

Poison:

a substance that is capable of causing the illness or death of a living organism

Imagine a time in which you were likely to fall ill from water contamination, a time in which alcohol was seen as the “healthful” option. This time is not ancient history, but rather the early days of the United States. In the year 1800, the average American over the age of fifteen consumed thirty-two gallons of hard cider and beer, seven gallons of distilled spirits, and one gallon of wine. Bitters were often used as a “health” tonic, and whiskey was used to prevent coughs and relieve pain. Children partook in these beverages as well, often consuming weaker versions. Alcohol was consumed during all meals: breakfast, lunch, dinner, and supper, and everywhere one would be: home, work, school, and taverns, as well as at special occasions such as weddings, funerals, and elections. Basically, alcohol was consumed everywhere and all the time.

If the beverage to be consumed was non-alcoholic, it was likely heated. Although germ theory was still not well understood, Early Americans knew that consuming boiled water in beverages such as coffee, tea, and hot chocolate was safe and “healthful.”

This exhibit takes a look at the beverages people drank in the early years of our nation. Knowing what science has discovered over the last 200 years about bacteria, germs, and alcohol, do you think you could survive living 200 years ago?



Pick Your Poison

Cider

Beer and Cider were common British drinks brought to the new world. While cider grew in popularity in America, beer fell out of favor due to the climate in the Northeast being ill-suited to grow barley. Cider became the most common beverage consumed in the Federal Period, for everybody from farmers, tradespeople, and middle class professionals, to indentured servants and slaves. In the year 1800, Americans over the age of 15 consumed 32 gallons of cider per capita. It was consumed throughout the day, including breakfast, and in both taverns and at home. All ages drank cider, including children, who often consumed *ciderkin*, a weaker cider with a lower alcoholic content, made from the second pressing of apples.

To produce apple cider, the apples are first ground into a pulp. This pulp is then pressed to release the liquid. The liquid is barreled, and the fermentation process begins, using the natural yeast that is in the liquid, originating on the apples' skins. The fermentation process is complete within a few weeks, and the cider is ready for consumption.

Although cider and beer brewing is often viewed as a masculine activity today, in early America, brewing was one of the many tasks that women performed to prepare food and drink for their families. In wealthier families, the brewing was often performed by indentured servants or slaves.

The decline of cider can be linked to three sources. First, the large influx of German and Eastern European immigrants in the 19th century brought a population that greatly preferred beer to cider. Second, as the settlers began to travel west, they found the land of the Midwest to be better suited to growing barley to make beer. Finally, the temperance movement, and later prohibition, led farmers to start growing other crops on the land once used for their apple orchards. Although cider accounts for less than 1% of alcoholic beverages consumed today, it is once again gaining popularity and consumption is growing at the highest rate compared to all other alcoholic drinks.



