

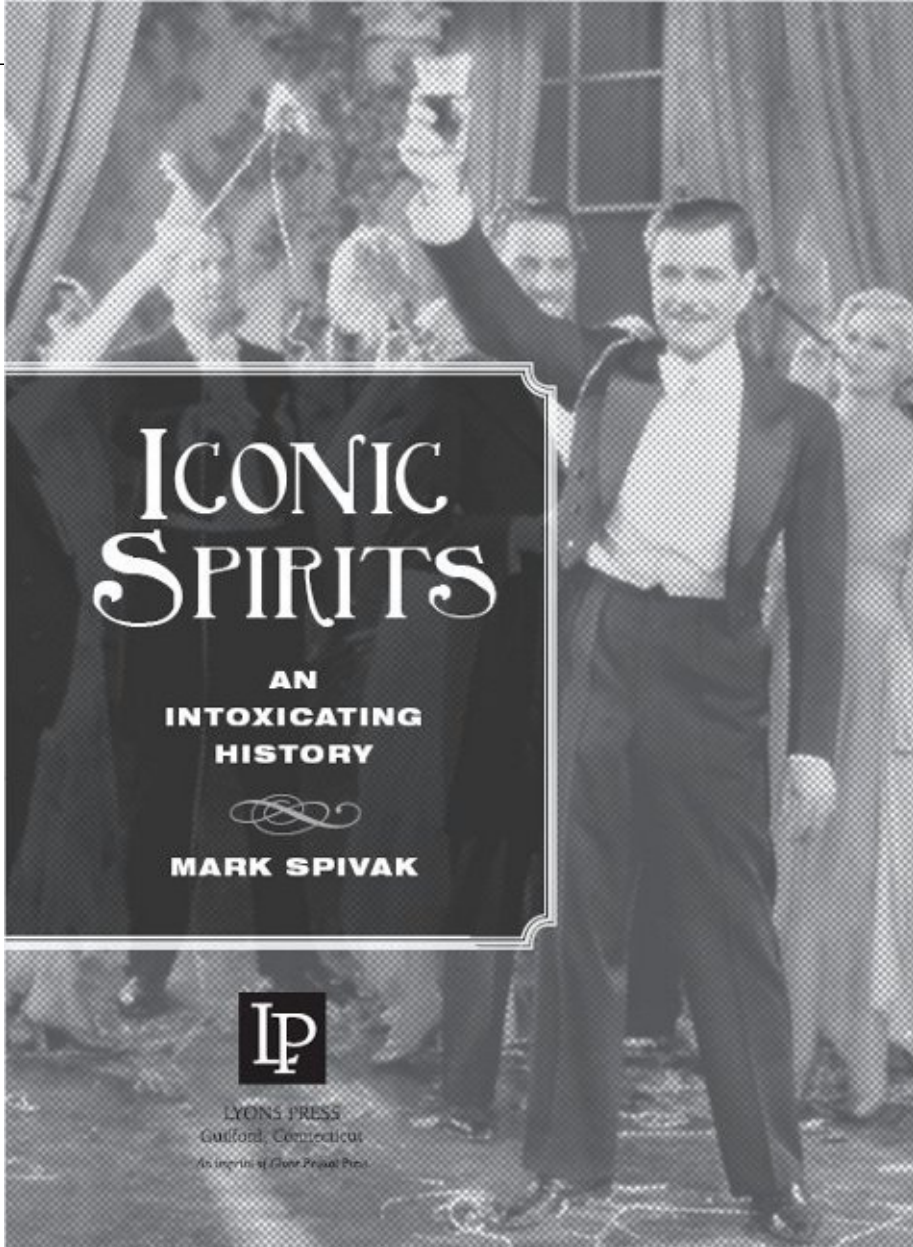


# ICONIC SPIRITS

AN  
INTOXICATING  
HISTORY



MARK SPIVAK



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INTOXICATING  
HISTORY



MARK SPIVAK



LYONS PRESS  
Gulford, Connecticut

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*For my grandparents, Gus and Gertrude Gerson  
And for my mother, Babette Leonore Gerson Spivak*



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## INTRODUCTION

What's a lifelong, committed wine geek doing writing a book about spirits?

For one thing, after I conceived the initial idea and began the research, I became enthralled with the resonant and compelling nature of these stories. Not only are they great yarns, but they're also untold stories—at least as far as the average imbibers is concerned. I realized that if I could bring them to life with a fraction of their original impact, I would be helping to connect readers with their past.

Coming back to spirits from an immersion in wine, I was struck by how much fun everyone in the liquor supply chain was having: Bartenders, salespeople, and executives—they all said so, but they didn't need to—it was apparent in the thrill of their work. There was an entrepreneurial joy in the creation of spirits brands that I hadn't witnessed in the wine business in a long, long time.

We all know that the cocktail culture has exploded across America over the past several decades. Much of the emphasis is usually placed on the resurrection of classic cocktails, on the consumption of those drinks by legions of consumers, and on the creation of new libations by a creative group of mixologists. More fundamental, and ultimately more interesting, are the stories of the risk takers who created those spirits in the first place. These are people who put their lives, careers, and fortunes on the line to pursue a vision that in many cases really did change the world.

From the epidemic of gin consumption that almost brought down the British empire, to Gaspar Campari toiling away in his workshop to infuse sixty herbs, spices, barks, and fruit peels into a mixture of alcohol and distilled water, to Sidney Frank waking up one morning and deciding to create the world's best vodka, our global economy and culture have been profoundly affected by the spirits that we have designated here as "iconic." Legislation was passed, moral crusades were launched and carried out, and the nature of society was altered. It hardly seems possible over a few shots of booze, but the twelve spirits featured in this book became the catalysts for change in governments and our way of life. They became the vehicles for creating the world in which we currently live.

At the end of each chapter, I've included recipes for the classic or most popular cocktails involving that particular spirit. Some of these recipes are amalgams of many different versions, collated into a form that seems to work best. In other cases, distillers or mixologists have kindly given me permission to reproduce their recipes.

