

The art of dram-making

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Erikht reveals how you can capture the taste of a season with not much more than a bottle of vodka and a few months' patience.

Sweet Gale dram will make you dream of Summer on a dark Winter evening

In this article, I will explore the very exciting and rewarding activity of making your own schnapps, or dram as I prefer to call it. Making dram is an old activity in most countries, but prevails most strongly in those countries that do not have their own traditional distilled specialities (such as whisky/whiskey, brandy, calvados, et caetera). Scandinavia and Russia are the most notable examples; for even if the Scandinavian aquavits and Russia's flavoured vodkas are distilled products today, they were not 100 years ago.

From fusel to infusion

Here in Europe, we have been familiar with the process of distillation for a little more than 500 years. The product was a foul-tasting liquid called fusel oil, which despite the taste was given names like aqua vitae, the water of life. Whisky, vodka, aquavit and eau-de-vie are all variations of this name. Aquae vitae were used as medicine for hundreds of years and, to make the spirit more drinkable, pharmacists would make their own tinctures, sweetened with syrups and flavoured with medical herbs. Thus, the art of dram making started. Until a hundred years ago, distilleries would do the same, infusing their fusel-filled spirits with herbs to mask the foul taste. A celebratory aquavit was made by the Norwegian wine monopoly a few years back – with added fusel oil to give it a genuine taste.

Sweet Gale infusing

Liqueurs or schnapps

It's relatively easy to make your own dram and most people frequenting sites like this will have tried it in one form or another, usually involving berries and sugar. These liqueurs are uniformly sweet and are often made without thought to how long the concoction should infuse, nor to maturing after the biological agent has been removed. This does not mean that there aren't some very good recipes out there, but with a bit of insight, the accidental liqueur-maker can become a very good dram-maker and can easily become an inventor of new and exciting drams.

I will write about the unsweetened drams in this article. I make more drams than liqueurs and often find them more refined, even if there are some great sweet liqueurs out there as well. I like to use spirits without flavour, usually cheap vodka. Personally I don't like to use brandy or gin or other aromatic spirits, though I make some exceptions. The unflavoured vodka is much easier to control and the final product will be all of your making, not a cheap brandy with added taste. Save your money and buy a proper calvados instead, which you can enjoy neat on a cold and wet autumn afternoon.

Blackcurrant leaf: You'll believe it when you taste it

Now to the principles:

Herbs, spices and berries

I like to distinguish between drams made from berries, from herbs and from spices. The herb and berry drams will more often than not be made from ingredients you pick yourself, while the most exotic drinks can be made after a trip to the local spice shop. I must admit that the wild or hedgerow drams always give me more pleasure than the ones made from shop-bought ingredients, simply because I have picked them myself. A proper little downsizer! Be aware that some

berries will water down the vodka. A bottle of 60% (or even 80%) can be handy to get the strength back. This said, most drams can be a little lighter than the 40% vodka you started with, especially those meant for drinking with food.

Three drams maturing. From left: Sweet Myrtle with honey, Apple and Cloudberry liqueur

The essence of essences

Often, one will make a dram from one ingredient only. It will then be stated how much of the flavouring ingredient, how much spirits, what strength the spirit and how long the agent should be allowed to infuse the spirit. After this, it will say for how long the finished product should mature. I like to leave the dram to mature in bottles, but Kilner jars are better for the infusing stage. Also, there is a difference between ready-made drams and those made as an essence. Essences are time-saving and easy to store. They can be just as good as the ready-mades, if you only remember that when the essence is mixed with spirits, it needs to stand for a bit to mature if it is to reach its full potential. Too often the dram's potential is destroyed by that greatest of sins: impatience.

Filtering

When a flavouring agent has done its job, it must be taken out of the dram. This is the act of filtering. There are different schools of thought about how the dram should be filtered, but the two most dominant are the coffee filter gang and the muslin flock. I belong to something in between and prefer several layers of muslin or gauze, first of all because I find the coffee filters to be a bit brutal with the flavours. But some very good dram-makers I know use nothing but, so this you will have to find out for yourselves. Most drams get better with a bit of airing, so don't be afraid to slosh it around.

