



DRINK #4

Traditions are funny things. We like to honor them, but tend to pick and choose the parts we like best, ignoring those we don't.

Holiday traditions tend to take the brunt of the conversion process, many times thanks to Wall Street and Madison Avenue whose main goal is to make it slick, make it sexy and make it sell. But for every soda guzzling Santa Claus with rosy cheeks and twinkling eyes, there's an older, less sanitized version waiting in the wings to snatch naughty children from their beds and spirit them away to a life devoid of iPhones, Instagram or T Swift. The horror.

In an attempt to keep at least one of those fading traditions alive, I've taken it upon myself to revive the celebratory

art of wassailing. What's wassailing, you ask? Gather 'round, lords and ladies, as I attempt to sum up a thousand years of legend, folklore and ritual in 800 words or less. For the stalwart, I've even included my favorite Wassail recipe at the end.

To begin with, the word 'wassail' comes from the Anglo-Saxon phrase 'waes hael,' or 'good health.'

The story of its inception is best presented by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his riveting, but by no means complete, 1135 potboiler "History of the Kings of Britain." In it, he tells of a king named Vortigern who, while being entertained at a royal banquet, was presented with a large bowl of wine by a pretty little serving wench named Rowena, who

bleated, "Lavert King, was hail!"

Vortigern's interpreter explained to him that the wench wasn't calling him out, but rather offering a greeting, the proper response for which was 'drinc hail,' roughly translated to mean 'commence guzzling!' The exchange become an instant tradition in



the lands of Britain, where the person who drinks first at a banquet or gathering (usually the head of the household) says 'wassail,' followed by the response

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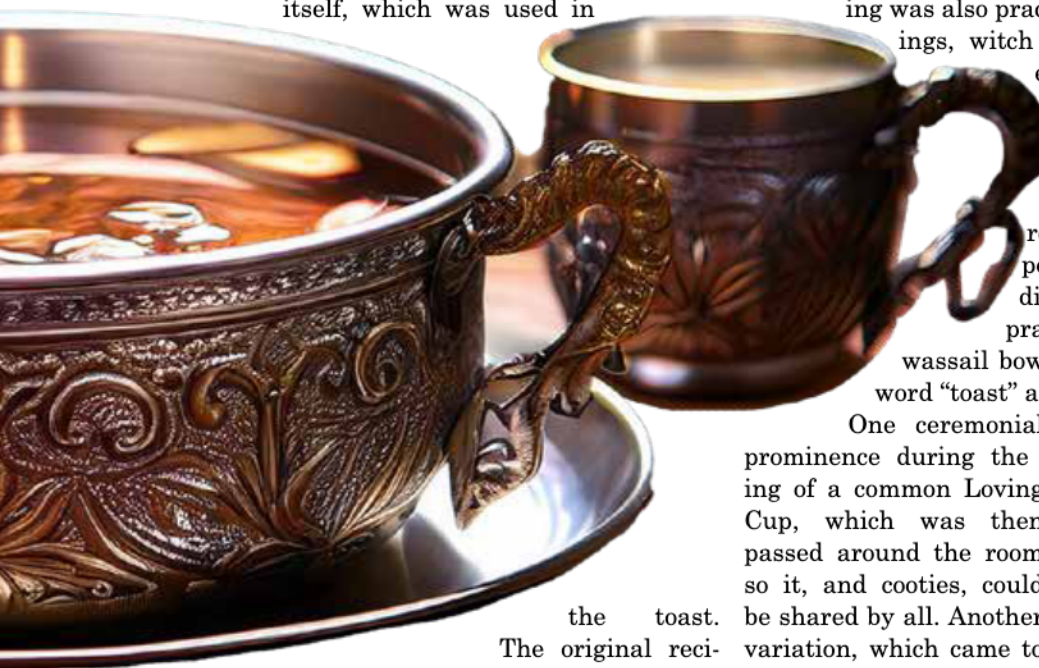
WASSAIL!

An abbreviated history of Wassailing

By David Salcido

from the crowd, 'drink hail!' signaling the beginning of the revels and debauchery.