I hope you'll find these stories as enthralling as I did, because they are the best kinds of tales: the type a writer could never make up.

**MOONSHINE,  
RUM-RUNNING,  
— AND THE —  
FOUNDING OF  
NASCAR**







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# MOONSHINE, RUM-RUNNING, AND THE FOUNDING OF NASCAR

Drive out of the city of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and the landscape turns rural very quickly. By the time you reach Wilkes County, the soft rippling hills have become higher and steeper, and the valleys are dotted with frame houses, farmland, and working tractors.

Joe Michalek, the energetic and genial president of Piedmont Distillers, is at the wheel. It's 6:30 a.m., and we're driving out to have breakfast with Junior Johnson—driving on Junior Johnson Highway, an eight-mile stretch of US Route 421 named for the famous race car driver. We ease onto old 421, which used to be known as Bootlegger's Highway. Sixty years ago there were nearly 400 stills in Wilkes County, and the roads here were dirt—"nothin' more than cow pastures," according to Junior. Bootleggers turned off their headlights at night to avoid detection and navigated by the light of the moon.

Robert Glenn Johnson Jr., known as Junior, was born in Wilkes County in 1931. He began running moonshine out of the hills at the age of fourteen, using his dad's rebuilt 1940 Ford. He became the fastest man on the dirt roads, the one bootlegger the law couldn't catch. In time, he took his cars, his speed, and his nerve onto the race track and became one of the greatest drivers in NASCAR history.

Author Tom Wolfe called Johnson "the Last American Hero." The nickname stuck, and it became the title of a 1973 movie about his life, a Hollywood extravaganza starring Jeff Bridges. Wolfe not only wrote at length about the legend of Junior Johnson in his breakout 1965 *Esquire* piece, he also helped create it. Junior was already an idol throughout the South at that time but was relatively unknown outside the region. The story captured him at the height of his racing career, and it also took the legend and burnished it so brightly that it became visible around the country.

The entrance to Junior's estate has wrought-iron gates and brick barriers chiseled with the initials J. It almost seems palatial, but this is a working farm with more than 800 head of cattle. We pull up in front of a large shed. Half the building is a garage housing Junior's 1963 Chevy racer, his son Robert's race car, and his rebuilt 1940 Ford bootleg car. The other half resembles a fraternal hall. Racing memorabilia clutters the walls, and Junior holds court on one side of a long folding table. At eighty, his once-formidable bulk has thinned out, and his hair has turned white, but he is alert to every nuance of every conversation, including those he seems not to hear.

"These old Fords was the ideal car to haul whiskey in," he tells me later on as we stand there admiring the glistening black bulk of the restored bootleg car. "They drove good, and they had a lot of space to pack whiskey. It got to where you hardly saw a car out late at night 'cept this kind of Ford, and you knew they was haulin' whiskey. Everybody had 'em. I was drivin' around the farm since I was 'bout nine, so by the time I was fourteen, I was a stable enough driver to haul whiskey. It was sorta like a milk run: You had your customers, and you planned your route. You started after it got dark, because the revenuers knew the bootleggers, and we knew them. If they could see you, they'd figure out the time you was travelin' and target you, but they couldn't do it in the dark." It was one big happy family, except that the revenuers—government agents charged with stopping the sale of improvised, untaxed liquor—

had the power to arrest you if they caught you. And given that they stood no chance of collecting the unpaid taxes on a generation's worth of moonshine, they'd just as soon lock you up.

Monday through Friday Junior cooks breakfast for his "boys," a combination of friends, business associates, and hangers-on. There are bowls of scrambled eggs and grits, plates of biscuits, and platters of breakfast meat. The regulars include former moonshiners such as Millard Ashley and Willie Claiborne Call, father of Piedmont's master distiller Brian Call. Known as the Three Musketeers, they worked together in what the locals refer to as the "liquor business" or the "whiskey business."

Michalek mixes seamlessly with the boys, eating sausage and joining in their good-natured grumbling and banter. He moved to North Carolina in 1995 to work for the tobacco company R.J.R. Reynolds, which at the time was a sponsor of Junior's Winston Cup racing team. His moment of epiphany occurred at a blues jam session way out in the woods, when someone offered him a taste of peach moonshine from a Mason jar, and he was amazed by the smoothness of it. He left R.J.R. in 2000 to start Piedmont Distillers and eventually persuaded Junior to partner with him on a legal line of moonshine called Midnight Moon.

"Because I was an outsider," he says, "I noticed that everybody here had very strong reactions on the subject of moonshine. I started reading about it and became intrigued with it. There's an incredible collection of characters associated with it, but at heart it's a way of life—an attitude of irreverence born of survival, mixed with an element of competition."

"Just about every house in the county was involved in the liquor business," says Junior. "They were either makin' it, buyin' it, sellin' it, or growin' the corn for it. My dad had five stills runnin' all the time. If they busted one, he'd just move it somewhere else."

Johnson Senior was the largest bootlegger in the county immediately before and after World War II and had the reputation for making the best moonshine. Labor in the liquor business was divided along generational lines. The fathers and uncles made the 'shine, and their sons tended the stills and hauled the whiskey. Some people now regard this as a romantic era, but it was really a fight to stay alive. "Back in the hard times," as Junior calls them, farmers couldn't pay their bills simply by growing corn. They either made whiskey, or they didn't eat.

On the dirt roads of Wilkes County, Junior developed the now-famous maneuver known as the Bootleg Turn. When the revenuers have you cornered, you turn the wheel hard to the left, downshift to a lower gear, and put your foot to the floor. The car pivots 180 degrees, and you're down the road before the law can turn themselves around. "Anybody who don't know how to do this is goin' to wreck their car every time," chuckles Junior. "Anythin' you could do to gain an advantage out on the road was very important. There ain't no way a Highway Patrol officer could ever attempt to do somethin' like that."

