

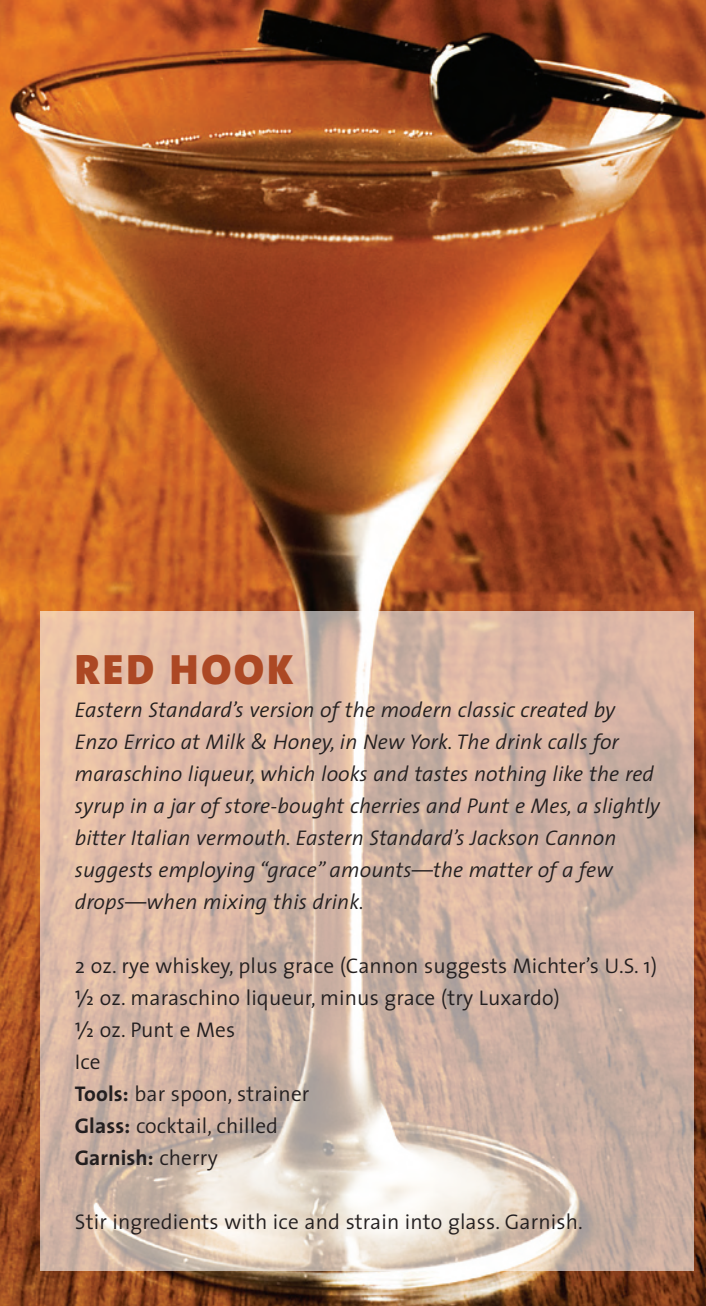
SAY HELLO (AGAIN)
TO RYE WHISKEY,
AN AMERICAN CLASSIC

the comeback *kid*

Story by PAUL CLARKE
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IN AN AGE OF DRINK defined by sleek bars with house-infused vodkas and incessant techno beats, it can be difficult to comprehend a spirit that last enjoyed broad popularity back when the Ziegfeld Follies was the hottest show around. Fragrant and robust, with a character like a ragtime record played on an old Victrola, rye whiskey is a bottled anachronism. But more than 80 years after Prohibition ended rye's moment in the spotlight, the preferred whiskey of the saloon era is re-emerging.



RED HOOK

Eastern Standard's version of the modern classic created by Enzo Errico at Milk & Honey, in New York. The drink calls for maraschino liqueur, which looks and tastes nothing like the red syrup in a jar of store-bought cherries and Punt e Mes, a slightly bitter Italian vermouth. Eastern Standard's Jackson Cannon suggests employing "grace" amounts—the matter of a few drops—when mixing this drink.

