

Smuggling Nun Honors And Celebrates Poitín As The Original Spirit Of Ireland

Is everybody ready for the introduction to one of Ireland's oldest spirits, Poitín, that was illegal for hundreds of years but is now available legally as Smuggling Nun.

Now here is the introduction to the lady who resurrected it so now you can have the real Irish poitín, ah to have a drop of it. So here we go, Maura Clare grew up in Fairfield, Connecticut, soaking up all she could about her Irish heritage from family stories and books about Ireland.

It was in her late teens that she first stumbled across mention of poitín. She was immediately fascinated by the rich history and stories of Ireland's original spirit. At the time, poitín was still illegal and had been since 1661. Yet Ireland's ancient distilled spirit had quietly persevered its 300 plus year ban as a clandestine tradition and symbol of defiance.

Maura's cousin—a Franciscan nun originally from County Clare—knew of Maura's growing obsession with poitín and eagerness to try it.

When Sister Mary traveled back to Ireland for a visit, she hunted down a sample of the hooch and smuggled it back to the US in a holy water bottle for Maura. Thus the seeds of inspiration for the Smuggling Nun brand were planted to come to fruition decades later.

Poitín is pronounced POT-cheen, with the emphasis on "pot." It helps to remember that poitín means little pot in Irish—a reference to the small copper pot stills used to make it.

It is believed poitín dates as far back as 6th century Ireland, making it the precursor to virtually all distilled spirits we drink today.

Throughout history, poitín was primarily produced from malted barley. Over hundreds of years, the Irish and Scots learned to age it into whiskey. Although barley is almost always the base ingredient, thrifty farmer-bootleggers also

combined or substituted other excess organic matter on hand to their mashes, such as oats, fruit—and occasionally even potatoes, after they were introduced in the late 1500s.

In the early 20th century, enterprising bootleggers determined to make the best-tasting poitín, learned to blend a little treacle and beet sugar into the barley mash before distillation.

When English colonizers outlawed poitín in 1661, it became the world's first illegal alcohol and the basis for all bootlegging subculture to follow.

In Ireland, poitín became virtually synonymous with the word illegal. That mindset was so entrenched, the Irish didn't get around to legalizing it until only 25 years ago.

"To this day, some hang onto the idea that if it's legal, it's not poitín," Maura laughs. "And some also associate it with harshness. Those beliefs vanish the moment they taste Smuggling Nun. Their faces light up, and they concede it is indeed the real thing—and first rate at that."

"SmugNun is proof that poitín can be delicious and very smooth, while retaining authentic flavor and strength."

For the bulk of her career, Maura lived in Boulder, Colorado, working as a producer of high profile events that often showcased celebrities, performers, and dignitaries. She visited Ireland regularly, both for work and recreation.

Volunteer endeavors included helping with President Mary McAleese's visit to Colorado and becoming a founding, executive board member of Irish Network Colorado and Irish Network USA.

In 2013, Maura put all of the above experience to the test, when she decided she wanted to learn how to make poitín herself. She reached out to her Irish connections for help in finding someone willing to teach her. It was surprising to discover how secretive the Irish still are when it comes to poitín.



Finally, a friend made a quiet introduction through his family to a retired bootlegger-farmer in the Glens of Antrim. Total blind luck led Maura to this man, whose father had been the distilling partner of Michael McIlhatton.

"McIlhatton" is a song recorded by Christy Moore that immortalizes that bootlegger as the finest of poitín makers.

Over subsequent years, Maura worked with "Stephen Still," her ten gallon copper pot, to practice and perfect the McIlhatton recipe.

During the pandemic, Maura went all in, selling her house and moving back to her native Connecticut to launch her business.

Smuggling Nun's County Down distillery went through an extensive process to procure the finest ingredients and scale up the formula for production.

In 2022, the Smuggling Nun is available to purchase online in most states, with free shipping on two bottles. And the

brand has debuted in select US locations in New York and Connecticut.

This fall the "most awarded bar in the world," the Dead Rabbit, is creating an elevated cocktail using Smuggling Nun for its celebrated upstairs salon.

In just eight months, Smuggling Nun has been awarded international medals for the liquid and accolades for package design.

San Francisco World Spirits Competition tasting notes read, "Approachable in style, with bright cereal notes, a subtle smokiness and fine minerality. The vegetal, savoury elements appear within the smooth, delicate palate."

Poitín has become popular with cocktail enthusiasts and spirits aficionados in Ireland and wider Europe.

This November, the world's first poitín conference will be held in Dublin, where Maura and the Smuggling Nun will be presented in talks and tastings, along with other brands.

Industry insiders predict awareness and demand for poitín will grow dramatically in the States in 2023 and beyond, as more Irish craft producers are poised to enter the market.

How best to drink poitín? Maura recommends, "If you like your spirits straight, Smuggling Nun is incredibly smooth and flavorful. And it's a standout in cocktails—just the most fun and flexible mixing base imaginable."

"My current favorite is a Celtic sour—a pisco sour but with poitín. Or there's the 'Dublin Donkey,' a poitín mule."

"Spicy margaritas and palomas are excellent. Or you can keep it simple with tonic or a little juice and seltzer."

These and more recipes can be found on smugnun.com.

With the enormous success story of Irish liquor, which grew 19 percent as an industry in just the last year, the time has come to honor and celebrate poitín as the original spirit of Ireland. ☺