

Fruit Liqueurs

Contributed by cab

Making fruit liqueurs is the single simplest thing you can do to make your own distinctive alcoholic drinks; with a minimum of effort, at quite a modest cost you can make drinks that will knock the socks off anything you can buy, and with a little bit of an extra push you can produce enough to keep you and yours in tipples all year, with plenty left over for presents.

There are many ways of making liqueurs, and they can range from fortifying fruit wines with spirits (a complex process I'll cover in a later article) through to mixing small amounts of fruit juice with spirits (only for wimps, really!). What I'm going to describe here is a means to make what I consider to be the best of all home made liqueurs, those made by soaking fruit or herbs in alcohol.

But first, some materials that you'll need to get you going. It's a short list, but an important one. You will need:

- Bottles (for storing all of your hard produced liqueurs). You'll soon start saving all kinds of interesting and pretty bottles for decanting liqueurs into; half bottles and miniatures are especially useful here, as is anything distinctive or patterned in some way. A pretty, well labelled bottle of liquor is a super gift.
 - Big, sealable jars. I can't stress enough how important it is to have a supply of these; you CAN make liqueurs direct in the bottles of course, but getting the fruit in and out is a pain.
 - Spoons for stirring, a pan for heating sugar and water (for some liqueurs), a sieve and a funnel.
- You can use pretty much any spirit (gin, brandy, whisky, rum, tequila…), and nearly any edible fruit or herb.

I'll describe two processes here; one for fruit, one for herbs.

Making fruit liqueurs

The basic idea here is that you soak a fruit in spirit, and sweeten it. You're aiming to use alcohol to dissolve out as much flavour as you can, with some sugar to balance out the acidity of the fruit. The amount of fruit you need depends very much on what you're trying to make. Sloe gin requires less fruit than, say, cherry brandy. The process is:

- Put the fruit into the jar, add a little sugar, and fill with spirit.
 - Wait… Try a fortnight.
 - Taste. Is it sweet enough? Add more sugar. Is it fruity enough? If it is, it's done. If it isn't, leave it another fortnight.
- And that's it.

Sometimes the fruit will be great (cherries from cherry brandy, blackberries from blackberry whisky, etc.), other times, it'll be pretty awful (sloes, even after being made into sloe gin, are pretty horrid to be honest). If it's good, put the fruit into a jar with a little of the liquor to keep it, and seal it.

Making herb liqueurs

Now herb liqueurs are a slightly different matter. Whereas with the robust flavours of fruit you can be a bit bold, with the more subtle herb flavours you have to be a bit more careful. The way to do it is as follows.

- Fill a jar (or half fill for strongly flavoured plants) with the herbs of your choice. Fill the jar with spirit.
- Leave for a fortnight, and strain.
- Make a sugar syrup. Use half a pint of water, heated in a pan, per pint of steeped spirit, and dissolve in it 1/4 (really dry) to 3/4lb (really sweet) of sugar in it in a pan.
- Mix the warm syrup with the spirit, and when it cools, bottle it.

This sounds like a more hit and miss process, but in truth it isn't. The recipe for beech leaf nouyau later in the article is as unlikely looking as any I've ever seen, but if you make it I guarantee it'll go down a storm at your next big party. The only way you're likely to go wrong is by using too much of the herb. If that happens, dilute

it down with more spirit.

I feel like I ought to have something more insightful, more complex to say here, but I don't. It just isn't that difficult!

Now, onto the recipes; first some fruit liqueurs, and then my absolute favourite herb liqueur. Enjoy.

Blackberry Whisky

- 1 preserving jar of blackberries
- Enough whisky to cover
- Sugar to taste

Simply fill the jar with blackberries, add in a few dessertspoons of sugar, and cover with whisky. Shake, leave for a few days, and test the sweetness (you might need to add more sugar till you get the taste the way you like it). After a couple of weeks, it should be more or less done. Pour off the whisky into a bottle, leaving just a dribble with the berries (which are great in ice cream, clafoutis, autumn pudding, etc.)

Works best with a smoky highland malt, use a good blended Scottish whisky of some sort and you'll be fine.

Cherry Brandy

- 1 preserving jar full of cherries (sour or sweet)
- 1-2 blanched almonds
- Enough brandy to cover
- Sugar to taste

Fill the jar with cherries, add the brandy, and sweeten to taste; go easy with the sugar to begin with, you can always add more, and you don't want this too sweet. Invert a few times a week, and after 1-2 months you'll have fabulous cherry brandy. Keep some alcohol in the jar you keep the cherries in, and use them up before they start tasting too strange... You'll know when this has happened...

The almonds are optional. I don't find that they add much, but some people insist they're necessary. Take your pick. You can use the same recipe with plums; wild cherry plums make a super beverage.

Sloe Gin

- Half a jar of sloes
- Half of the weight of sloes in sugar
- Enough gin to fill the jar

This is the undisputed classic English liqueur. It isn't the best one you can make, but it's by far the best thing you can do with all the sloes you'll find.

The trick to making a really good sloe gin is to make sure that the berries have been frozen, either on the tree (picked after a frost) or in your freezer.

Soak the fruit in the jar for at least three months, preferably longer, in the dark. Shake the jar every day or two, and when done decant into a bottle. Check for sweetness, and sweeten more if you need. I find that the fruit is still inedible, but the gin is superb!

Blackcurrant Rum

- Blackcurrants to half fill a jar
- 1/3 the weight of blackcurrants in sugar
- Enough rum to fill the jar

As simple as all of the other recipes, soak the blackcurrants and sugar in the rum till they taste good.

Raspberry Vodka

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- Raspberries to fill a jar 1/4 to 1/3 full
- A few teaspoons of sugar (a very small amount)
- Enough vodka to fill the jar

This is an amazing brew. Be sparing with the sugar, when you've made this a shot of it is like being hit in the head with a bag of raspberries. It'll need at least a couple of months to be ready, and it's better if you can give it at least six months.

Beech Leaf Noyau

- 1 jar of beech leaves (young, soft ones)
- Enough gin to cover
- Sugar and water

This is a classic liqueur, and I can't recommend it highly enough. It's also a good model for how to make herb liqueurs; beech leaves aren't strongly flavoured, but this drink has a potent and distinctive tang to it. Make this one first, then think about other herb liqueurs.

Gather the beech tree leaves when they're young, soft and velvety. Pack them into a jar, and let them steep in enough gin to cover them for about a fortnight. Add a couple of almonds if you like.

Make a sweet sugar syrup (see above), and blend it with the spirit.