2 oz. rye whiskey, plus grace (Cannon suggests Michter's U.S. 1)
½ oz. maraschino liqueur, minus grace (try Luxardo)
½ oz. Punt e Mes
Ice

Tools: bar spoon, strainer

Glass: cocktail, chilled

Garnish: cherry

Stir ingredients with ice and strain into glass. Garnish.

Spicier and leaner than bourbon, its more familiar younger sibling, rye was the most popular whiskey in the country before Prohibition. Made from a mash of fermented rye grain—often with barley, corn and other grains mixed in—rye whiskey has a more assertive flavor than the rounder, sweeter bourbon, and its taste inspired the creation of some of the most regal cocktails in mixology, such as the Sazerac and the Manhattan. Ten years ago, only a small handful of rye whiskies existed, but thanks to a growing interest in bourbon and other whiskies, bartenders and curious drinkers are increasingly seeking out the lost flavor of rye.

"What a fantastic drink a glass of rye is," says Mike Miller, owner of Delilah's, a bar in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood. With more than 350 types of whiskey on the shelf—including an estimated 22 ryes—Delilah's is one of the best-stocked bars in the country. Miller says many customers come to him for a whiskey education—and recently, they've been coming for the rye.

In colonial days, rum was the favored tippie; when the revolution brought the rum trade to a halt, thirsty Americans sought spirits made closer to home. The eastern markets proved attractive to Scottish and Irish settlers in western Pennsylvania and Maryland, who for decades had been distilling whiskey from the abundant rye grain. By the 1780s, around 5,000 log stillhouses were operating in Pennsylvania's Fayette, Allegheny, Westmoreland and Washington counties, producing the fragrant liquor that came to be known as Monongahela rye. Following the Whiskey Rebellion in the early 1790s—prompted by an excise tax on distilled spirits—a number of farmers packed up their stills and headed to Kentucky, where they helped create the corn-based whiskey that became known as bourbon. Still, rye remained dominant.

Over the years, distinct styles emerged. The sweeter, more robust Monongahela rye—also called Pennsylvania rye—was sold under brand names such as Schenley, Old Jupiter, Good Old Guckenheimer's and Large (which evolved into Old Overholt, a brand still available today). Maryland ryes, such as Sunnyside, Susquehanna and Maryland Union Club Rye (actually made in New York City), tended to be brighter in flavor, with a grassy character.

When Prohibition shuttered the nation's distilleries in 1920, drinkers turned to whatever was available, such as the lighter-flavored Canadian whisky supplied by bootleggers. (Canadian whisky is still often called "rye," though very few Canadian brands are true rye whiskies.) By the time of repeal in 1933, tastes had changed. Rye was considered an old man's drink; it was the cheap hooch in a hip flask in 1930s gangster movies, the rotgut Ray Milland binged on in *The Lost Weekend*, the 1945 chronicle of an alcoholic on an epic bender. Rye had fallen from Park Avenue to Skid Row.

Fast-forward six decades to the 1990s, and only a few brands of rye remained, produced by bourbon distillers in Kentucky that made the venerable spirit almost as an after-

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thought. "We spill more bourbon in a day than we sell rye in a year," says Larry Kass, director of corporate communications for Heaven Hill, a Bardstown-based distiller that makes three brands of rye: Rittenhouse, Pikesville Supreme and Stephen Foster. Kass describes sales of rye as "just a drop" in the overall liquor market, and he estimates that even Heaven Hill's most popular rye, a 100-proof version of Rittenhouse, sells less than 1,000 cases per year.

That may be changing. Last April, the 100-proof Rittenhouse was named "North American Whiskey of the Year" at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition, and the whiskey has become a staple at influential New York bars, such as Pegu Club and Milk & Honey. Kass says he now receives daily e-mails from people across the country, desperate to find the suddenly popular spirit. "And that's for a \$13 bottle of whiskey," he says.

