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In *Colonial Spirits*, Steven Grasse presents a historical manifesto on drinking, including 50 colonial era-inspired cocktail recipes. The book features a rousing timeline of colonial imbibing and a cultural overview of a dizzying number of drinks: beer, rum and punch; temperance drinks; liqueurs and cordials; medicinal beverages; cider; wine, whiskey, and bourbon—all peppered with liquored-up adages from our founding fathers. There is also expert guidance on DIY methods for home brewing. Imbibe your way through each chapter, with recipes like the Philadelphia Fish House Punch (a crowd pleaser!) and Snakebites (drink alone!). Hot beer cocktails and rattle skulls have never been so completely irresistible.

Colonial Spirits: A Toast to Our Drunken History Details

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T says

4.5 absolutely solid stars.

What a fantastic book! If you love history, if you love booze, or if you love both, you absolutely must carve out sometime and read this book. From learning about Washington's impact on alcohol in America, to the origin of the term 'snake oil', to the roots of the Prohibition movement in the US, this book covers all the bases. I haven't yet tried any of the recipes included, but definitely have my eye on a few.

I received this review copy from the publisher via NetGalley.

Ira says

Great Book.

Really neat angle on American History.

Love the art.

Digging the Recipes.

Grasse has come a long way since Virus:...

Keep up the good work!

Cat says

Awesome little book! Quick, entertaining and informative read. I was a history major in college and loved hearing all the behind the scenes stories of our countries early days; some were a real hoot! This little tome adds to the merriment by including wonderful recipes we are invited to try at home for cider, parry, beer (oh, how I wish my grandmother hadn't tossed her home brew recipe before leaving Germany!), and cocktails. Loved all the info and factoids! Too fun! Anyone who enjoys all these new brew pubs, distilleries, etc, will love this book.

Somebody in the craft brew industry! Please try making a sweet parry!!

Joseph says

I got this as a gift and honestly, I was expecting more of a history book than a recipe book ... which is fine, I guess. It's hard to be too negative about a book when it's mostly a list of cocktails, but I do have a few quibbles.

I know the book is about "colonial" spirits, but a little insight into the drinking habits of the native population would have been interesting. Grasse makes a brief mention of Seneca Oil, as the origin of the

phrase “snake oil”, but aside from that, there’s not much. Maybe he was unwilling to provide too much of a downer by calling to mind thoughts of alcoholism, but if he can spare a section to address drinking habits in Europe, surely there must be some interesting information about how Native Americans were quenching their thirst prior to the colonial invasion.

Additionally, the tone of the book is a little ... weird. I mean, I get it; I’ve been carried away on the river of my own overweening prose on more than one occasion, but “Morning in America has only been a result of nighttime in America” is laying it on a little thick, isn’t it? Let’s be honest, this book is little more than a list of elaborate ways to get your drink on, cloaked in a flimsy veil of history. The attempts to turn it into some searching exploration of The American Soul feel a bit forced. Just give us a couple anecdotes we can stumble through the next time we’re drunkenly failing to impress some girl at a bar, and lay off the half-baked philosophy.

Finally, and maybe most importantly, Grasse doesn’t do a great job of selling the necessity of all this extra labor. He sets the bar low early on, by promising only that everything is safe to drink, but nothing he writes afterwards really lifts the bar much higher. Sure, the cock ale won’t kill me, but convince me that it’s worth standing over a stock pot for a few hours. Or at least be more explicit about which recipes are being presented in the spirit of historical education, and which I might want to serve at my Fourth of July Cocktail Party.

Anna says

Colonial Spirits by Steven Grasse, illustrated superbly by Reverend Michael Alan and published last Sept 12th by Abrams, is not a book about the colonial men, souls, who made the USA. No. It’s about the “spirits” that permitted at the Americans to create that country.

Won’t you think that the USA would have been the same country without “spirits?”

Well, this book is not just a story of men but also and first of all of...alcohol.

This book is born as a beautiful, old-fashioned book, where History of alcoholic beverages must be the main protagonist. What the book wants to do is focus the past, and like all cook books I read by Abrams stunningly beauty because it’s another historical trip in the USA and I love the history of the USA. This time History passes through the various alcoholic beverages created with the time in the USA.

The book begins with the arrival of the Pilgrims in the East Coast.

What meant the New World for the first pilgrims? To re-start from the beginning a new life, new food, new beverages. I don’t want to say that they had to forget what they left behind, but surely this one a new complete different adventure where life needed to be re-invented.