Sweeteners

When a sweetener is needed, many turn to honey. I would give it a thought before doing so. Honey has a strong flavour of its own and this will be imparted in the drink, which is not always wanted. If honey is used as a sweetening agent, use a light and delicate honey rather than a cheap one, which often have a far more overpowering taste. If you make a dram from morellos, then a honey from a morello orchard or raspberries might be a better idea than a Provençal thyme honey. I use white sugar if nothing else is indicated. White sugar is as tasteless as sweeteners get and is easier to control than most alternatives.

From left: Blackcurrant and Rowan. Both of these have some maturing to do!

Thoughts on time

All drams and liqueurs have three “ingredients”: spirits, one or more biological agent(s) and a good portion of time. With very few exceptions liqueurs and especially drams, will benefit from maturing. According to the great Swedish ethnologist and dram-maker, Albert Sandklef, dram should mature for five years before consumption. This might seem a bit steep for most and I myself have never tried keeping dram for so long. But a lot of my drams, especially those of a more marked character, have all been better for a few months or a year of maturing. So if you don't like the taste of a dram, let it lie for a year and try again. It might surprise you. And, if not, give it away to somebody who likes it - or mix it with Coke and ice.

I intend to give a few recipes here, all good for the season we are in. Later, I'm going to add more articles, so that in time it can become quite a dram-maker's library. So, let's start with the first recipes....

But first:

1l = 10dl
1dl = 10cl
1cl = 10ml

For those of you living in another galaxy entirely, 1l is approx. 2 pints. Yes, I have had this question from Englishmen before.

Autumn:

Rowan, Sorbus aucuparia L.

Rowan is a plant we have in abundance and it's easy to pick large quantities. I give three different recipes here.

1:

Take 1 dl frozen rowan berries and pour on a bottle of vodka. Let it stand for 4-6 days. Filter it and let it mature for at least 3 months (preferably half a year) before tasting. This makes a simple, elegant schnapps, which I make every year.

2:

Fill a glass half-full (be optimistic) with frozen berries and pour on vodka (my father-in-law once tried 60%, which made it good but very strong). Let it stand for two weeks. Filter. Let it mature for a year. This makes a much more robust and almost whisky-coloured schnapps. My father-in-law invented this because he is unable to take instructions.

3: This one is called "Shooters Shot".

Here, the berries should not be frozen. If you only have frozen berries, don't worry. Just let the drink stand to infuse for half the time instead and everything should be all right. Or let it stand the time and get a more powerful tasting dram.

1 kg rowan berries
 1 orange
 1 piece of fresh ginger
 1/2 cinnamon stick
 8-10 cloves
 15 juniper berries
 50 grams brown sugar
 Vodka

Slice the orange thinly. Put everything on a Kilner jar (enough vodka to cover it all). Let the jar stand somewhere dark but not too cold. Some people extract it after one month, others after five or six. The longer the berries are left to infuse, the longer the drink needs to mature (it will probably not taste very good at the beginning), say at least the same time it spent infusing in the first place. Try four months infusing and six months maturing after filtering, I think that would make good schnapps.

Blackberries, Rubus fruticosus

Blackberries are the most common hedgerow berry in most European countries. They will benefit from maturing. The process is simple:

Fill a Kilner jar half full with blackberries. Fill the jar with vodka. Let the jar stand for a minimum of two months, preferably a whole year. Filter through a sieve, taste and bottle. If the drink seems sour or very strong, add a tablespoon of good honey (raspberry, maybe) per bottle. If you keep the cork or lid tight, blackberry dram will keep for years. Let it mature for two months after bottling.

You can also make blackberry whisky. Simply half-fill a Kilner jar with blackberries, fill the jar with whisky and let it stand for three months. Bottle and let it mature for a month or so.

Blackberry leaves make good dram as well. Pick 4dl blackberry leaves; pour on 3.5dl vodka (this is best done in a Kilner jar). Let the concoction infuse for a week in light, then a week in darkness. Filter and bottle with two sugar cubes. This dram can be consumed at once, but will improve with maturing. Mature until the day of St Lucia (13 December).

Blackberries also make a good sweet liqueur. Take 35cl vodka, 2dl sugar and 5dl blackberries. Put everything together in a Kilner jar. Let it stand for six months. Filter and taste. The liqueur is extremely boring at this time. Bottle it and let it mature for a year in the bottle. Now, that was something else, wasn't it?

Blackcurrant, Ribes nigrum

Blackcurrant makes excellent dram, berries and leaves both. The dram made from berries needs time to infuse, but can

be drunk when infusion time is over.

