

Punch of the 18th Century

The typical punch recipe of the 18th century was much less complex than most mixtures today. The word itself -punch- probably comes from the Hindi meaning “five” for five ingredients.

Rum or brandy was the usual spirit used in punch. Citrus fruit -limes, lemons or occasionally oranges- was added, along with sugar -brown or white. Water diluted this potent mixture, and nutmeg was sometimes grated over it. These, then, are the five ingredients: a spirit, citrus, sugar, water and nutmeg. Punch could be served cold or hot, depending on the season.

Below are two variations that are my favourites. The amounts are for a full bowl. You may want to experiment and vary the proportions to your taste. These are fairly heavy on the citrus. “sour punch” was popular at the time.

Rum Punch

8 ounces (240 ml) of dark rum

The juice of one half a lemon (this may vary, depending on the strength of the lemon)

One to two tablespoons of brown sugar (Demerara, if possible)

24 ounces (700 ml) of water

This was a less expensive recipe at the time, using rum (a cheaper spirit) and partially refined brown sugar, with no nutmeg.

Brandy Punch

8 ounces (240 ml) of brandy

The juice of one lime (like the lemon, this may vary)

One to two tablespoons of white (refined) sugar

24 ounces (700 ml) of water

Nutmeg grated on top

With the brandy, white sugar and nutmeg this punch would have been considered quite genteel. In 1775 a group of ladies at a party in Edinburgh, Scotland were asked, “whether they would choose brandy or rum punch? The ladies, who always love what is best, fixed on brandy punch, and a large bowl was immediately introduced”. (*Letters from Edinburgh*, anon. 1775)

If an entire bowl is a bit more than you need for a nightcap, the recipe below is scaled down to a glass.

1 ½ to 2 ounces rum or brandy

One slice lemon or lime

One to two teaspoons sugar (brown or white)

Four to six ounces of water

Nutmeg if desired.

And with that, I give you an 18th century toast:

May we breakfast with Health, dine with Friendship, crack a bottle with Mirth, and sup with the goddess Contentment! (*The Convivial Songster*, 1782)

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