

ALABAMA EGGNOG

By  
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An Alabama eggnog is one that caresses the palate with velvety gentleness, and then once it is within the stomach, suddenly becomes the counterpart of a kicking mule. It is a fluffy, saffron - colored beverage, delicate in fragrance, daintly blended, and pungently persuasive. It is as Uncle Nat says, "Lak a yaller gal wid a new dress--smooth as cawsilk, purty as de warbler's breas,', but lightnin' on de rebound."

Uncle Nat should know, for he has been an eggnog specialist for more than sixty years. He is one among scores of such specialists--stooped and gray-bearded old Negroes, betraying a little weariness under the weight of years, but very proud in a quiet dignity of their roles in keeping burning this light of tradition.

Somewhere in Alabama's past -- probably during the glittery years that immediately preceeded the war between the states -- the Christmas eggnog custom became solidly established. It was not an innovation -- Christmas eggnog had been served for many years --but Alabamians claimed then, and still do, that no eggnog parties approached their own in lavishness and hospitality.

Beginning in the big -houses, in the majestic Greek Revival designed mansions such as Gaineswood, Rosemont, and Thornhill, the custom branched out to the cabins of the poorest farmers, and, where planters were benevolent, to the slave quarters.

In these latter instances, the amount of whiskey was held to a minimum, but on many plantations the Negroes were allowed sufficient Christmas "nog" to bolster their spirits for "jig-tune" singing and buck dancing to the rhythmic twanging of banjos.

However, it was in the big-houses that parties attained proportions approaching splendor. On Christmas Eve, great log fires were kindled in the marble - trimmed fireplaces of spacious living rooms; candles gleamed above shiny chandelier pendants, and red-berried holly hung in generous wreaths above all entrances. Hundreds of eggs were gathered, to be blended with choice, well-aged whiskies that the planters had ordered from distant distilleries.

It was the custom for guests -- people from all the adjacent country side--to begin "dropping in" around nine o'clock of Christmas Eve morning. They came dressed in all their finery; some came with extra clothing, for the parties continued unabated until nightfall of Christmas day. At the great double doors, they were greeted by their hosts, and then they were shown into the living rooms where huge crystal bowls, brimming with eggnog, were lined upon broad central tables.

This, then, was how the annual festive occasions came into being, during a period when Southern affluence reached its zenith. The affluence has waned; perhaps the parties are not so widespread as in the old days, but they may still be found at Christmas time in every section of the state. It is at this time that many persons, who never take alcohol at any other time of the year, see nothing wrong in drinking one or more richly stimulating eggnogs.

Prohibition, which is still enforced in several Alabama counties, never succeeded in halting the parties. The only difference was the substitution of "moonshine" corn for branded liquors. And the corn, when properly aged in a charred keg, proved very palatable. The Negroes sing about it:

Bossman wants er keg o' cawn,  
Hi de do -- hi de do;  
Been drinkin' grog since he wuz bawn--  
Hi de do -- hi de do;  
Po-leece say, 'Hit's ag'in de law!  
Bossman say, "Gainst de law! - Ah, Pshaw,  
I's gont'er drink ef hit's aged er raw!--  
Hi de do -- hi de do!"

Several sections of Alabama are famed for the hospitable charm of their eggnog parties. The quietly dignified town of Eufaula is an example. There, the visitor will find warm generosity, gracious conversation, many new friends who will "drop in" for a few minutes of gossip, and the best eggnog and cake that skilled hands can create.

At Eufaula, also, will be found many of the "keepers of the spirits"-- the aged Negroes who remain unequalled at their art of preparing nog. They know that they are good and they will tell a visitor with serious confidence, "Don'no whut de fo'ks hyar'll do when I's gone. Ain't nobody but me know how ' zactly to mix de nog wid de eggs."

Then, if asked, they will give the recipe:

Take a dozen eggs, and beat the yellows and whites separately, both very light. Put half the sugar in the whites, and half in the yellows. When the yellows and the sugar are beaten together very light, add the whiskey, two tablespoonfuls to an egg. Then fold in the beaten whites, and at last fold in one pint of whipped cream, adding more whiskey to taste. This proportion can be used to make any amount of eggnog.

They usually begin with 100 eggs and along with their product, they always serve fruit cake, Lane cake, cocoanut cake, and salted nuts.

At such ante-bellum mansions as Roseland, Buena Vista, Elmoreland, Lockeland, Weelawnee, and Magnolia Vale, the parties have been an integral part of social life for more than 100 years. Surrounded by a background of Christmas greens, the great bowls are kept full, and foamy nog is served to every caller. The serving, as of old, takes place in the living rooms, where everyone with a speaking acquaintance is welcome.

Just as the town is widely known for its eggnog, the rural sections of Barbour County are famous for their syllabub. This is made with a syllabub churn. Cream is placed in the churn, and sugar and home-made wine are added. As fast as the syllabub is churned, it is taken out and put into tall glasses, and is served all day to neighbors and friends. All sorts of cakes, candies, and nuts are accompanying treats. One of the famous fruit cakes of that region is made this way:

One pound of butter; one pound of sugar; one pound of flour; twelve eggs; six tablespoonsfuls of buttermilk; one teaspoon of soda; one cup of syrup; one pint of whiskey; one tablespoonful of cinnamon; one teaspoonful of allspice; one tablespoonful of nutmeg; one-half teaspoonful of cloves; four pounds of raisins; two pounds of currants; one pound of almonds; one pound of pecan meats; one pound of citron; one pound of crystallized cherries; and one pound of pineapple.

The fruit is prepared by cutting citron and pineapple in small pieces. Cherries must be whole. Wash and dry raisins and currants, several days before making cake so they will be thoroughly dry. Blanch and slice the almonds and prepare the raisins by pouring boiling water over them. Allow them to drain and afterward cut into small pieces. Clean the currants by placing and shaking flour over them and rubbing it carefully. Put them into a pan of clean water and rinse them until the water is clear. Dry in the steam of the oven.

Sift the flour, add soda, salt, spice, nuts and fruit, and stir well in order to distribute the flour. Add sugar gradually, constantly beating. Beat the eggs and add a little at a time to the butter and sugar. If this mixture curdles, add a little flour. Add syrup, flour, salt, soda and slices of fruit, beating thoroughly. Last of all, stir in the whiskey. Line the cake pan with three layers of brown paper, greased with fat. Do not use butter. Bake four hours. While warm, pour more whiskey over the top and cover with a cloth.

However, few of the old Negroes know the secret of making fruit cake, and they scorn the prospect of being enlightened. They protest vehemently that whiskey should never be mixed with cake.

"De women folks is 'sponsible," they say. "De menfolks, dey lak de nog strong, wid nothin' to weaken it down. But de mistuses, dey watch de men close, and 'bout de time everybody gits to fightin' de Yanks, de mistuses call out, 'Pass de cake aroun' -- dey's moufe hyar need stuffin' up."