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**HOW'S YOUR DRINK?**

## A Cock(tail) 'n' Bull Story

By ERIC FELTEN

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So pronounced is the triumph of vodka in these bibulous States that one might think the liquor has been an American staple for centuries. But other than the odd case or two imported for Russian and Polish immigrants, vodka was virtually unknown in the U.S. until well after Prohibition. In the late 1930s, a Russian ex-pat named Rudolph Kunett was making about 20 cases of the stuff a day in Bethel, Conn., and not making the rent.

Come 1939, he was nearly broke and sold the brand -- Smirnoff -- to John Martin, the head of G.F. Heublein & Bros. And there it might have languished had it not been for a market-making cocktail. Long before Sean Connery quaffed his first screen Vodka Martini, there was the Moscow Mule, the drink that made Smirnoff.

At the height of its popularity, the Moscow Mule -- vodka, ginger beer and lime juice on ice -- inspired some rather purple prose. Clementine Paddleford, the New York Herald Tribune's influential food scribbler, waxed euphoric about the drink when, in 1948, it "kicked its way into town": "In the most unlikely places matrons are pouring mules like pink tea and giggling like co-eds," Paddleford purred. "The nicest thing about the mule is that it doesn't make you noisy and argumentative, or quiet and sullen, but congenial and in love with the world. One wag of its tail and life grows rosy." Bring on the glow sticks.

### MOSCOW MULE



Lynton Gardiner


1½ oz vodka  
 juice of ½ lime  
 4-5 oz ginger beer

*Build on the rocks in a highball glass (or a copper Moscow Mule mug if you can find one). Garnish with lime wedge and a nice leafy sprig*

John Martin would long claim that he invented the Moscow Mule along with his friend Jack Morgan, who owned an old-English-style pub on Hollywood's Sunset Strip called the Cock 'n' Bull, which had a house brand of ginger beer bottled in stoneware crocks. Martin and Morgan said that a fit of "inventive genius" led them to combine their respective products.

I find more truth in the story told by Morgan's head bartender, Wes Price, who maintained that the drink was fashioned sometime in 1941 in an effort to offload otherwise unsellable goods. According to Price, Martin had imposed a shipment of Smirnoff on the Cock 'n' Bull and the cases sat fallow in the cellar, crowded against the dusty jugs of ginger beer that Morgan had ordered in an earlier fit of misguided enthusiasm. "I

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Summer with lime wedge and a nice leafy sprig of mint.

just wanted to clean out the basement," Price would say of creating the Moscow Mule. "I was trying to get rid of a lot of dead stock." The first one he mixed he served to the actor

Broderick Crawford. "It caught on like wildfire," Price bragged.

In particular, the drink caught on with the Tinseltown glitterati. When gossip queen Hedda Hopper puffed Greer Garson in a 1947 feature, she noted the actress's taste for Moscow Mules. Hopper describes Garson "selecting a glass of alarmingly huge proportions" for the drink, which she made with vodka, ginger beer and a garnish of mint. And, oh yes, she "topped off the concoction with a dash of worcestershire sauce."

Such is the way that drink recipes become corrupted. A dash of Worcestershire sauce would make for a stomach-turning Mule, and I can't imagine that Garson would have committed such an enormity. But I *can* imagine that, in venerable cocktail-mixing fashion, she might have added complexity to the drink with a few drops of Angostura bitters, which come in a paper-wrapped brown bottle similar to the one for Worcestershire sauce. Goodness knows how many people read the column and choked the bilge down.

Hopper's error didn't derail the cocktail's progress, which Martin and Morgan promoted by having mule-engraved copper mugs made. They hyped the thousands of cups stolen by over-eager customers; Smirnoff would later sell the mugs nationwide. The Moscow Mule is still properly made in a copper mug, originals of which can regularly be found on eBay.

When the drink got its name, Uncle Joe Stalin and Uncle Sam were allies, if not exactly pals. But by 1950, not unlike a few Hollywood screenwriters, Smirnoff and its flagship drink were taking heat for their Russian association. Assuming Smirnoff was a Soviet import, unionized bartenders in New York announced a Moscow Mule boycott, refusing to "shove slave labor liquor across the wood in any American saloon." Smirnoff rushed to testify that its vodka was not, and never had been, a member of the Communist Party -- and got some help from Walter Winchell: "The Moscow Mule drink is U.S. made, so don't be so political when you're thirsty," he wrote in May 1951. "Three are enough, however, to make you wanna fight pro-Communists."

The Mule survived the red scare, but couldn't weather the nuttier notions of the marketing department. In 1965, the drink was relaunched as the Smirnoff Mule, complete with a massive ad campaign targeting the groovy new "discotheque" scene. This being the era of the Frug, the Mashed Potato and the Shrug, the Smirnoff folks figured they could use a novelty dance of their own. The company hired dancer "Killer Joe" Piro to create a sort of deranged Watusi to go along with an overgrown boogaloo jingle performed by Skitch Henderson and Carmen McRae. "Stand stubborn/Stop sudden/Look cool," implored the lyric. "Turn it on/Take it off/The Smirnoff Mule!" And that was that: The drink didn't fade away; it just died of sheer embarrassment.

And what a pity, because the Moscow Mule is a terrific summer refresher, and well worth the effort of seeking out ginger beer, a soft drink with the spicy bite that ginger ale only wishes it had. Or just find one of the growing number of bars that have revived the drink in the past few years, such as AZ88 in Scottsdale, Ariz., Bar 89 in New York's SoHo neighborhood, and PX in Old Town Alexandria, Va. -- all of which have taken the trouble to acquire copper mugs for proper presentation.

When you've got a nice icy Moscow Mule at the ready, drink a toast to Wes Price, who wondered why

the Edisons of the world got to patent their creations, but not bartenders. "I never got an extra cent for my invention," he griped as he gave notice he was leaving the Cock 'n' Bull in 1953. "I wasn't truly appreciated." But you are, Mr. Price, you are.

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