Junior started racing in 1948, up at North Wilkesboro Speedway. "Racin' was just a natural for me," he says. "Other people had to learn all the stuff I already knew when I got started." At first he could make more money hauling whiskey than from racing, but by 1953 he was competing in major NASCAR events. He won five races in his first full season. The tracks were still dirt back then, and Junior made the most of them. He invented a technique called the Power Slide, which enabled him to go faster through the turns and shoot out in front of the other cars on the straightaways. "You'd have to be turnin' a certain speed and downshift your car, and make it so you could drive it in gear when you turned the wheels. You'd practice that stuff and perfect it, and get so you could do it every single time. But it was somethin' that some people could never understand—they never could drive a car that fast like that. My brother was a much better driver than me on the roads, but not on the race track, 'cause he never thought the car would hold on the turns."

Junior is hitting his stride now—he's the total master of the conversation, just as he was once in absolute control at 180 mph.

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"I had a lot of friends that was very good bootleggers, but they couldn't drive a race car to save their lives. I never thought I could get hurt in a car, 'cause I thought I was in control. I think the ability I learned as a youngster taught me what cars were really all about, and I felt I had the confidence that I could make them do what I wanted."

Beyond technique, that confidence is the quality that Junior admires most in a driver—call it guts, heart, or nerve. Early drivers such as Roy Hall and Fonty Flock had it, Fireball Roberts and Curt Turner had it, and Dale Earnhardt Sr. had it most of all. After he retired as a driver and started his own racing team, Junior looked for drivers with nerve: Cale Yarborough, LeeRoy Yarbrough, Bobby Allison, Darrell Waltrip, and Mario Andretti. To him, nerve is what separates the ordinary from the great.

During his bootlegging days, Junior went up to Charlotte and bought a police radio. While the revenuers were driving all over creation trying to hunt him down, he was tracking their movements on the shortwaves. One night, though, they finally had him cornered. According to Wolfe, they had him trapped on a road near a bridge with no way out, with their barricades set up to stop him. While they were waiting for him, they heard a siren approaching and saw the red lights flashing on the grille. They took down the roadblock to let their fellow agent pass, and who sped by them but Junior Johnson, his 1940 Ford decked out with a siren and flashing lights. "You had to play the same games on them that they was playin' on you," he says, laughing.

Junior got to a point where he was doing well enough as a driver that he could give up bootlegging. Finally, though, his luck ran out, and he wasn't even behind the wheel when it happened. "I won a race in Altamont, New York, in 1955 and drove all night to get home. I come in around 4:00 or 4:30 in the morning. My dad was still in the liquor business at that time. He and my brother had a still, and they had overslept. You had to fire up your still before daylight so nobody could see the smoke, 'cause if they saw that smoke, they might report you to the law. My dad asked me to go out and fire up his still, and then he and my brother would come out, and I could go to bed.

"I went out to that still, and the revenuers had it staked out. There was eighteen of 'em, and I couldn't fight 'em off. When they saw who I was, they figured they had hit the jackpot. They just wanted to catch me and put me in jail, 'cause they couldn't do it any other way. The judge had it in for my family anyway, since he had sent my dad to prison three or four times."

Junior was sentenced to two years in the federal prison in Chillicothe, Ohio, and served eleven months (in 1986, Ronald Reagan gave him a presidential pardon for his moonshining conviction). Many times since, he has said that prison was the turning point in his life. In a 1988 interview recorded for the Southern Oral History Project, he called it "one of the best things that ever happened to me." He learned patience and discipline in prison, along with the ability "to live with your fellow man and get along with him." He learned to take orders and accept responsibility for himself, and realized that he was not the center of the universe.

Junior Johnson today is a mellow man who is soft-spoken, modest, and self-effacing—even when his words could be taken as boasts. He has a philosophical view of life that initially seems to be at odds with his hard-driving image. He is gracious with others and tries to see the good side of people. His graciousness dries up quickly when questioned about the early days of NASCAR, however, and particularly when asked about Bill France.

Big Bill France had been a driver from the earliest days of stock car racing in America, going back to the mid-1930s, and eventually became a race promoter. After World War II, he echoed the sentiment

of many drivers about the need for a centralized authority in the sport. In December 1947, France convened a meeting of drivers, mechanics, and promoters at the Streamline Hotel in Daytona Beach and founded the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing, or NASCAR. He installed himself as the organization's leader and went to work to establish NASCAR as the preeminent racing authority in the country.

In the decades that followed, France ruled NASCAR with an iron fist. He controlled the finances and decided on how much to pay the winning drivers. He demanded that drivers race exclusively for NASCAR and banned anyone who appeared in the races of the three or four competing circuits. He blocked the establishment of a drivers' union. He kept tight control of the organization's finances, even as he became first a millionaire and then a billionaire. He owned all of NASCAR's shares, and it remains a totally family-owned company to this day.

"Bill France married a girl 'bout thirty-five miles from here," says Junior. "He was up here a long 'cause we had what he needed to get goin'—we had the fast cars, and we had the money out of our bootleggin' business. He'd find out who the top bootleggers were in the county and try to get money from them to get his racin' goin'."

"They can say that NASCAR started any way they want to," he says emphatically, "but this race track here in Wilkesboro is where it started. No question 'bout that. And that's where he got his money to do what he did."

Back in the day, North Wilkesboro Speedway was the king of the rural dirt race tracks. It opened in 1947 and was the first NASCAR-sanctioned track. It was owned by Enoch Staley, a Wilkes County resident who was a fan of the stock car races organized by Big Bill France. Staley built the track with the help of partners, along with a promise from France to promote races there in exchange for a cut of the gate. Over the course of the next fifty years, nearly every NASCAR great competed and won at Wilkesboro.

In the 1970s and 1980s, however, NASCAR began to change. The tracks became larger and more elaborate. Like baseball stadiums, they were built specifically to host the exploding popularity of the sport. They had skyboxes, not to mention the capability to hold tens of thousands of fans and generate huge profits. North Wilkesboro slowly became an anachronism, but Staley wanted to keep the original atmosphere. After he died in 1996, the track was sold to Bob Bahre and Bruton Smith. In 1997 Bill France decided to pull the Winston Cup from North Wilkesboro in favor of larger tracks with bigger paydays, and the Speedway went into mothballs. It was revived briefly in 2010 but closed again.