The word wassail also came to denote the drink itself, which was used in



the toast. The original recipe, as passed down from that time, was said to be a heady combination of mulled ale, curdled cream, roasted apples, eggs, cloves, ginger, nutmeg and sugar. In time, the cream and egg were separated out (the genesis of the gastric terror known as egg nog?) and, though variations abound, the main ingredients of wassail always involved baked apples and spices.

Over time the tradition of wassailing, much like the recipe, began to acquire variations. Although classically observed during the Christmas holiday, wassailing was also practiced at weddings, christenings, witch burnings and other joyful events where community and family came together to celebrate. The first mention of a wassail bowl was in the thirteenth century, referring to a large wooden or pewter vessel in which were dipped cakes and breads. The practice of floating bread in the wassail bowl was the progenitor of the word "toast" as a salutation.

One ceremonial version, which came to prominence during the Renaissance, was the filling of a common Loving Cup, which was then passed around the room so it, and cooties, could be shared by all. Another variation, which came to prominence in the 17th century, was for a bowl of wassail to be taken house to house and shared with neighbors, until a little ailment called the Black Death put an end to communal quaffing.

The most popular tradition, however, continued to be the custom of toasting one's guests before the commencement of merry making, as kept alive by popular scribes Washington Irving and Charles Dickens, during the 19th century. In the 20th century, alas, there were none to carry the torch and the tradition declined, eventually falling victim to the same corporate white washing of the holiday season that created Santa Claus, artificial Christmas trees and increasingly vapid interpretations of A Christmas Carol.

Still, remnants of the tradition continue. There are many who claim that the custom of going from house to house singing Christmas carols had its origins in wassailing. In fact, the song "Here We Come A-Wassailing" was eventually changed to "Here We Come

WASSAILING

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WASSAILING*continued from page 19*

singing hymns to unsuspecting neighbors, rather than bringing them booze, often resulted in a payoff to make them stop.

A-Caroling,” mainly because the concept of wassailing became lost over time. That and the rigid expungement of all references to inebriated conviviality by enterprising Puritans, who hit upon the concept that



Eventually frowned upon in polite society, despite the original intent of offering blessings and good will to friends and family, the custom of wassailing went underground where it has assiduously been kept alive by artists, miscreants and rogues to this day. No matter what the ritual exercises or traditional observances, one fact remains: wassail continues to be a great way to warm the cockles on a cold winter's eve.

Wassail!

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There are so many different versions of the recipe that have been handed down over the centuries, but common elements tend to be booze, baked apples and spices. Beer is the preferred base, but other versions involve everything from wine to apple juice. Here's my tried and true version, always a favorite at holiday gatherings:

Traditional Wassail**Ingredients:**

- 6 – 10 small apples, cored
- 1 cup brown sugar
- 1 cup water
- 8 to 12 12-ounce bottles hard apple ale
- 1 teaspoon cloves
- 1 teaspoon allspice
- 1 teaspoon ground ginger
- 1 teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 1 cinnamon stick

Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees F
2. Put apples into a glass baking dish. Sprinkle brown sugar onto each apple evenly. Pour water into bottom of the dish and bake approximately 45 minutes, or until tender.
3. In sachet or tea infuser combine cloves, allspice, ginger, nutmeg and cinnamon (you may have to cut the cinnamon stick to make it fit)
4. Pour ale and place spice sachet into a large pot and set over low heat, slowly raising temperature until steam is rising. Do not boil!
5. Remove sachet. Add apples and liquid from baking dish to hot cider and let mingle over heat for 15 minutes or so.
6. Ladle into cups and serve.
7. Don't forget the toast to the good fortunes of those around you.



Wassailer's note: Hard apple ale (Redds Apple Ale, Woodchuck Hard Cider or Unibroue Ephemere from Canada, if available) is the preferred choice at my castle, but traditionalists tend to like using real English ale. Other choices are porter, brown ale or Belgian dubbel. The secret is to favor malt over hops, as hoppy beers, such as IPAs, tend to be bitter when cooked.

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