

LIQUEURS

the habit of ancient monks

by Sharon Kirkham

There are literally hundreds of different liqueurs to tantalise and titillate taste buds – whether it's neat or over ice, in a cocktail or coffee, as a cooking ingredient or delicious dessert. It's hard to believe that the deliciously sweet fruit, berry, cream, coffee, chocolate, herbal, and nut flavoured liqueurs we savour today are, in fact, the historical descendents of the bitter, pungent and hard-to-swallow herbal medicines prepared by ancient monks and alchemists.

During the 13th century, life appeared a little simpler. It was thought that everything in the world was composed of four 'essences' – earth, fire, air and water. However, in 1240, Arnaud de Villeneuve, esteemed physician to the pope, professor of medicine, alchemist and monk, came up with a 'fifth essence'. Attributed with introducing the distillation process to Europe, Villeneuve found that the clear, fiery liquid produced by distilling wine had some extraordinary restorative and life-giving properties. When he applied it with a cloth to open wounds and sores, they miraculously healed. He felt he had discovered the divine, and named this clear spirit, 'eau de vie' – the 'water of life'. In *The Boke(sic) of Wine*, Villeneuve talks of 'distilling wine, the subsequent flavouring of the spirit with herbs and spices, and the vital life-restoring properties of these 'waters'.

The monastic orders and alchemists soon realised that the well-known medicinal properties of various herbs, spices, fruit and bark were preserved longer when infused with alcohol rather than with water, and so the production of alcoholic elixirs (our early liqueurs) began. But while these early potions may have cured all manner of ills, they were decidedly ill tasting. The drinking of liqueurs for pleasure, not pain, only happened later when new sweeteners and exotic aromatic spices became readily available and affordable – thanks to the opening up of new trade routes. India and Indonesia had been reached, America and the West Indies had been colonised, and suddenly all sorts of new 'delicacies' were at hand – sugar, coffee, cocoa, cinnamon, cardamom, ginger, quinine, nutmeg, vanilla, not to mention exotic fruits like bitter oranges, bananas and mangoes. And while much of the liqueur production between the 14th and 17th century belonged to the monastic orders, by the mid-16th century, commercial distillation had begun. The Dutch were the first, establishing Bols in 1575. The Germans followed in 1598 with Der Lachs. By the mid-17th century, Holland boasted some 500 distilleries which used both white and red wines as the base for producing their 'waters of life'. And the rest, as they say, is history.

The five-minute Liqueur Master Class

A liqueur is a sweet alcoholic beverage made by redistilling spirits with aromatic flavourings such as fruits, herbs, spices, flowers, seeds, roots, plants, barks and occasionally cream. The word liqueur is derived from the Latin liquifacere, which means to melt or dissolve – and this refers to the various methods used to flavour the alcoholic base of a liqueur. These include:

Maceration

Used to extract the aromatic substance from a raw material, this process sees the raw material immersed in pure alcohol (sometimes for up to a year!), until that spirit absorbs that flavour. The 'tincture' that is produced then forms the basis for the liqueur.

Infusion

Similar to maceration, the raw material is still steeped in alcohol but this is then heated over several days – the result is a more flavoursome and economic product.

Percolation

This can be done hot or cold. The flavouring agent is placed in a container and raw alcohol is either bubbled through it over a period of days or weeks, or it is brought to the boil. The rising vapours then percolate through the flavouring agent and fall back into the main pot producing an 'extract'.

Distillation

Heat is used to extract flavour and then distillation concentrates the extracted essential oils.

A particular flavour source will demand a particular extraction method. For example, bark and fruit skins, which are hard and dry, are more suited to distillation and percolation, while soft and juicy fruits are well suited to maceration.

While many of the actual recipes for liqueurs are fiercely guarded secrets, most can be said to fall into one of the following categories – chocolate, coffee, cream, crème, fruit, berry, herbal (anise-flavoured, etc.), nut and other.