As I spoke with Junior, the North Wilkesboro Speedway was still shuttered. Locked gates barred access to the track, and the Winston Cup lettering was fading on the walls of the wooden grandstands. There were overgrown weeds in the vast lot that had once held thousands of cars, pickups, and adoring fans. Junior knows that era isn't coming back, and he's sometimes nostalgic about the early days of the sport.

"A lot of NASCAR's knowledge and history was what I created," he says flatly, without a hint of boasting. "When you're an advanced technology person in a sport like I was, you wonder where all the engineers come from. I didn't have an engineering degree; I left school in the eighth grade. So brains are sometimes more important than education." He was the first to drill out the wheel wells on a race car, which saved thirty pounds and increased airflow to cool the brakes.

In 1960 Junior went to the Daytona 500 with a car he admits wasn't capable of winning. He was 50 horsepower and 20 mph behind everybody else. During one of the practice runs, he noticed that if he got right behind the lead car and stayed on his bumper, his own car was suddenly going as fast as the leader. It was drafting, something birds had been doing instinctively since shortly after the Earth was

created, and Junior decided to use it to his own advantage. “The race was two-thirds over before everybody figured out what I was doin’,” he says. ~~By the final laps the lead cars were either blown up or wrecked, and Junior won.~~

Life takes most of us to strange places, and Junior is well aware of the irony involved in his selling legal moonshine. Junior Johnson’s Midnight Moon is distilled and bottled at the tiny Piedmont headquarters in Madison. They use the old Johnson family recipe—still a closely held secret after all these years, but with a few tweaks added. The ’shine is now triple-distilled, which makes it much smoother. The whiskey still starts with fresh cornmeal blended overnight with mash from the previous run, and the process (including the stripping run, second run, finishing run, blending, filtration, and bottling) takes several weeks from start to finish. We’ll never know exactly how it differs from what the Johnson family cooked up in the backwoods stills, nor are we supposed to. It’s still sold to the public in Mason jars, and the taste is marked by the sweetness of the corn and the burn of the alcohol. In addition to the basic version, the company offers an assortment of fruit infusions: Cherry, Strawberry, and Apple Pie. The product has resonated with some of the country’s top mixologists, liquid chefs who are constantly hunting for something new, different, and unusual, even if it has been around for hundreds of years. North Carolina has what Michalek calls “a small but emerging cocktail culture,” and Midnight Moon is featured at lounges such as Single Brothers in Winston-Salem and Foundation in Raleigh. It has established a growing following in Brooklyn and is gradually spreading to major U.S. cities. In a further bit of irony, Piedmont’s operation is far more streamlined than things were in the old days. At his peak as a bootlegger, Junior employed seventy-five people. “I had cars, trucks, mechanics, drivers, and still hands,” he says. “But remember, we had to do all the transportin’ ourselves.”

Michalek believes that moonshine “has the capability to become a category unto itself,” the equivalent of scotch or bourbon, although he’s unsure how long it will take to get there. After Junior, his idol is Sidney Frank, the man who created Grey Goose from nothing more than the flash of an idea. Like Frank, and like many of the modern generation of distillers, Michalek is essentially standing at one end of a craps table, betting the title to his house, and staring down the long expanse of fate toward that point where he might hit the jackpot. “Occasionally, I hear skeptics tell me that people will never drink moonshine,” he says. “Well, you wouldn’t have thought they’d drink Jägermeister either. Junior’s enthusiasm is virtually unqualified; he sees a time when ’shine will become a vodka replacement for many people. “Vodka ain’t nothin’ but white whiskey anyway,” he says. This is certainly true as far as it goes: You can make vodka from anything, corn included. Nor is moonshine unrelated to some of the world’s other great spirits. If Midnight Moon were distilled in Kentucky and placed in charred oak barrels, it would eventually become bourbon. The fact, though, is that Junior’s dad and others like him weren’t making an elegant vodka to be mixed into a martini and sipped on the rocks. They were concocting raw whiskey to be chugged out of Mason jars in the light of a backwoods moon.

Most importantly, Midnight Moon represents the closing of a circle for Junior Johnson, a vehicle for him to finally put his bootlegging past into what he feels is the proper perspective. When Tom Wolfe arrived in 1965, locals asked him not to portray Wilkes County as “the bootlegging capital of America.” Today Junior speaks matter-of-factly about his experiences with moonshine and presents it as something that sprang from economic necessity.

More than a matter of survival, it was also part of the genetic hardwiring of Wilkes County. Bootlegging was the legacy of the Whiskey Rebellion, after all, a bloody and hard-fought insurrection against the excise tax that was finally suppressed by President George Washington. For the Scotch-Irish who migrated down the Appalachian Trail and spawned men like Junior Johnson, it was an ingrained attitude of resistance against the government. *You ain’t tellin’ me what to do. You ain’t takin’*

*my whiskey*. It was the attitude that gave birth to the American Revolution: Live Free or Die. “People from Ireland and England basically brought the whiskey business to the United States,” says Junior. “They came here when they was starvin’, durin’ the potato famine. We just took their ideas and improved on ’em.”

Junior also believes that his Midnight Moon project has helped NASCAR come to terms with its own heritage. Virtually all of the early champions were bootleggers, yet for many years their names were buried in obscurity. Some observers felt that Bill France was intent on separating NASCAR from its past, in order to establish it as a national sport like baseball or football, one that appealed to the broadest possible segment of the population and provided clean, wholesome family entertainment. Junior has done bottle-signing events at the NASCAR Hall of Fame and feels that NASCAR now “accepts the fact that bootleggers is what created the start of the sport.”

Back in the shed, we walk over to the 1940 bootleg car, and Junior explains how he used to pack for the milk run. “The liquor was packed in six-gallon cases,” he says. “There were twelve half-gallon jars in each case. You put two of them on the floor, stood them up, then two more on top of them. You put two cases on the front seat. They went right up to the steering wheel, almost like a seat belt.” He gets more animated as he goes along. “Then you filled up the boot and the trunk. There was twenty-two cases in all. When the car was empty, the back springs had the car all jacked up, but when it was loaded and weighed down, it looked like a normal car. You could always tell a bootleggin’ car, though, because it had wide tires and stronger wheels. If you knew what you was lookin’ for, you could pick it out.”

