

Kentucky Derby is more than a horse race

By Sam Dean, Bon Appetite

As far as we're concerned, the mint julep is as important to the Kentucky Derby as the horses, or the jockeys, or whatever it is everyone seems to be cheering about while we launch our faces into another leafy sprig of mint. It's the quintessential Southern drink—the sweaty climate calls for a serious cool-down, and only a region with a sentimental attachment to its landed gentry would think to drink booze out of silver cups.

But man, what a name! “Schlep” is the only other (not totally obscure) word in the English language that ends in -lep, and even that wears its Yiddishness on its sleeve. So how did the julep trot into our native tongue?

In the beginning (and likely a very early beginning, at that), the word was *gul-ab*, and the drink was Persian rosewater (*gul*=rose, *ab*=water). *Gul-ab* then moved through the normal channels (Arabic>Italian>French), until finally “julep” shows up in English, around 1400, in a surgical textbook called *Lanfranc's Chirurgie* (the old-timey word for “surgery”). There, it's described as a “sirup maad oonly of water & of sugre,” mixed with more medicinal ingredients to make them easier to swallow. So by the 15th century, “julep” had lost its floral notes, and had moved into meaning any kind of soothing, sweet drink.

By the late 1700s, though, the Atlantic seems to have split the julep into two camps. In Europe, it was still a general term for a sweet drink, including something with medicinal properties, but hard-drinking Americans had codified it into a cold cocktail, served with sugar, ice, and some kind of

aromatic herb. Speed up to 1804, when an American writer credited his love of whiskey to “mixing and tasting my young master’s juleps.” So we know that whiskey was a major component, but in the 19th century, juleps were also made with brandy and (surprisingly) gin.

While the popular idea of a mint julep may have dwindled into a bourbon-only drink these days, there is still some linguistic innovation going on: Andrew Knowlton, BA’s Restaurant and Drinks Editor, named his daughter Julep. (But it was more for the history of the word than anything—he and his wife were thinking of naming her “Rose,” but decided to go for a more ancient version of the same. That said, he is a man who likes mint juleps.)

Our favorite julep, the Prescription Julep, is a throwback to those 19th-century recipes, with Cognac and rye replacing the typical bourbon (and a nod to the drink’s medicinal roots in the name), but there’s clearly a final frontier to cross for any true julep traditionalists out there: going back to the drink’s rosy roots.