Fill a two-pint Kilner jar with one pint of blackcurrants. Add three tablespoons of good quality honey and fill the glass with vodka. Let it stand for a minimum of three months, but try a whole year. It really gets much better. Filter and bottle. If you think the taste of blackcurrant is too strong, add some more vodka (or something even stronger...). The dram should then have a couple of months to stabilise.

Blackcurrant leaves are the same as blackberry leaves. Put 4dl in a small Kilner jar and add 3.5dl vodka. Infuse in light for a week, then darkness for a week. Sieve it and bottle with two sugar cubes. This one must mature until December (let's say a minimum of three months). The day of St Lucia is as good as any to pop this one.

Sloes, *Prunus spinosa*

It might seem cheeky, a Norwegian teaching Pommies how to make sloe gin or sloe vodka. But I think it's easy and good, so why not? I prefer vodka before gin, but realize that cultural differences will be against me on this one. Anyway, take 2dl frozen sloes. (Put them in the freezer. Please. Don't wait for natural frost. Why should you? God has created the freezer for a reason.) Then put them in an empty vodka bottle (or gin bottle). Fill the bottle (with either vodka or gin...). Let it stand for a month. If you do not freeze the berries, you might need a longer time to infuse it and more berries. Also, you should presumably prick them, but of this I know naught. Pour the whole thing through a sieve. Bottle it and mature for a couple of months. This dram improves by further maturing, so by all means let it stand for a year if you can. There are lots of different recipes around. Find one you like.

Juniper, *Juniperus communis*

The juniper berries should be picked in September and the best berries for dram making are berries you picked yourself recently. Bought berries can also be used, but I feel that they tend to be a bit dry. Add 10 extra berries if dried berries are used.

The drink itself is easy to make and tastes better than gin and genever (and can be used as such). Bombay Blue Sapphire is a gin made a little bit like a dram, since the spirits are distilled through a filter filled with herbs and spices. It is made like espresso coffee, while our dram is made like tea.

Take 50 juniper berries and crush them lightly to free the oils. Put them in a jar and pour on 7dl vodka. This should infuse for a week and then be sieved through muslin (no coffee filter here). Bottle the dram. This dram improves gallons by maturing, so let it have until Christmas before tasting. Remember to shake the bottle before use or else the oils won't mix with the rest of the dram.

Sweet gale, *Myrica gale* L.

I moonlighted this from the rivercottage.net forum. I wrote it myself half a year ago, so I do this without remorse.

Sweet gale (or bog myrtle or sweet willow) is a plant that grows over most of the Scandinavian Peninsula. I would be extremely surprised if it didn't grow in the UK*. It's a small bush (at least here it is) with small (less than an inch long) green leaves and it smells strongly aromatic when you rub the leaves.

When making sweet gale dram, we use the leaves only because the wood will give off an unpalatable bitter taste. Picked early in the year, they tend towards sweetness, late in the year towards bitterness. Also, they are stronger early in the year, so made in September it might need two days' extra infusion time. It's best gathered in June, but can still make a good dram at other times. Make at least a little bit to try, only remember to let it mature at least until Christmas.

I like concentrates of sweet gale drams, but these drams should always mature for at least three months. See how the colour changes during the first week, from sickly green (with an awful mouthwash taste) to a dark, rich brown, full of the flavours of a coastal summer's eve. This is truly the lavender of the north.

For a great concentrate:

Fill a Kilner jar with sweet gale leaves (the green only). It's a heck of a job, but sweet gale is free. Fill the jar with vodka or another neutral spirit. Put it in a cupboard.

After no less than five days and no more than a week, filter the spirit in several layers of muslin. It should now look

unappetising and taste even worse. Forget it for some months (or look at it and taste it every week to mark the progress). If you make a lot of this, save some for a year and see how it mellows.

This concentrate can be mixed with neutral liqueur. I prefer approx. 1:6, but others prefer more or less. The strength of the concentrate may differ. Start with 1:3, taste and then increase the amount of vodka if necessary.

Ready dram

Put 1dl sweet gale leaves in a 0.75 l bottle (standard vodka bottle, 7.5 dl). Fill it up with vodka. Let it stand for 4-5 days. Filter. Mature (minimum 2 months).

If this is too strong, mix with vodka.

* Sweet gale is chiefly found in Scotland, North Wales and north-west England (where it is more likely to be known as bog myrtle). There are also localised populations in the Devon and Surrey commons and the Norfolk Broads.