

Alabama eggnog: traditional taste of the season

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Tulane University creative director Melinda Viles shares her family recipe for eggnog, a much-acclaimed Christmas treat that goes back generations. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Most people who know me realize when one of my stories starts out, “Back in Dothan, Alabama ...” that they are in for a long tale. In the case of our family eggnog recipe, the same is true, but it instead starts out in Birmingham, Alabama.

It started before my grandparents were married. The Dubose brothers (my grandmother’s brothers) had moved to Birmingham from Texas. The Merrill brothers (my grandfather and his brothers) were there, in business with the Dubose brothers.

When my grandmother arrived in Birmingham on a train, one of the Merrill boys sent

my grandfather, the baby of the bunch, to pick her up from the train station because her brother was too busy. Six weeks later they eloped to Tuscaloosa, Alabama. And that is where the eggnog story begins.

The Merrill and Dubose families would get together over the holidays and my grandmother's brother, Dicke, and his wife, Alice, would make eggnog from scratch for everyone. My grandfather adopted the recipe, and when he and my grandmother moved to — wait for it — Dothan, he brought the recipe with him and added his own little twist.

He and my grandmother owned a restaurant, and the only day it was ever closed was on Christmas day. He would get up early every Christmas morning and begin making eggnog at home, so that everyone could come by there to visit and have a glass. My mother and aunt remember people coming by from morning until late at night. I have seen pictures of my grandparents together on Christmas with a house full of people, dressed to the nines, holding a silver cup of eggnog.

When my grandfather passed away, my uncle took over the eggnog duties. People still came by the house to enjoy a glass of B.M. Merrill's eggnog.

When I was small, I remember trying to sneak a taste of whatever the white frothy drink was that the adults were enjoying. I remember thinking, "Why would anyone want to drink this stuff?" (Must have been the bourbon that I had not quite acquired a taste for just yet.)

My grandmother hosted people at her house every year until she wasn't able to live there anymore, and either my uncle or my father would make the eggnog for her (and the hundreds who came by to visit). When I moved away, I brought a lot of home with me, but one of my favorite pieces of home is my grandfather's eggnog recipe.

My grandfather died before I was born, but I felt like I knew him through the stories his friends would tell me over a cup of eggnog. He loved life and loved sharing food and drink with his family and friends. That is why I enjoy making it so much. To me it represents family, friends, tradition and love. And I love sharing it with my friends and family here. It is a truly labor of love. With a little bourbon.



B.M. "Brother" Merrill's Eggnog

Serves 12

12 eggs, separated
1 quart whipping cream
12 tablespoons sugar
12 jiggers whiskey or bourbon

Beat egg yolks until light yellow. Add sugar, 1 tablespoon at a time. Add whiskey, 1 jigger at a time. Set to the side. Beat egg whites until stiff. Set aside. Beat whipping cream until fluffy. Fold egg yolk mixture into whipping cream. Then, fold in egg whites. Serve with a sprinkle of cinnamon and nutmeg on top. And a spoon!



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