He closes the car door, and his face turns serious.

“I’ve done the good and the bad. I went to jail and did time. There was nothin’ I missed in the bootleggin’ business. A lot of people didn’t ever want anybody to know they was a bootlegger, ’cause they didn’t want what they thought was a bad name. But I never thought it was bad. My dad was the biggest bootlegger around; he was the most popular man around here, and I was proud to say that I had a dad like that. Sure, it was against the law, but it wasn’t like he was killin’ anybody. He was lookin’ after his family, and he had a premium product. He was a perfectionist, wouldn’t settle for anythin’ less. He wasn’t hurtin’ anybody except the government, and they wanted to charge us \$11 in taxes for a gallon of moonshine we was sellin’ for \$3. If we paid their taxes, we wasn’t goin’ to make it. It was a way of life for me. The people that worked for me, they got up and went to church on Sunday. It was just a job for them.”

Everything that Junior says is true, of course. But as I listen to one of the greatest NASCAR drivers of all time reminisce about his days eluding the revenueurs on the back roads of Wilkes County, it’s hard to believe that the thrill of the chase wasn’t part of the equation. It was a job, to be sure, but that doesn’t mean there was no fist pumping when the government boys ate your dust.

“I had ’bout eight or ten offers to do moonshine before I took this one. Most of ’em was phony. They was going to run the show from someplace like New York or Boston, hire somebody to make the moonshine for ’em, and put my name on it. I said no to all of ’em until Joe came along. I wanted to make sure that it was serious, that it would be done right.

“You know,” he says philosophically, “it’s hard when you see somethin’ that you do, and nobody else realizes what it really is. That’s what’s so important about this Midnight Moon business. It’s almost like a discovery of somethin’, when you develop somethin’ that was hidden, somethin’ that people had disgraced, and you turn it around on them and make it an honor. I think this Midnight Moon will change the history of the whiskey business, provide a better product, and take it to a new place.

“We may not catch Jack Daniel’s,” he grins, “but we’re gainin’ on ’em.”

What follows are some of the most compelling cocktails from the Midnight Moon collection by Piedmont Distillers, Inc. For consumers and bartenders alike, moonshine cocktails are a relatively new art form. Feel free to experiment with your own creations, but remember that, contrary to Junior's dictum that vodka "ain't nothin' but white whiskey," there's a significant taste difference between vodka and moonshine. The high corn content of moonshine yields a spirit that is plumper and sweeter than vodka, and the flavor profile of drinks made from 'shine should be adjusted accordingly.

### **Moonshine Martini**

1½ ounces Midnight Moon  
Splash of dry vermouth  
1 olive or lemon peel (for garnish)

Shake with ice and strain into a martini glass. Garnish with an olive or lemon peel.

### **Peppermint Moon Martini**

2 ounces Midnight Moon  
½ ounce peppermint schnapps  
Hard peppermint candy (for garnish)

Combine ingredients, shake with ice, and serve in a martini glass, garnished with hard peppermint candy.

### **Burn Out**

*This is Piedmont's version of a Long Island Iced Tea.*

½ ounce Midnight Moon  
½ ounce gin  
½ ounce rum  
½ ounce tequila  
½ ounce triple sec  
Sour mix  
Splash of cola

Combine ingredients in a cocktail shaker with ice, shake, and serve in a tall glass.

### **Green Flag**

1½ ounces Midnight Moon  
Melon liqueur to taste  
Sour mix  
1 maraschino cherry (for garnish)

Combine ingredients, shake, and serve over ice garnished with a cherry.

### **Bloody Mary Midnight**



*This is Junior's personal favorite.*

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1½ ounces Midnight Moon  
3 ounces Bloody Mary mix  
Pinch each of salt and black pepper  
1 stick of celery (for garnish)

Stir and serve over ice with a pinch of salt and pepper, garnished with a stick of celery.

### **Junior's Apple Pie**

*This is an industrial-size recipe for a moonshine punch, which may be served cold or warm.*

2 gallons apple juice  
2 gallons apple cider  
2 cups dark brown sugar  
2 cups sugar  
1 can of cinnamon sticks  
Dashes of ground cinnamon  
2 750-milliliter bottles of Midnight Moon

Warm the juice, cider, sugars, and cinnamon sticks. Bring to a boil, stirring occasionally. Add a few dashes of cinnamon. Let cool, add Midnight Moon, and stir.

### **Ginger Johnson**

Orange slice  
2–3 pieces of candied ginger  
2 ounces Midnight Moon Apple Pie  
Splash of club soda

Muddle the orange slice and candied ginger in a shaker; fill shaker with ice, add Midnight Moon Apple Pie, and shake. Strain into ice-filled glass, and top with a splash of club soda.

### **Chocolate Cherry Moon**

1½ ounces Midnight Moon Cherry  
¾ ounce dark crème de cacao  
3–4 dashes of Bitter Truth Xocolatl Chocolate Molé bitters  
½ ounce half-and-half  
Dark chocolate shavings (for garnish)

In a shaker combine all ingredients with ice and shake vigorously for 15 to 20 seconds. Strain into glass and garnish with dark chocolate shavings.

THE  
**GOLDEN GOOSE**  
THAT LAID THE  
**“WORLD’S BEST VODKA”**



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# THE GOLDEN GOOSE THAT LAID THE “WORLD’S BEST VODKA”

“I wanted to be a billionaire,” Sidney Frank once told *Inc.* magazine. “I wanted to count the money while I was on this side of the ground.”

Frank was born in rural Montville, Connecticut, where his parents, immigrant Jews from Russia, raised chickens and vegetables on the family farm. According to legend, his mother sewed burlap bags together because they could not afford sheets. He attended Norwich Free Academy on a scholarship paid for by the town.