Alcohol as well to be re-invented.

Americans once arrived in the new world “tried to make booze” from everything and sometimes with funny results, writes the author.

The author describes John Smith, his devotion for women and his love for Pocahontas.

But then the author asks: “Why puritans drunk?” Surprisingly they were scared by water, it seems.

Well, although it can appears strange, maybe there is a great truth in this ironical affirmation. (And you will

smile a lot reading this book because Mr Steven Grasse is truly ironic!)

The old populations, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans left us an immense patrimony of knowledge. With the time this knowledge has known a great dispersion.

Romans loved water. Thermal baths were born with them and they truly loved good water. Well with the time all the rest of Europe, once disappeared this great Empire, unable to return at the hygienic conditions the Romans had dictated and created.

Water in Europe and in Britain not purified at all.

Water during 1600 was very dirty we can add. Who drunk water risked to start to fall sick with smallpox, dengue, yellow fever, influenza, sadness. So why to be sad when there was the possibility of drinking some alcohol? But what kind of alcohol?

Samuel Cole just arrived in 1630 from the Old World in the East Coast I guessed was missing his distant land so badly because decided to open in the social Boston the first tavern. This place became an active center where people loved to spend some time together for drinking, eating and also starting to talk of current events.

At the same time at Philadelphia some people opened a lot of taverns as well.

And now let's speak of the first chapter involving spirits: Beer.

Beer can be created substantially with barley but also with any other kind of grain. At the moment we have wagons of ales available but surely 300 years ago the story appeared a bit different.

No one will discover the real taste of ales produced by the Americans of the 1600 but something is more than sure: everyone drunk beer. Including children.

Beer substantially was made at home.

Taverns later symbolized the populist atmosphere of that age. Mr Grasse says: "It was what we drunk as well as where drunk it."

You will find great recipes for beer.

The second chapter involves cider.

Cider born thanks to apples and apples has been one of the most wonderful success of Americans. Apples trees started to be planted since 1623.

He is a real legend and wagons of books written about him: Johnny Appleseed spread love for apples in the USA.

Born John Chapman, on Sept 26 1774 in Massachusetts he spent most of his life loving animals, nature and trees traveling in many States like Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and wherever he went he planted apples trees. The author specifies that the story Johnny planted seeds was maybe not real. What he did was to plant a lot of orchards trees.

Many recipes, anecdotes, utilization of cider in the daily life.

Wine: this one per centuries a complete failure for the Americans. They tried with all themselves to produce good wine from 1500 but without great results. There is to say anyway that in recent time in particular in California Napa Valley there are great improvements. Maybe the USA not a land of wine, but sure it is a land of...spirits!

Rum and punch a great chapter apart that you will find very interesting. The first one associated at piracy as well, and in another chapter you will find a lot of informations in this sense.

Then it's the turn of Liqueurs, cordials, medicines and beverages and a final chapter dedicated at the various alcoholic beverages in the rest of the world.

What the author thinks is that without beer, without rum, without bourbon, without "spirits" not intended as ghosts but as introduction of some alcohol in the body and so with the materialization of a parallel intelligence once drunk, the USA now wouldn't exist as we are seeing it. If rock exists, if movies exists, if many industries exists, it's thanks to alcohol adds Grasse.

For sure beer and also other alcoholic beverages are able to bring people together and they permit a good socialization.

I can tell you something: this book is precious, old-fashioned, beautiful. It seems to open (I read my copy via Adobe) an old book. If you know someone who love History and also alcohol, good illustrations, and this friend will be passionate for experimenting some of the recipes of this book for creating a new kind of beer, punch etc, you will make a great figure for sure!

Christmas is close...

Don't lose the occasion to make happy someone you love!

The cover of the book is enchanting like all the rest of illustrations you will find inside.

I surely thank NetGalley and Abrams for this book!

Joe says

History has never been so fun. A very entertaining read. With quotes from Benjamin Franklin (who everyone knows was a boozier) to recipes from George and Martha Washington (who knew?). Every page was a delight! I will definitely be trying the recipes!! This book will certainly have a forever spot on my bookshelf. Can't wait to see what Steven Grasse comes out with next.

Chris Stave says

I've got a lot of cocktail books. This one is worth reading the words around the recipes, though. Entertaining and well written.

Stefanie says

What a great read! Come for the history and the "fun facts" you can spring on your friends the next time you're at the bar. Stay for the recipes - both the originals and the updated modern ones. Fascinating just to read on its own but a useful resource if you're looking for a little do-it-yourself for infusions, shrubs, sodas,

and cocktails.

