



Drawing by Elsie P.L. Dentes.

The Adirondack or Mountain Ash Cocktail

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First notice of a Mountain Ash Cocktail came to my attention while searching out material for a brochure commemorating the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Adirondack League Club. It was in an article by General R. U. Sherman, entitled "The Bisby Trout" in *The American Angler* (October 13 and 20, 1883). Bisby trout were a diminutive form of lake trout, averaged about 12 inches, and inhabited a chain [of] four lakes of the Bisby Club. That organization predated the Adirondack League Club and merged with them in 1893. Sherman, one of the first New York State Fish Commissioners, was knowledgeable about fish and fishing in the Adirondacks, and it would appear about related subjects as well. The Bisby trout piece ended like this:

A visitor, for the first time last summer to the Bisby waters, declared in his enthusiasm of his first breakfast, that Delmonico, with all his skill and wealth of resource, could not produce a dish like this—broiled Bisby trout,—nor concoct a drink equal to the Mountain Ash Cocktail, the usual precursor of the morning meal at Bisby Lodge.

I didn't pay much attention to the last part of the sentence at first, figuring in my naïveté that the concoction referred to something like tomato juice laced with spices. I was wrong.

The 1904 yearbook for the League Club contained an article by W. H. Boardman. "How Deer Live in the Winter" described their food and condition and ended with a list of browse eaten as reported to Boardman by a local guide:

[The deer] eat mountain ash $\frac{1}{2}$ inch thick. I send you a chewed specimen. You sportsmen scrape this bark for bitters to make the "Adirondack cocktail," but the deer use it without whisky.

As one who samples spirits on occasion, the notion of a potion named after a favored locale or native tree piqued my imagination. Intuitively, I concluded that "Mountain Ash" and "Adirondack Cocktail" referred to the same drink. What were the ingredients beyond "bitters" and whiskey, and how were they put together?

That information was located fortuitously in *The Lovers of the Woods*, a book published in 1901—the author, W. H. Boardman. It contained yarns about various experiences in the North Woods around the turn of the century and this clue turned up in a story about a sickly sport, recently arrived from the city, looking for rejuvenation:

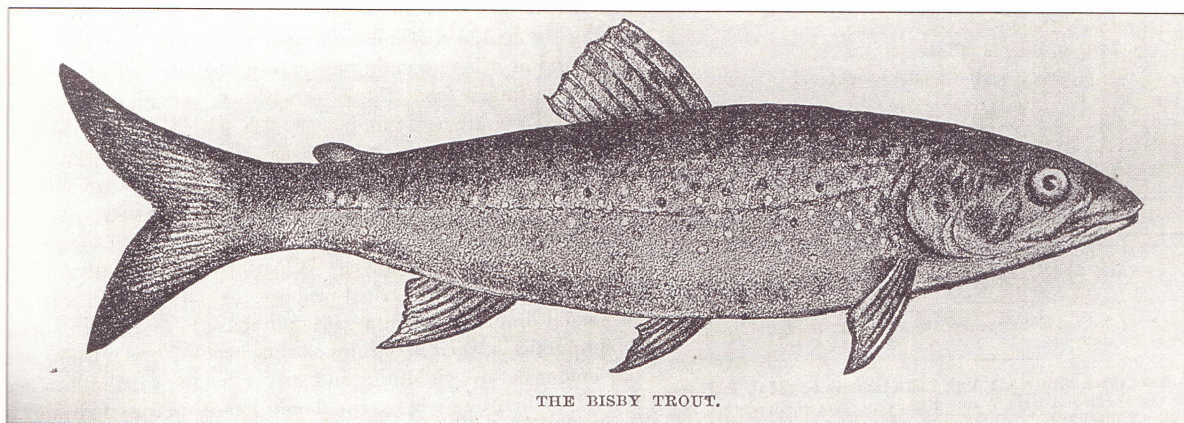
I have brought you six feet and four inches and two hundred and forty pounds of bad health and low spirits, John!

I'd never 'a' knowed it, Colonel, but we'll make it two hundred and ten pounds and high spirits in about a week. We've got plenty of black flies to bleed you, and you've got me to tramp with; that makes two reducers; and you'll drink a little tamarack tea every night and mornin'; that'll cure your dyspepsia and give you an appetite.

