

Liqueurs

by Paul Dunseath © 1998, 2000

"Christmas is a' coming and the goose is getting fat;
Please to put a penny in the old man's hat;
If you haven't got a penny, then a ha'penny will do..
If you haven't got a ha'penny, may God Bless You !"

Making your own liqueurs, using one of the many essences available at your local wine supplies dealer, can provide an inexpensive way to serve your Christmas guests with an elegant after-dinner cordial or liqueur at a fraction of the commercial cost. Liqueurs made at home can duplicate the commonly-available ones, and simulate (if not duplicate) the fine proprietary ones, at a fraction of their cost. Enjoy ! At the end of the year as the Canadian landscape reflects so perfectly the emotions we all feel as Christmas approaches (come on, now; be romantic; I'm not talking about shoveling the driveway!), the time comes to think about the most meaningful season of the year, and, with it, the likelihood of entertaining friends and families. What nicer demonstration of hospitality than home-made wine?

Oh, I see; there isn't time to make any more... Oh, well, there's always next year. But wait... what about liqueurs ? Sure, you can make them for Christmas, if you start a few weeks ahead ! Is it worth it ? Well, have we ever lied to you before ?

The basic process for making liqueurs is fairly simple; one simply dissolves sugar in water, adds alcohol (either alcohol or wine) and a flavour extract, and bottles in an appropriate bottle. Ageing helps, but even a couple of weeks will make a marked improvement. Many of the extracts also come with pre-printed labels, but if you wish to re-use commercial bottles with their proprietary labels and spring one on your fiends - let your conscience be your guide---

A Modest History of Liqueurs

Lets look at some historical factors. Liqueurs originated in all probability - at least, in something approximating their present form - in the Middle Ages, - when practitioners of the Medical Arts realized that certain potions, believed to be good for various bodily ills, dissolve poorly or not at all in water, but in fact dissolved freely in alcohol.

Extracts of various kinds, perhaps sweetened with honey and dissolved in brandy, became the stock-in-trade of various distillers and several monasteries, with the various formulations being then - and now - a closely-guarded secret. In time, people came to realize that you didn't have to be sick to enjoy the taste of these products, and they came to be enjoyed for their own sake. Today, of course, liqueurs are made from a variety of fruits, herbs, whiskies, rums, and even eggs ! And all, or virtually all, are enjoyed for their taste, rather than their alleged health-giving properties.

Making It At Home

For the home winemaker or brewer, a variety of flavourings are also available at local winemaker supply stores, which flavourings, mixed with sugar, alcohol, and - sometimes - home-made wine - can provide a close approximation of commercial liqueurs. How close ? Well, as they say, it depends.

An anecdote, however, may be instructive. A friend of ours once made some "Cerne de Menthe" liqueur, and, having nothing better to store it in, used a bottle bearing a world-renowned commercial brand of the same liqueur. He served it on one occasion after supper to a business colleague who fancied himself a connoisseur. Having noticed the distinctively-shaped bottle, his colleague sipped the liqueur, raised it to the light, and commented, "You know, Dave, I don't often buy M.....B..... because it's so expensive., but it's sure worth it, isn't it ? Can you do the same ? Of course you can. First, a little theory then we'll see how to do it... and remember, there's still time before Christmas !

Proof Oh Spirit !

The basis of alcoholic strength (of which we need to be aware, since making liqueurs involves blending ingredients of various alcoholic strengths) is the concept of proof.

Pure alcohol, of course, bums quickly if a match is put to it, while pure water puts a match out.

Today, one may measure very accurately exactly where along this continuum a mixture of alcohol and water may lie, but in olden days it wasn't so easy. However some brave soul discovered that if a mixture of water and alcohol was combined with gunpowder (!), then the rate of burning reflected the percent of alcohol in the mixture. If the mixture fizzled and went out, it was "unproved"; if it burned evenly, it was "proof spirit"; if it flared up, it was "overproof".

Modern analysis indicates that "proof spirit" is 57.05% alcohol; and that pure alcohol is 1.750 proof (in the U.S., the equivalent figures are 100 and 200 respectively; more rational, perhaps, but less replicable). What this means is that, in Canadian practice, multiplying alcohol content by 1.75 gives degrees proof (in the U.S. system, the multiplier is 2). Commercial liqueurs range from .300 to an incredible .960, but a figure of .400 is a good average; those who choose to make them more or less strong will be able to do so with the recipes which follow.

Ingredients

The basic ingredients required are ...

sugar,

water,

alcohol (either underproof or RAQ Alcool or equivalent),

liqueur essence,

and - if desired - white wine to reduce the quantity of alcohol required.

Determining Quantities

The many commercial liqueur concentrates on the market will indicate how much spirit, sugar, water, and flavouring are required to make a given quantity of liqueur. If you want to use the simple method, i.e. following the recipe and using commercially- available alcohol, ignore the steps that follow and simply follow the recipe.

If you wish to cut your cost by using your own homemade wine, read on.

The technique to be used is known as a "Pearson Square" (pay attention, there'll be a short quiz at the end of the class !)

A Pearson Square looks like this...

A	B
	C
D	E

The Square can be used with either proof ratings or percent alcohol, but not both at the same time. In what follows, we will use proof spirit. In the Square...

- A is the proof rating of the spirit you have on hand to fortify the remainder;
- B is the present proof of the liquid to be fortified;
- C is the desired proof rating;
- D is C minus B;
- E is A minus C.

The ratio of D to E is that of alcohol addition to wine volume.

Let's say that we have a bottle of .800 proof (almost pure) alcohol and a bottle of white wine at 12% alcohol; this wine, as we have seen, is $.12 \times 1.75 = .210$ proof.

We want to end up with a proof rating of .400 (40 proof).

To 10 oz (300 cl) of this wine, we will add 10 oz (300 gm) of sugar, warm it (slightly!) to dissolve the sugar, and we will find that we now have 16 1/2 oz (500 cl) of sweetened wine. However, since the volume has increased, the strength has correspondingly dropped, to $300/500 \times .21$ or about .120 proof. We want to add our Alcohol at .800 proof to this, and end up with .400 proof spirit. Plugging these values into our Pearson Square gives the following:

A .800	B .120
	C .400
D .280	E .400

This tells us that we need 28 parts of alcohol (D) to 40 of wine (E), or, since we only have about 16 oz of sweetened wine, $16/40 \times 28$, or about 11 oz of alcohol, which will then give us .400 proof spirit.