Rittenhouse's overnight leap to rock-star status comes at a time when distillers are discovering the potential of well-crafted ryes. The trend started in 1996, when San Francisco-based Anchor Distilling released an artisan-crafted, small-batch, single-malt rye whiskey called Old Potrero, available in differently aged 18th- and 19th-century styles. "I liked rye because it was out of fashion, and I saw an opportunity to make our mark," says Fritz Maytag, owner of Anchor Distilling. Maytag jump-started the craft-brewing movement in 1965 with Anchor Steam Beer, in part by scrapping modern shortcuts and instead going back to age-old processes of production, with spectacular results. "I think we'll go down in history as doing the same thing in American whiskey distilling that we did in beer, and we're very proud of it," Maytag says.



GOLDEN RYE FLIP

From Rye, in San Francisco. Traditionally, a "flip" was a drink that included a raw egg. Instead, Rye uses advocaat, a Dutch egg liqueur that tastes like eggnog. This cocktail has "winter" written all over it.

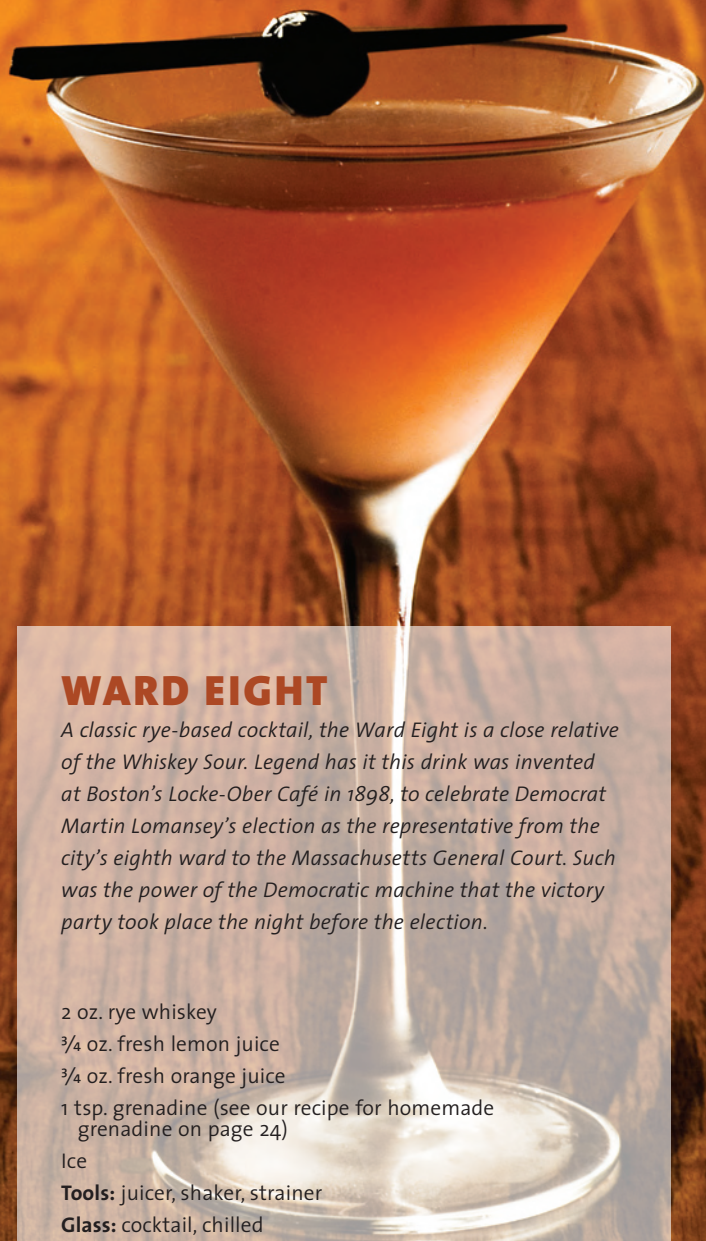
1½ oz. rye whiskey
½ oz. advocaat
½ oz. half-and-half
½ oz. simple syrup (equal parts sugar and water, mixed over medium heat until sugar is dissolved)
4 dashes orange bitters
2 oz. fresh Clementine juice (substitute other mandarin orange varieties as needed)
Ice

Tools: juicer, shaker, strainer, channel knife (for garnish)

Glass: cocktail, chilled

Garnish: orange twist

Combine all ingredients in a cocktail shaker and shake well. Strain into glass. Garnish.