That is good, John. It is what I came here for, but I have an idea that you can condense the medical treatment into one sweet moment of medicinal bliss if you will scrape a little of the tender bark of the mountain ash and make an extract with two ounces of whiskey. Two ounces of spring water and a lump of sugar mixed with this in a tin cup and handed to me will blind me to your few faults, and,—

I'll take no care, though the weather prove fair,
And reck not e'en though it rain.
We'll banish all sorrow, and wait for the morrow,
And angle, and angle again.

There was the recipe, almost complete! A major problem remained—what kind of whiskey? It required an active research program to resolve this



"The Bisby Trout," an illustration accompanying General R. U. Sherman's article in *The American Angler*, October 20, 1883.

final question, an endeavor enthusiastically shared by several fishing cronies. The spelling, whisky or whiskey, might have given a clue but inconsistency nullified that. No matter. We tried scotches, bourbons, and blended ryes. None came through as idyllic, although we managed to spoil several quarts accumulating this negative knowledge.

Then one of the research team came up with the final detail on the moving ingredient—from an old-timer and former forest ranger encountered on the Moose River plains. He had been chore boy in a tavern in the southern foothills of the Adirondacks so my associate recognized the opportunity and put the question: "What did a man drink in those days?" Came the answer: "Why, sir, gentlemen drank rye."

Somehow, we had missed the boat by using blended varieties, currently more readily available, rather than straight rye. We found a couple of brands. There was no question that the flavor of this, melded with aromatics extracted from mountain ash bark, made the drink. When one of our group traveling though Maryland found "Pikesville," we wrote the final chapter.

Over the years, preparation for this libation became a ritual celebrated on many a May Adirondack trouting expedition. Someone would be delegated to fetch a few twigs of the past year's growth of mountain ash. In strange territory this can take a bit of doing, especially when there is enough of a winter deer population to browse all lower twiggery within range of an

animal standing on its hind legs. Near our base camp, the only mountain ash with accessible twigs grows atop a glacial erratic, a massive boulder of sufficient elevation to put lower branches out of the grasp of hungry white-tails. Most of our sources are spotted in advance along trails or shorelines, and twigs are harvested as needed. The European variety of mountain ash commonly used as an ornamental is worthless for drinks, probably just as well because otherwise the puny specimen growing in our yard in Ithaca would soon suffer from overpruning.

Our senior fishing buddy, whose daughter provided the accompanying sketch, always prepared the concentrated elixir several hours ahead of anticipated need. In early spring, as the ash buds are swelling, the aroma of the green cambium layer of the bark is most pungent. The cambium is easily separated, then bruised, and immersed in several ounces of rye. A mortar and pestle is ideal for this chore, but the butt of a knife handle and small bowl suffices. Add sugar, about one-half teaspoon per drink, and let the mixture steep for at least a half hour. The fragrance of the bark is distinctly almond and a hint of that can be detected in straight rye. Perhaps the mountain-ash extract merely enhances and fortifies this. We use a bit more water than the equal parts suggested in the Boardman account, and substitute a couple of ice cubes to cook the libation to "spring" water temperature. Flavor is deadened if the drink is made heavily iced but added dilution does provide a bit more margin of safety. These are stout drinks, and with sugar speeding up stomach absorption, consumption of two produces a fair buzz. Even a toddling grandchild got into trouble with an inadvertent sip, as indicated in the following experience.

I had just mixed a round at a small family gathering. A portion of pure elixir had slopped on the counter and I mopped it with what seemingly was the bar cloth. It turned out to be a grandchild's "ditty" rag. Now as any good parent knows, a child and its ditty are not long parted, and it wasn't long before someone commented on how strangely the kid was behaving. No doubt about it, with a juicy section of ditty and thumb tucked in mouth, garrulous and rubber-kneed, slobbering and slurping, the little rascal exhibited classic symptoms of being in the bag. I attempted to relieve the anxiety of the mother with what seemed a perfectly innocent explanation. But I sensed from the icy look that I was condemned of a nasty prank without benefit of due process so let the matter drop with a silent chuckle.

Long after the researching phase to reconstruct the drink was completed, I found out that the mountain ash plant is a botanical with medicinal qualities and that, among other things, "The bark is used as a tea...to cleanse the blood in the spring" (*A Guide to the Medicinal Plants of the United States*. Krochmal and Krochmal, 1973). This doubtless explains why imbibing an Adirondack or Mountain Ash Cocktail makes one feel so good.

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