Frank was an entrepreneur from his youth. Montville is close to Mohegan Rock, one of the largest natural formations in the country and a popular tourist attraction. At the age of twelve, he constructed a ladder and charged sightseers a dime to climb to the top of the rock, where they could enjoy unobstructed views of Long Island Sound. From the beginning he understood that if he were going to succeed, he had to do it himself—through his wits, by the force of his personality, or some cunning combination of both. It was a classic Horatio Alger story, but with a difference: Alger’s heroes only wanted the comfort and security of a middle-class success.

He used the money from the Mohegan Rock venture and other odd jobs to enter Brown University, where he enrolled in the Class of 1942 (his grades were borderline, but his firm handshake convinced the admissions officer that he had the right stuff). His money ran out after one year, and he was forced to drop out, but he retained a special affection for Brown for the rest of his life. He also made some valuable connections: His roommate was Ed Sarnoff, son of David Sarnoff, the broadcasting legend who served for decades as president of the Radio Corporation of America and its television arm, NBC. When he left school, he applied for a job at Pratt and Whitney; the manager was an alumnus of Brown, and Frank got the job. He spent World War II testing airplane engines for the company in the South Pacific.

After the war Ed Sarnoff invited him to a party, where he met Lewis Rosenstiel, the chairman of Schenley Industries, which was then the largest distiller and beverage importer in the United States. Rosenstiel hired him to develop an alcohol-based motor fuel. The fuel never worked out, but Frank married Louise, Rosenstiel’s daughter.

“Marry a rich girl,” Frank said many years later, in advice to students that appeared in Brown University alumni magazine. “It’s easier to marry a million than to make a million.”

Frank’s big break with Schenley came in 1950, when Rosenstiel sent him to Scotland to investigate problems with a distillery the company had purchased. The plant was producing a million gallons of whiskey per year, compared with ten million annually from distilleries in the United States. Frank observed the operation and discovered that the stills were only running two days each week. He questioned the distiller, who told him there had been an old law that had restricted him to two days a week; the law had been repealed, but his superior had told him to keep doing what had always been done. Frank ordered the still to operate around the clock, and the production nearly quadrupled.

Sidney Frank rose to become president of Schenley, but he discovered that marrying into the family

was less stable than he had thought. He was fired, rehired, and fired again, and was finally forced out in 1970. “I butted heads with my father-in-law,” he said in the *Inc.* interview. It was his typically gentlemanly view of the situation, although when he left Schenley, Lewis Rosenstiel had him locked out of the liquor business.

In 1973, after Louise’s untimely death from a heart attack, he founded the Sidney Frank Importing Company. The shop consisted of Frank, his brother, and a secretary. “Some people are afraid to put their money into something,” he explained to Joseph Guinto in *American Way* magazine, “even if it’s something they believe in. But you can’t be afraid in life, because fear will stop you from achieving success.” Fear was not in his vocabulary, but even the most sympathetic observer would have concluded that he was in over his head. The major liquor companies completely dominated the field. They were multinational conglomerates with huge market capitalizations, and it was unclear how someone like Frank could compete.

Then along came Jägermeister, a German digestif distilled from fifty-six different herbs and spices which had first been introduced in 1935.

After he started SFIC, Frank liked to walk around Manhattan and observe what people were drinking in the bars. One night he was strolling through Yorkville, a German community on the Upper East Side, and saw immigrants drinking Jägermeister. The concoction was bitter, herbal, and sweet, but he was desperate to find something—anything—that had a base audience, so he sent a message to the president of Jägermeister. Frank flew to Germany and asked for the distribution rights; he was granted an exclusive from Maryland to Florida.

But it was not a promising situation. Even the Germans affectionately referred to the stuff as “living glue,” and many in this country thought it tasted like NyQuil cold medicine. “Imagine you took a black crayon and mixed it with some rubber, then added sugar,” wrote one American consumer. “Finally, mixed in some mouthwash flavored like dark purple cough syrup.”

Within one year, Frank had the sole rights on distributing Jägermeister throughout the country, but it looked like a hollow victory. The brand sold about 600 cases per year, SFIC was struggling, and Frank was forced to sell most of his personal assets to keep the company going.

Then, in the mid-1980s, Jägermeister suddenly developed a cult following at Louisiana State University. The reasons were unclear; it had nothing to do with advertising, since SFIC couldn’t afford any. The turning point was an article in the *Baton Rouge Advocate*, which quoted students describing the potion as “liquid Valium” and floating the theory that it was an aphrodisiac. Frank saw his opening and pounced.

He reproduced the story and plastered it all over the LSU campus. He posted copies in the men’s rooms of the local bars and put up Jägermeister billboards around the area. His most interesting innovation was the creation of the Jägerettes, beautiful young ladies in scant costumes hired to patrol the bars and dispense shots of the drink. Eventually, the Jägerette program swelled to more than 90 girls in thirty-five states, and there was a separate cadre of Jägerdudes for the country’s gay bars. Sales exploded and now exceed two million cases annually.

Frank found a way around the unpleasant taste of the drink. “At room temperature, Jägermeister tastes lousy,” he remarked in the *American Way* piece. “At five to eight degrees, it’s marvelous.” He purchased a company that designed systems to dispense chilled liqueurs and produced the Jägermeister Tap Machine, capable of cooling the beverage down to zero, suitable for either bars or home use. There are now 30,000 tap machines around the country. One was sitting on Frank’s kitchen counter when he died in 2006.

By the 1990s Sidney Frank was a legend in the industry. Even the big liquor companies had

acknowledge him as a marketing genius—easy enough to do, since he still wasn't threatening them on their own turf. His competitors didn't realize that he was preparing to restructure the basic principles by which spirits were sold in America.

According to a feature story by Seth Stevenson that ran in *New York* magazine in 2005, Frank summoned his top executives in 1996 and gave them their marching orders: "Go to France and come back with a vodka." Vodka from *France*? What about Poland or Russia? Or Sweden, the home of Absolut, which was the world's best-selling vodka at the time? Frank was adamant, and his minions eventually found a distiller in Cognac whose business was slow and was willing to switch over to making vodka.

