. Instant thaw. There's also the benevolent favorite, Irish coffee, best with a tower of whipped cream. I recently heard it described in a *Prairie Home Companion* skit (this must be a joke older than me): "It'll git you drunk...but, you can't sleep it off!"

But all of these pale in comparison to my newest enthusiasm. I've met Tom and Jerry! No, kids, not Ben and Jerry, the ice-cream guys. No, old-timers, not the cartoon cat and mouse. This is a warm winter drink, a heady concoction that will make you feel like your internal organs are glowing and can be seen from outer space. When you finish one, you feel invincible. In a friendly, vivacious kind of way. You think I exaggerate?

My manner of introduction suggested that a Tom and Jerry is not a new invention. I live in a small town in Upstate New York's snow belt and our Main Street businesses, the ones we have (there are also empty storefronts here), get into the holiday spirit every December with holiday specials. I was on board for the sale at the bead and gem shop, for the festively wrapped scented soaps in the store next to it. I sampled "SoupFest" in a few more as I browsed (what it sounds like—each shopkeeper offered a cup of soup from a crockpot or vat for shoppers). When I ran into some friends, though, they waved a dismissive hand at the soup and cried, "Oh, no! No, no! Not that! Let's go get a Tom and Jerry! It's traditional!"

They revealed it was “a sort of a hot eggnog” and it was being served up at a dicey little bar up the street, Ed and Bud’s. Ed and Bud’s, I judge, is no place for a nice girl like me. Ed and Bud’s opens early in the morning and well before lunch, the barstools are securely occupied by the shiftless, the retired, the downtrodden old characters of this town—mostly men. The décor is peeling paneling and faded, stained curtains in the small windows. I once had the worst hamburger of my life in that place and hadn’t returned.

Swept up in their enthusiasm and holiday spirit but nonetheless dubious, I trailed along to Ed and Bud’s to meet Tom and Jerry. The place was bustling and it was clear to see that, while the regulars were ensconced in their regular spots, we were not the only spillover patrons from the Christmas on Main Street activities. We perched at an unsteady table, primly keeping our coats on, and ordered our Tom and Jerry’s. The barman was polite, even twinkly. He advised us that “it would take a few minutes.”

He could be glimpsed busying himself off to the side of the bar. When I stood up to finally remove my heavy jacket and craned my neck to see what was happening, I spotted a simmering crockpot, a quart of cream, a carton of eggs, and a stout bottle of brandy, among other materials and ingredients. “Was there also a bottle of rum?,” one of my companions wanted to know. “There needs to be rum, too.” I hadn’t noticed. Maybe. Oof.

After nearly 10 minutes, overflowing mugs were delivered to our table. Cheap little 6-ounce coffee mugs, of the sort one finds at a tag sale for a quarter. Faded lettering on the sides varied from “Merry Christmas” to “Happy Holidays” to, yes, “Tom and Jerry.” A jaunty cap of cream and whipped egg whites, dusted in nutmeg, covered the steaming contents and began to slide down the sides. I warmed my fingers on my cup and sniffed it hopefully. My companions were in a different frame of mind; they’d had this drink before. Their eyes rolled back, their snowflake-dampened scarves fell forgotten to the grubby floor, and they moaned with bliss as they slurped greedily.

My first sip was an experience of sugary froth, spicy nutmeg, and a warm bolt of booze. My attention telescoped dramatically on the little cup. Heat cascaded evenly, in a stately manner, down to my toes. I decided the cup was cute. A really adorable vintage cup. Must watch for these at sales this summer and in the junk shops around town. Another warming gulp. I decided I’d been a snob about this fine establishment. Tom and Jerry were wonderful, welcoming fellas. Anyone could see that. All too soon, my little cup was drained and I was filled with sentimental well-being towards the out-of-focus patrons bellied up to the bar, my kind friends, and the talented, hardworking barman. I shot him an affectionate, apologetic grin. I licked my lips.

It turns out, at least according to some sources, that a Tom and Jerry is a regional specialty. Some trace its origins to Michigan, citing a visionary bartender named Jerry Thomas who was born on the shores of Lake Ontario around 1830 and plied his trade in various places, including New York City. Placing the drink where winters are cold makes perfect sense.

Others say Thomas merely publicized it, but got the idea from the popular 1821 novel by journalist Pierce Egan *Life in London*. I looked it up and was amused to learn it was that time's equivalent of a graphic novel and featured tales of the hijinks of three guys named Tom, Jerry, and Logic. (Logic, we notice immediately, was not immortalized in the drink's name, no doubt because who wants to think and drink?) The stories enjoyed a second life on the London and, later, the New York stage, which is probably how the recipe traveled to America.

The drink was evidently invented by author Egan to help publicize his stories, though having it be tasty and laden with booze probably didn't hurt, either. The Tristram Shandy and even *The Catcher in the Rye* may be clever, but I've never actually seen these literary drinks in action. A cocktail to help market a book or play isn't a bad idea—one can perhaps imagine Bridget Jones telling Ellen or getting her famous BFFs to "tweet" about whatever she favors, or Jason Bourne's stress-relief "secret" going viral. The only modern-day example that comes to mind isn't even that modern and in fact lacks specific ingredients—James Bond's "shaken not stirred" martini. You may have noticed, Daniel Craig hawks premium wristwatches instead. Harmless, but boring.

Meanwhile, Tom and Jerry's abides, and merrily resurfaces every holiday season in colder parts of the Northeast to warm winter-weary souls. Even if hardly anyone has a clue about the name's origins anymore. That's because it's so delicious and, well, life-affirming.

Like any recipe with longevity, there are variations, but here's the basic template:

2 eggs, separated
2/3 cup sugar (superfine, if you wish; some recipes call for powdered sugar, which sacrifices that lovely crunchy texture in the first sips)
4 ½ cups milk (or cream, or a mix)
dark rum
brandy (or bourbon)
spices to taste (cinnamon, cloves, allspice), including nutmeg to sprinkle on top

Beat egg whites till stiff peaks form, gradually adding the sugar.
Vigorously mix the egg yolks with 1 tsp brandy. Add spices if desired.
Blend everything and keep cold/refrigerate. This is called the "batter."
Heat milk till simmering—hot but not bubbling.
Put a shot of brandy AND a shot of rum in each mug, pour in milk, top with several spoonfuls of batter, and dust with nutmeg.

Serve immediately and with a flourish. Serves 6, or so.

God bless us, every one.