Karen says

With such a fun title, I couldn't resist picking this up. Would it live up to its epic title? Before starting to read, I did due diligence in learning about author Steven Grasse. I found and scrolled through a fascinating story in a Men's Journal article penned by Julia Holmes. Quite an impressive resume - this guy knows booze.

So I dug in and found out right off the bat, this is no ordinary cocktail guide, it is spirits storytelling at its finest with intoxicating humor.

I learned interesting historical stuff in school, but who knew our forefathers could be wild and crazy guys. Some of the LOL tidbits in this book would really have made History class fun.

But you won't find this kind of history in school. Ben Franklin's Drinkers' Dictionary? For real? Cock Ale. Use your imagination on how this originated (or buy this book and you won't have to – see page 31). The stories behind the spirits related to our forefathers are fascinating and humorously written. The colonial times generation “tried to make booze from literally anything they could get their hands on”.

Even the recipes are written humorously. And there are many of them –colonial versions and the updated versions using obtainable supplies and ingredients. For example “General George Washington's Small Beer” a recipe taken from a notebook dated 1757 kept by George Washington. The author recreates this Colonial era-inspired beer on the following page. The chapters cover beer, cider, wine, liqueurs, and the hard stuff plus chapters titled “Colonial Imbibing” and “Meanwhile, Across the Continents & The Sea.”

After reading this book, I am now intrigued by Steven Grasse's company Tamworth Distilling based in a New Hampshire village named...Tamworth. It's products come from their own cultivated crops and sourcing ingredients from local farmers. Spirit offerings posted on their website are unique – like Sweet Potato and Chicory Root vodkas, Black Trumpet Blueberry Cordial – huh? I need to make a visit to New Hampshire soon, I'm thirsty and they have a shop where I can taste their full line of spirits.

So in answer to my initial question, heck yes it lives up to its title. It's a fascinating. book delving into centuries worth of recipes “culled from period cookbooks, historical records, anecdotes and folklore.” It is a must-buy gift for your favorite home brewer.

Thanks to ABRAMS publishing for providing an early copy in exchange for an honest review.

Andrea says

This was a light, but informative read on the early days of alcohol in America. There are a few recipes that I'm interested in trying out.

Killian says

I have somehow found myself in the midst of reading several books that I am just "meh" about, but feel like they deserve more stars than my actual enjoyment would indicate. My personal feeling on this book is a 3, but the book delivering on what it states is a 5, so I'm comprising on 4. I think a ton of people would really enjoy this book, I just wanted a bit more substance. I mostly picked this book up because I greatly enjoy the YouTube channel Jas. Townsend and Son, Inc. which has a series about 17/18th century American cooking, so that was kind of what I was looking for here.

Let's begin this by saying that I don't drink very much. Alcohol of all kinds tends to either make me instantly sleepy or trigger migraines so I've just learned to stay away for my personal well-being. That being said, the history of the alchemy of alcohol intrigues me, a lot. I mean, really, who came up with this stuff? Some of the methods of fermentation and cooking the liqueurs and alcohols in this book are just mind boggling. It would never occur to me to attempt any of them and think they would work, but obviously someone did. The author does an amazing job of detailing the exact ways to make everything from traditional mixed drinks, to ciders, to rum, to even non-alcoholic drinks. It was truly impressive to read about since I don't have any background in backyard-brewing.

Interspersed between the sections of recipes are the authors stories of the colonial era (with an obvious slant towards the imbibing side of things), and various historical facts. It all seems quite well researched, but I could never pick up on the cadence of the writing. It seemed to be trying to mix modern with colonial vernacular, but it just came off as awkward most of the time. There were a few spots that were confusing enough for me to read, re-read, re-read again, and still not understand what was being conveyed. This is my major gripe with the book, because it really took away from my enjoyment of the history which is given just as much importance here as the recipes.

Taken all together, I did like this book and was impressed with what it was trying to do. I haven't mentioned the artwork, but it's absolutely lovely. The cover is an example of the cute little watercolors found all throughout as simple images of foods, or scenes illustrating a point in history. This is definitely a worthwhile read if you want to try the recipes, but maybe not as much if you're just in it for the history.

Review also published on my blog.

Copy courtesy of ABRAMS/Abrams Image, via Netgalley in exchange for an honest review.

Mary says

Entertaining history with modernized recipes. A fun read.

Carolyn Li-Madeo says

Borrowed physical copy from the Berkeley Public Library