The beauty of the situation was that even if Frank had given the liquor giants a blueprint of what he planned to do, they still wouldn't have viewed him as a threat. Most of the premium vodkas on the shelves were sold in the vicinity of \$15, which was the price of Absolut. As far as the beverage moguls were concerned, that was the end of the story. Frank's idea was to create a superpremium vodka and charge \$30 for it. His reasoning was that it had to be French, since French goods were considered by many consumers to be the finest on Earth. It had to look impressive, so he designed a frosted glass bottle and packed the spirit in wooden cases. It had to use French spring water filtered through Champagne limestone. It had to taste good, of course, but his overriding goal was to create a sense of luxury, a feeling of perceived value. The last piece of the puzzle was the name. According to Seth Stevenson, Frank's second in command was awakened at 5:20 one morning by a call from his exuberant boss, who exclaimed: "I figured out the name! It's Grey Goose!" In fact, Grey Goose had been the name of a German wine Frank had sold during the 1970s, a Liebfraumilch that had competed unsuccessfully with Blue Nun; he still owned the rights to the name, and remembered that it had resonated with consumers even as the wine fell flat.

Is Grey Goose actually "the best-tasting vodka in the world"? The Beverage Testing Institute in Chicago, an independent review organization, thought so in 1998, and that was good enough for Frank. "We took \$3 million, which was going to be our entire profit for a year, and we put it into advertising," he told *Inc.* "We made big, beautiful ads that listed Grey Goose as the best-tasting vodka in the world, and we indoctrinated the distributors and 20,000 bartenders, and when somebody would come in and say, 'What's your best-tasting vodka?,' they said Grey Goose." The importers of Belvedere and Chopin vodkas filed suit in 2004 to enjoin SFIC from using the slogan on the theory that BTI's test was outmoded and misleading, but by then the cow was long out of the barn.

The irony, of course, is that most vodka doesn't taste like anything at all—not surprising, given that it's virtually a neutral spirit. This is particularly true in recent years, when vodkas are triple- and quadruple-distilled before being filtered through charcoal. There are very slight differences in taste from one to another, but it's not anything the average person would probably notice after adding Cointreau and cranberry juice to make a cosmopolitan.

Why did Frank want to make vodka in the first place? Part of the allure was that vodka was manufactured, not crafted. "The nice thing about vodka," he explained to *Inc.*, "is that you make it today, you sell it tomorrow; even Jägermeister is aged for a year. So you don't have to put your money into buildings and machines and warehouses." It was one of the first things he had learned in the liquor business: Bricks and mortar cost money, and you were much better off as an importer with a low capital investment. If things went well, in the case of vodka, you simply asked the distiller to produce as much as you needed.

From the beginning, Grey Goose was marketed to those who had arrived at a platform of success in life, as well as to those who were still waiting to catch the train. Frank donated the product to an

charity that wanted to pour it at their bar, on the theory that people who attended charity events were the vodka's target audience. SFIC did everything humanly possible to forge a link in the mind of the consumer between their new product and the concepts of quality, refinement, and taste.

The release of Grey Goose coincided with the growing popularity of the cosmopolitan and the explosion of the cocktail culture in the 1990s, but the process of promoting the brand was also made easier by the nature of the era itself. America was at the apex of the dot-com boom, and people were accumulating staggering amounts of wealth. The huge payoff of the period was even trickling down to the middle class. Despite all the perceived value and luxurious overtones, though, you didn't need to be rich to indulge in Frank's vodka. All you needed was thirty bucks. "What can you buy that's the best in the world for \$30?" he said to *American Way* magazine. "You can't buy a car. You can't buy a diamond ring. You can buy Grey Goose, and it's the best in the world."

Grey Goose revolutionized the world of spirits. Before it came along, there was a small category of premium spirits, but most liquor was simply booze. If you were a drinker, it gave you bang for your buck, and you bought it as cheaply as possible. Grey Goose spawned an entire new world of superpremium spirits. There were more people willing to spend \$12 for a cocktail or \$30 for a bottle of vodka than ever before because they now viewed the experience differently: It had overtones of connoisseurship, an aura previously reserved for wine drinkers.

By 2004 Frank was selling 1.5 million cases annually. That was the year a Parisian banker told him that the chairman of the board of Bacardi was willing to give him \$2 billion for Grey Goose. The details of the deal are confidential, but he's widely believed to have raked in more than that. Most of it went directly to him, and Sidney Frank finally became a billionaire at the age of eighty-four.

One of the first things he did was share the wealth with his employees. If they had worked at SFIC for ten years, they received a bonus equivalent to two years' salary. His personal assistant got \$250,000. It also appears that they all had to sign confidentiality agreements, since none of them will talk to the media to this day.

Beyond that, Frank's generosity was astonishing. He gave Brown the largest single gift in its history—\$100 million—to endow scholarships for students who couldn't afford the school's hefty tuition (he had already given the university a \$20 million gift in 2003 to fund a new academic building). The first class of Sidney Frank Scholars graduated from Brown in 2009. He gave \$12 million to the Norwegian Free Academy and contributed liberally to the Robin Hood Foundation and the American Heart Association. At the time of his death, he was involved in setting up his own charitable foundation.

At the same time, Frank lived a lifestyle that would make Jay Gatsby seem like a pauper. In his final years, he owned six mansions and retained four personal chefs. His favorite game was golf. When his body became too frail to allow him to play it, he hired eight professional golfers and put them on his permanent payroll. Frank regularly chartered a 727 and flew the group around the world to play the best courses he could find. He followed them in a golf cart, coaching them on how to play the shot, telling them which clubs to hit and which angles he wanted them to use. His golf game became the video arcade of a billionaire, except that the figures were real. To spice up the competition and pad the salaries, he offered bonuses: \$100 for a birdie, \$500 for a double birdie, \$1,000 for an eagle, and an extra \$500 to the winner of each round.

