

A Christmas Miracle!

MICHTER'S WHISKEY CAKE

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY JORDAN BUSH

In early December 2018, I was invited to a celebration of Dick Stoll's 85th birthday. The last master distiller at Michter's Distillery in Schaefferstown had gone on to become the first half of the Stoll & Wolfe Distillery in Lititz, where the event was held. A concurrence of extraordinary rarities commemorated the occasion, including a 30-year-old bottle of whiskey, a peculiar birthday cake and the search for a nearly forgotten recipe.

It was a laid-back evening at Stoll & Wolfe Distillery that saw many people stopping by to wish Dick a happy birthday. I pulled up a chair next to Ethan and Gretchen Smith, collectors and absolute historians of the storied Michter's Distillery in Schaefferstown, Lebanon County. I perceive Ethan to be the ampersand in "Stoll & Wolfe," as he is credited with having made the fortuitous introduction of Dick Stoll to Erik Wolfe.

Without ceremony, Ethan quietly produced a vintage bottle of Michter's Whiskey. It was distilled

by Dick and predated the Schaefferstown distillery's closure on Valentine's Day, 1990.

Unexpectedly, Ethan generously offered me a sip of the sour mash whiskey. In disbelief, I felt I should decline, understanding its rarity. But then again, it struck me that the opportunity might never present itself twice. His offer was sincere. I was restrained but no fool. The moment I took a sip, there was less Michter's whiskey left in the world. It was wonderful and an experience made better by knowing I was sampling whiskey that's about as old as I am, all the while I was seated next to the man who distilled it. I will never forget that once-in-a-lifetime gesture by Ethan.

Now having a flavor reference of the original Michter's 86 Proof Sour Mash Whiskey, I asked Ethan what spirit he considers a modern facsimile. "Old Forester 86" was his



A photographic recreation of the cover of *Michter's Recipe Notebook*, featuring Michter's Whiskey Cake and "Wonderful Good" Egg Nog. Also shown is a Michter's 750 mL hex decanter, 1753 jug decanter (and candle holder), quart jug and a "Love and Romance" hex cup. The sealed 1970s Michter's Sour Mash Whiskey bottle, distilled in Schaefferstown by Dick Stoll, is courtesy of Michter's historian, Ethan Smith.



Dick and Elaine Stoll met through Michter's, where he was a distiller and she conducted tours during the summer months. Their birthdays are a month apart (Elaine's on October 30 and Dick's on November 28). Dick would have been 90 this month. Photograph courtesy of Jim Wolfe.



Dick Stoll's 85th birthday party was held at Stoll & Wolfe Distillery on December 8, 2018. Left to right are Sam Komlenic, Jordan Bush, Dick Stoll, Ethan and Gretchen Smith, and Erik Wolfe. Photograph courtesy of Jim Wolfe.

Opposite, left to right:

Illustrated recipes from the *Michter's Recipe Notebook* include Carriage House Mince Meat, Michter's Amish Coffee, "Wonderful Good" Egg Nog, Blue Mountain Pumpkin Custard, Michter's Whiskey Cake and Schapp's Sauce. Just recently another Michter's cookbook popped up on Ebay. Dating to 1959, its title is *Michter's Plain and Fancy Pennsylvania Dutch Cookbook*.

The cake is baked with a pound each of candied cherries and dried dates, both of which I soaked in Old Forester 86 bourbon. Out of the oven, the cake weighed 6 pounds, 10 ounces (before the final dose of whiskey was added)!

reply, adding, "Old Forester is about the closest you're going to get in flavor to the original Michter's without spending serious coin." This would quickly become a necessary anecdote.

The "Birthday Cake"

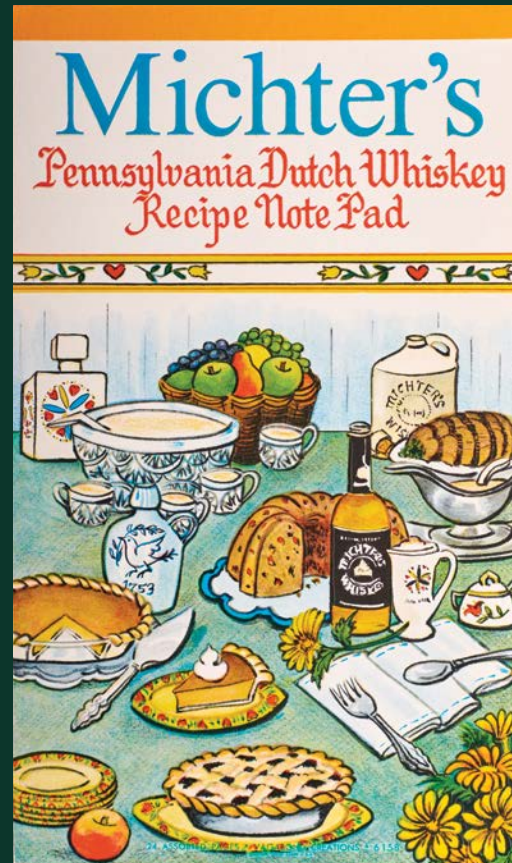
At the next table over sat Sam Komlenic, an editor at *Whiskey Advocate*. Sam has probably forgotten more about whiskey than I will ever hope to know. He had baked a birthday cake of sorts that was being passed around to those nearby. Prepared in a sheet pan covered in waxed paper, it was sliced into finger-food-sized portions. That isn't how I typically approach cake, but hey, it's still cake!