WARD EIGHT

A classic rye-based cocktail, the Ward Eight is a close relative of the Whiskey Sour. Legend has it this drink was invented at Boston's Locke-Ober Café in 1898, to celebrate Democrat Martin Lomansey's election as the representative from the city's eighth ward to the Massachusetts General Court. Such was the power of the Democratic machine that the victory party took place the night before the election.

- 2 oz. rye whiskey
- ¾ oz. fresh lemon juice
- ¾ oz. fresh orange juice
- 1 tsp. grenadine (see our recipe for homemade grenadine on page 24)
- Ice

Tools: juicer, shaker, strainer
Glass: cocktail, chilled
Garnish: cherry

Combine ingredients in a cocktail shaker. Shake well with ice and strain into glass. Garnish

Old Potrero's critical acclaim prompted a reassessment of rye, and today, a crop of new premium ryes is appearing on the market. Among them are the latest whiskey from Anchor Distilling, Old Potrero Hotaling's Whiskey, an 11-year-old limited-edition rye released last year to commemorate the centennial of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. This fall, Heaven Hill unveiled a 21-year-old, single-barrel version of Rittenhouse, available as a very limited, one-time bottling. Michter's, a venerable brand originally from Pennsylvania, has a premium 10-year-old rye on the market; Van Winkle, one of the most esteemed names in bourbon, distributes a 13-year-old rye whiskey; and another bourbon notable, Hirsch, bottles a delicious 21-year-old straight rye. Sazerac makes an 18-year-old rye that is one of the most highly rated whiskeys in the country, and in October, the distillery released an unfiltered, barrel-proof version called Thomas Handy Rye. October also saw the release of a 23-year-old rye from Black Maple Hill—which has been selling an excellent 18-year-old rye for the past four years—and Templeton Rye, named for a type of Iowa moonshine popular among Chicago bootleggers during Prohibition, will debut early this year.

Rye's distinctive flavor made it a perfect mixing whiskey during the early years of the cocktail, and today's mixologists are rediscovering its magic. "There's a mixability to ryes, a spiciness in their flavor profile, that I find really interesting in cocktails," says Jackson Cannon, bar manager at Eastern Standard in Boston. "It makes for a more interesting drink than bourbon." Cannon says he's educating customers about rye's unique qualities through modern classics, such as the Red Hook (see recipe, page 32), which Cannon describes as a "knock-knock" drink that bartenders order from each other. He's also using rye to reintroduce customers to familiar classics like the Sazerac. "Rye is critical to making that drink go," Cannon says. "If you make it with bourbon, you lose that wonderful diffuse nature of the drink. In the Sazerac, you're taking rye down to its most subtle component."

Bartenders are also introducing customers to rye using the king of all whiskey cocktails, the Manhattan. "We've found rye makes a better Manhattan, and a lot of people trying rye Manhattans for the first time have agreed," says Greg Lindgren, co-owner of Rye, a bar in San Francisco. Rye carries 10 or 11 ryes, and bartenders use it in classics as well as in new (though classically inspired) cocktails, such as the Golden Rye Flip (see recipe, page 33) and the Rye Cobbler.

It's too soon to tell if today's unexpected resurgence will lead to a long-term rye renaissance, but Jackson Cannon and others see echoes of the recent past in today's interest in rye. "It reminds me of about 10 years ago, when bourbon broke and people were becoming aware of the Maker's and the Booker's and the Basils," Cannon says. "There's now this awareness of rye. It's fun that the dialogue is advancing." ■

that's the spirit

Not long ago, rye whiskies were hard to find. That's starting to change, with new bottlings and brands slowly appearing. Here's a primer to get you started. —P.C.

BLACK MAPLE HILL

18-Year-Old Rye, \$85
23-Year-Old Rye, \$125
CVI Brands: 650-595-1768
Black Maple Hill distributes two of the finest ryes on the market. The 18-year-old has a deep, sweet aroma and a full body, with a fruity, long-lasting finish. The 23-year-old version is even more alluring, with a smooth, sweet flavor that dances on the tongue.