Frank kept working. Even without Grey Goose, SFIC was a substantial enterprise, comprising spirits (Jacques Cardin brandy and Saint Vivant Armagnac, in addition to Jägermeister) and wines (Gekkeikan sake and plum wine). The agreement with Bacardi contained a non-compete clause that prevented him from creating a new vodka or gin for at least four years, so he introduced a superpremium tequila named Corazón. He designed a line of wines called Genofranco, as a tribute to



his late brother. He partnered with the rapper Lil Jon to market an energy drink called Crunk!!!. At the time of his death, he was actively involved in the upcoming launch of Michael Collins Irish Whiskey.

Most of this work was done in the bedroom that served as his home office. Frank received visitors while clad in his pajamas, smoking one of his trademark oversize cigars that were custom-made for him by Davidoff. It's an interesting way to spend the bulk of your workday, but Frank was not unique in this. Lyndon Johnson received underlings in his bedroom while wearing his pajamas, as did Winston Churchill, who was one of the historical figures Frank particularly admired (even though his cigars were bigger than Churchill's).

Associates of Frank said that when he attended a business meeting with distributors, he was always impeccably attired in a silk sports jacket and bow tie. Those people, however, were peers; they were potential equals. His employees were something else. Many people in the Johnson administration felt that LBJ conducted his bedroom appointments as a means of controlling his staffers, and we can only speculate on what was in Frank's mind. *If you don't like talking to me while I wear pajamas, you have three options: deal with it, find another job, or become an entrepreneur yourself and force your employees to meet with you while you wear your pajamas.*

We don't have a clear picture of what Frank was like to work for, since his employees aren't talking. Pajamas or no pajamas, we can assume from the fact that he was still on the job in his mid-eighties that he was driven to exceed and excel. He was probably still working when he died of heart failure on his private plane on January 10, 2006.

Was this classic Horatio Alger story only and always about money? It obviously started that way, but by the end of Frank's life, the money had become symbolic of something else. It was the means he used to translate his audacity and uniqueness into success. Before Jägermeister, when he founded SFIC, Frank was already wealthier than most people ever dream of becoming. He owned a townhouse on Ninetieth Street and Park Avenue in Manhattan, 500 acres of beachfront property in Antigua, and an art collection that included Henry Moore sculptures, Calder mobiles, and Impressionist masterpieces—assets that he sold to keep his company going. He risked everything he had on several occasions. "I went belly-up a few times," he said to *American Way*. "But you learn from that."

As he prepared to debut Crunk!!!, Frank made a curious comment. He was eyeing the US demand for energy drinks, which exceeded \$1 billion annually. "If I can get 10 percent of Red Bull's market," he told Matthew Miller of *Forbes* magazine, "I'll make a lot of money." This came from a man who had just been named number 164 on the *Forbes* list of the 400 richest Americans. "One of the things I've found is that it takes a lot of time to invest a billion dollars," he remarked in the *American Way* interview, and he had recently hired a financial adviser to "teach me how to spend money." When you grow up sleeping on burlap bags, the drive is certainly for money, but the money is emblematic of many things: the need to be different, to be distinctive, to be recognized as standing above the pack in many different ways.

"Genius is an expression of the obvious," he told *Forbes*. "I just did the obvious."

Perhaps so, but he inspired a generation of entrepreneurs that followed him, people like Joe Michalek of Midnight Moon and Rob Cooper of St-Germain, not to mention Patrón's John Paul DeJoria—creators of new spirits brands who were dazzled by Frank's success and emboldened by the depth of his chutzpah. He became the poster boy for what was possible in the industry, the shining example of what someone with drive and vision could accomplish. He gave them the template for how to fabricate something out of nothing.

Given the mixability of vodka, the number of cocktail recipes is both historically endless and multiplying every day. Many mixologists see the spirit as a blank canvas upon which they can paint their palate. In reproducing some of the classics, I'm mindful of how precise measurements and proportions can be in the world of cocktails; even with something as simple as a screwdriver, the success of the drink depends on the interplay between the correct amounts of different ingredients.

## Cosmopolitan

*There are numerous versions of how this cocktail first appeared on the scene. Toby Cecchini, who now owns a lounge in Manhattan's Meatpacking District, claims to have invented it as a staff drink when he was tending bar in San Francisco in the late 1980s. Around the same time, bartender Cheryl Cook supposedly created it in Miami. Yet another version credits it to San Francisco bar owner John Caine in the 1970s.*

*Regardless of how it got started, the cosmo was launched into hyperspace by Sex and the City, and remains one of the most popular cocktails served, particularly with the ladies. Cecchini's "original" recipe has been reported to contain Citron vodka. Here is an amalgam of more than one dozen versions:*

3 parts vodka  
 1 part Cointreau  
 1–2 parts cranberry juice  
 Splash of fresh lime juice  
 1 lemon slice or twist of lemon (for garnish)

Place all ingredients in a cocktail shaker with ice; shake well and strain into a large martini glass. Garnish with a lemon slice or twist of lemon.

**NOTE:** The variations are close to endless. Although most agree that Absolut Citron was the original vodka used, many people will substitute Stolichnaya Citros or Grey Goose Orange. Many versions use Rose's lime juice in place of the fresh lime juice, which would obviously make the drink sweeter; some bartenders rim the glass with sugar as well. According to spirits guru Gary Regan, Cheryl Cook's cosmo used Absolut Citron, Rose's, and triple sec. As for the triple sec, here's a quote from Richard Lambert, Cointreau brand ambassador: "Using top-shelf liquor in a cocktail and substituting triple sec for Cointreau is like asking your wife to go out in a beautiful gown and a pair of old slippers."

## Martini

*The vodka martini is a variation on the classic martini, which is made with gin (see chapter 4). It gained enormously in popularity in the United States during the last few decades of the twentieth century, when vodka was regarded as being "healthier" than gin (although it's hard to make a case for one distilled spirit being better for you than another—with a straight face, anyway). Here's the classic recipe.*

2½ ounces vodka  
 ½ ounce dry vermouth  
 1 olive or lemon peel (for garnish)

Pour ingredients into a cocktail shaker with ice. Shake or stir according to preference; serve in a chilled martini glass with an olive or lemon peel.

## Vodka Tonic

*Like the gin and tonic, this drink is the essence of simplicity, and there's no room for shortcuts. Use the best*

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