Taking a bite, it became clear why the portions were small: it was a whiskey cake. And not just any whiskey cake, it was a Schaefferstown Michter's Whiskey Cake, soaked in sour mash whiskey. Dense and flavorful, the whiskey contributed warmth and spice to the delicious, fruited cake. In amazement, Elaine Stoll, Dick's wife, shared she had sampled many whiskey cakes over the years, but Sam's was "the best by far."

Naturally, I asked Sam about the origins and recipe of his whiskey cake. He instructed me to find a copy of Michter's cookbook. I had no idea such a book existed, something he offered up as though the book and its information were common knowledge. He let me in on a secret, too: "Soak the cake in whiskey for a week or two, covered tightly in the fridge."

Recipe Hunting

I was 30 years too late to walk into the Schaefferstown distillery to buy a copy of the recipe book. Instead, I saved an eBay search for "Michter's" and waited. In the meantime, on August 13, 2020, Dick passed away at the age of 86. Four months after Dick left us for the angel's share, my eBay search produced a listing for not one but five copies of the Michter's recipe book. Of all places, the seller was in Lititz and offered local pickup. It was a Christmas Miracle! Clicking "Buy it Now," all five copies were mine. Eager to retrieve my prize, I drove the windy, snow-covered



Michter's Whiskey Cake Recipe

Having secured the recipe, it was time to bake. The recipe reads as follows:

INGREDIENTS

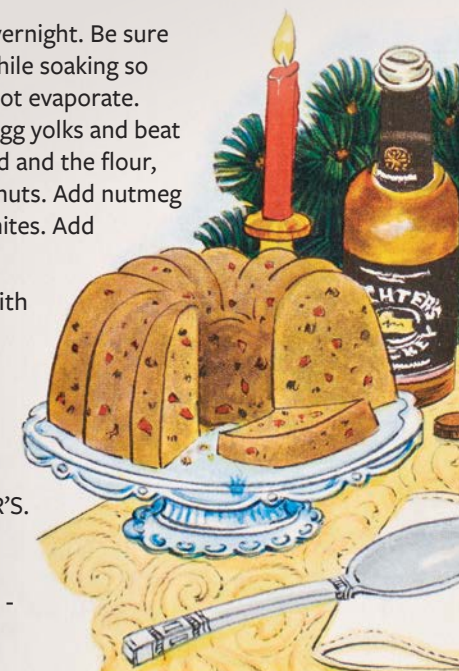
- 5 cups sifted flour
- 1 lb. white sugar
- 1 cup brown sugar
- 3/4 lb. butter
- 6 eggs, beaten separately
- 1 pt. MICTHER'S Whiskey
- 1 tsp. baking powder
- 1 lb. red candied cherries (cut into pieces or halves)
- 2 tsp. nutmeg
- 1 lb. shelled pecans (raw and cut into pieces)
- 1/2 lb. chopped white raisins or chopped dates

DIRECTIONS

Soak cherries and raisins in MICTHER'S overnight. Be sure to cover the cherries and raisins tightly while soaking so that the aromas of the MICTHER'S does not evaporate. Cream butter and sugar until fluffy. Add egg yolks and beat well. Add soaked fruit and remaining liquid and the flour, reserving a small amount of flour for the nuts. Add nutmeg and baking powder. Fold in beaten egg whites. Add the lightly floured pecans last.

Bake in a large greased tube pan lined with greased paper for 3 to 4 hours in a slow oven 250 to 275 degrees. Watch baking time.

To store when thoroughly cool, place in a lightly covered container. Stuff center hole with cheesecloth soaked in MICTHER'S. Wrap in heavy waxed paper. It isn't necessary to soak cake in whiskey as cake will be moist and flavorful. Keep very cool - in refrigerator if necessary.



Following SAGE ADVICE

Taking the input of Ethan Smith, Sam Komlenic and Elaine Stoll into account, I made a few revisions to the recipe. Instead of using a rare, 30-year-old bottle of Michter's Whiskey distilled in Schaefferstown, I took a cue from Ethan and used Old Forester 86.