HIRSCH SELECTION

21-Year-Old Kentucky Straight Rye Whiskey, \$125
preissimports.com
One of the early premium ryes, this one is bright and spicy, with a round, smooth flavor and a short, sour finish. An excellent rye.

JIM BEAM

Straight Rye Whiskey, \$15
jimbeam.com
This rye has a bright, fruity smell that ranges from citrus to peaches, and a smooth, slightly sweet flavor that is serviceable in a cocktail, but somewhat lacking in character.

MICHTER'S

US-1 Single-Barrel Straight Rye, \$30
10-Year-Old Rye, \$60
abbott-chatham.com
The US-1 is a good intro rye, with a spicy aroma and a short, cherry-like finish. Michter's 10-year-old has a deep-amber color, an appealing fruity aroma with touches of banana and oats, and a full-bodied, mellow flavor that's nice for sipping.

OLD OVERHOLT

Straight Rye Whiskey, \$14
jimbeam.com
The sturdy workhorse of American rye whiskies. It has a bright, apple-like aroma and a taste that is smooth and spicy, if short on complexity. Another decent intro to rye.



OLD POTRERO

Single-Malt 18th Century Style Whiskey, \$60
Single-Malt 19th Century Style Straight Rye Whiskey, \$80
anchorbrewing.com

Anchor Distilling's 18th century-style whiskey is aged less than two years in toasted oak barrels and bottled at 125-proof. In the glass, it behaves more like a grappa or a single-malt, with a complex, earthy aroma and an immense, dry, spicy flavor. The 19th century-style is aged in charred oak barrels and bottled at a more manageable 90-proof. It has a sweet, molasses-like aroma and a long, herbaceous finish with a touch of hot pepper. Full of flavor and character, these whiskies should be enjoyed on their own, with a little ice or water.

PIKESVILLE SUPREME

Straight Rye Whiskey, \$12
heaven-hill.com
Possibly the last of the Maryland-style ryes, Pikesville Supreme is a well-balanced, medium-bodied whiskey with an aroma of apples and pears, and a long, smooth finish. Found mainly in the mid-Atlantic area and priced to move at less than \$15 a bottle, this rye deserves a broader audience.

RITTENHOUSE

80-Proof Rye Whiskey, \$13
100-Proof Bottled-in-Bond Rye Whiskey, \$20
21-Year-Old, \$150
heaven-hill.com
At 80-proof, Heaven Hill's Pennsylvania-style Rittenhouse rye is very approachable, with a bright, lightly spicy flavor that finishes quickly. The 100-proof version ramps up the rye character, with a peppery, sourdough-like flavor and slight sweetness; this is a great intro whiskey, and it makes an excellent Manhattan. After extended aging, the limited 21-year-old Rittenhouse

is mellow and robust, with an aroma tinged with sourdough and chocolate and a full, round flavor. It's great on its own, or maybe with an ice cube, and would also make a phenomenal Sazerac cocktail.

SAZERAC

6-Year-Old Rye, \$24.99
18-Year-Old Rye, \$49.99
Thomas Handy Rye, \$55
buffalotrace.com
Sazerac's 18-year-old whiskey, a dry, earthy spirit with a luscious, spicy flavor and a short, pleasant finish. The 6-year-old Sazerac, the easiest to find, is a perfect example of what classic rye should taste like: a touch of peach and brown sugar, but with a pervasive dryness that makes it great as a mixer, especially in its namesake cocktail. The limited-edition Thomas Handy Rye is Sazerac's latest—an unfiltered, uncut, single-barrel version of the 18-year-old rye. At cask strength, it shows the spirit's true potential, with an aroma touched with caramel and a dry, spicy, herbaceous flavor.



WILD TURKEY

101-Proof Kentucky Straight Rye, \$21
wildturkey.com
The aroma is earthy, but this rye is pumped with flavor and a peppery bite. It may be a difficult rye for beginners, but its assertive character makes it good in cocktails.



VAN WINKLE FAMILY RESERVE

13-Year-Old Kentucky Straight Rye Whiskey, \$35
oldripvanwinkle.com
This rye comes across gently, with a soft, sweet aroma and a smooth, dry flavor that's more reminiscent of bourbon than other, spicier ryes.