I candied cherries with a 1/2 cup of sugar and simmered them over low heat for roughly an hour, letting them cool before adding chopped, dried dates.

Make sure to heavily grease the bundt pan; I used room temperature, unsalted butter.

I accidentally doubled the amount of dates and was pleased with the outcome. Covered, I let them sit out in a bowl overnight so as not to affect the baking temperature with a chilled ingredient.

Four hours at 265 degrees and a broom cake tester produced a clean result. Still in the pan, the hot cake weighed 6 pounds and 10 ounces before one cup of whiskey was added to the cheesecloth. Adding a splash of whiskey every few days, the cake was kept covered tightly in the fridge for several days (or even weeks for a softer texture) before being enjoyed in excessive portions.

backroads to Lititz, a short trip that felt like a lifetime.

Collecting my package on the seller's front porch, I couldn't wait and opened the envelope while parked in their driveway. To my surprise, each copy of the recipe "book" was pristine, with crisp edges and tight binding. The fully embossed cover features a colorful spread of desserts and drinks that are accompanied by stoneware whiskey decanters sold by Michter's. No author or publication date was listed. The only date shown – "1753" painted on a stoneware – alludes to the first distillery at that site, which was started by Swiss-Mennonite farmers, John and Michael Shenk, in the year 1753.

TO MY SURPRISE, the recipe book isn't in a traditional format. Instead, it's a notepad titled, *Michter's Pennsylvania Dutch Whiskey Recipe Note Pad*. Each tear-out page contains a recipe and illustration using Michter's Whiskey, being careful to capitalize MICTHER'S, emphasizing the point of the handout. These notepads weren't created to endure but to be consumed and shared like a good bottle of Michter's whiskey.

Carefully turning the pages, I scanned to find Michter's Whiskey Cake recipe listed on page five. All told, there are six recipes repeated throughout the notepad, each using whiskey: Carriage House Mince Meat, Michter's Amish Coffee, "Wonderful Good" Egg Nog, Blue Mountain Pumpkin Custard, Michter's Whiskey Cake and Schapp's Sauce.

ARRIVING HOME, I messaged Elaine to let her know I finally found the collection of recipes. Back when the Schaefferstown distillery was open, Elaine, who was a teacher, worked as a summer tour guide at Michter's, where she met Dick. Surprisingly, Elaine didn't have the recipe book, so a copy went back to Lititz for her. Elaine recognized it, explaining they were offered for sale in the gift shop for a few years beginning in 1976.

—jb—

Wonderful Good Egg Nog

INGREDIENTS

- 1 dozen fresh eggs
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 1 fifth MICTHER'S's Whiskey
- 4 oz. rum
- 4 oz. brandy
- 2 oz. Cointreau
- 1 qt. milk
- 1 pt. cream
- 1 qt. vanilla ice cream
- Grated nutmeg

DIRECTIONS

Separate egg yolks and beat with sugar until smooth. Stir MICTHER'S, rum, brandy and Cointreau into egg yolks. Add milk, cream and ice cream. Let stand in refrigerator until ready to use. Just before serving, fold in stiffly beaten egg whites. Sprinkle lightly with nutmeg. It gives 30 servings. (Author's note: As with the whiskey cake, I used Old Forester 86 in place of Michter's. I also used pasteurized eggs.)



Whiskey Cake TRIVIA

Yes, the jokes about fruit cake are sure to begin soon. But, add whiskey, and I'm sure you'll change your opinion.

Curious about the origins of such cakes, I did a little digging and discovered some historical background through the website, *Rabbit Hole*. It seems that 200-plus years ago, whiskey provided such cakes with more than flavor and a kick. Whiskey also served as a preservative that allowed cakes to stay fresh long after their shelf life would have expired. It seems we have Ireland and Scotland to thank for the treat.

According to *Rabbit Hole*, "Whiskey cake is a historical recipe that has withstood the test of time. The earliest writing about it extends as far back as the 1700s, with the delicious baked good providing a tasty treat for Irish

families in the 18th century.

The story of how whiskey cake came to the U.S. has something in common with how the country became a key player in the whiskey community. As with the drink that gives it its name, whiskey cake soon found its way across the Atlantic Ocean as European colonists migrated to the Americas, bringing their favorite dishes with them. Once imported to the colonies, whiskey cake proved to be just as much of a success with the colonists as it was with their relatives across the sea."

The narrative went on to share that George Washington was one of whiskey cake's biggest fans. In fact, the Emmy Award-winning show, *A Taste of History*, even provided a recipe that is thought to be the same one that was used at Mount Vernon.



Jordan Bush is a commercial photographer. His work has allowed him to discover and document cultures and food across five continents. A graduate of Garden Spot High School and Millersville University, Jordan and his fiancée, Jessica, reside and cook together in Ephrata.