Coffee, tea, & chocolate

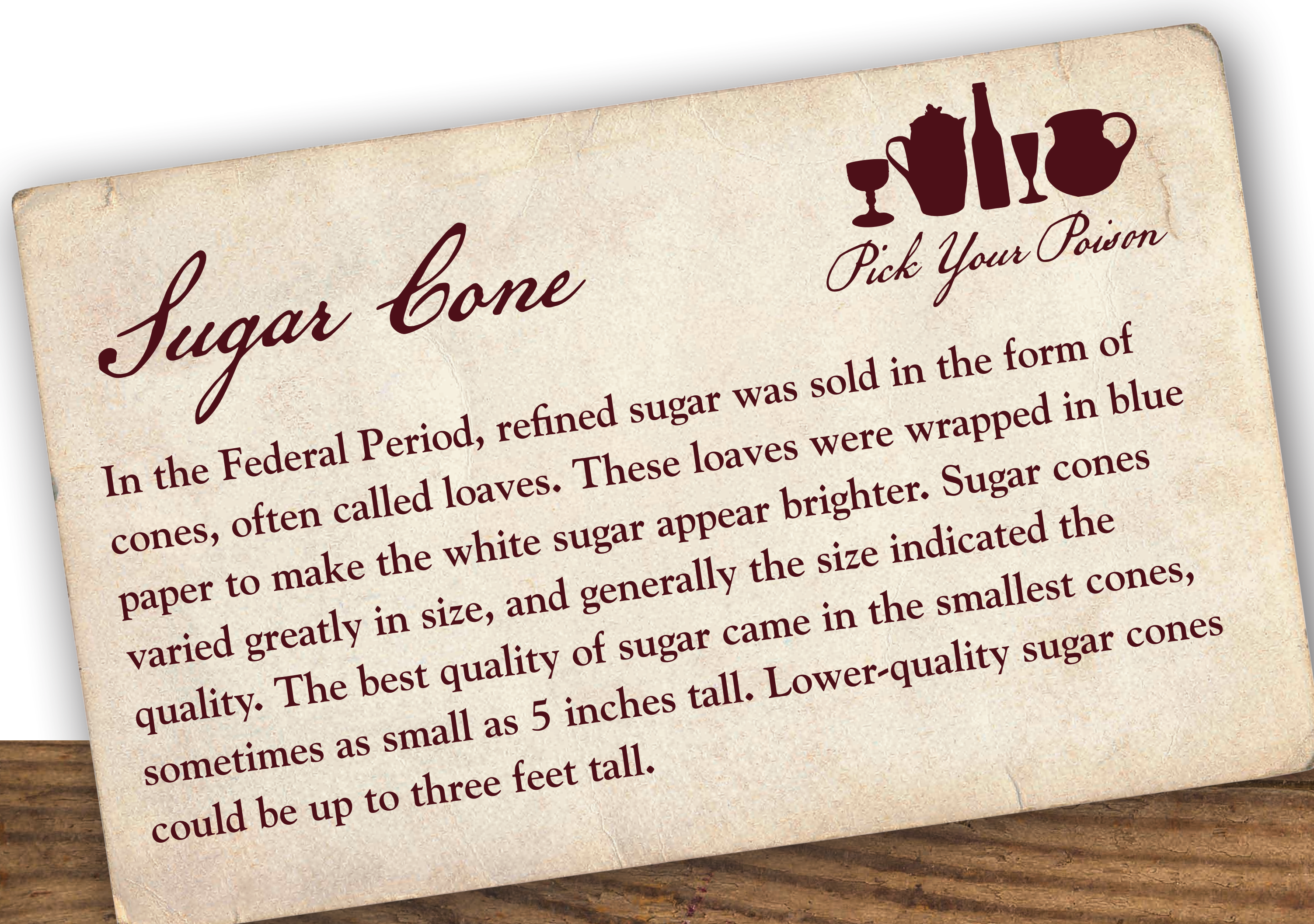
Coffee, tea, and chocolate were introduced to England and its colonies in North America in the 1600s. By the beginning of the 1800s, these beverages were accessible to the middle class and the upper class. People drank the beverages warm, and due to their inherent bitterness, were often sweetened using sugar and milk.

Tea originated in Asia, and became very popular in England. During and after the American Revolution, some Americans viewed tea drinking as unpatriotic, due to tea's association with the English. Despite this, many Americans still continued to drink tea, and other Americans created tea substitutes using herbs and spices such as sassafras, spicewood, mint, and strawberry or blackberry leaves. Among Americans who continued to drink tea, the most popular variety was called Bohea, a black tea. Higher quality black teas included Congo and Pekoe. Others drank Hyson, the most common variety of green tea. The upper class often treated tea drinking as an elaborate after dinner ritual. For most Americans, however, tea was just a drink. By the 1830s, tea was so common that it had become the name for the early evening meal.

Many Americans who boycotted tea began drinking coffee instead. Coffee originated in Africa, and was introduced to Europe by Middle Eastern cultures.

The coffee plant thrives in tropical climates, and much of the coffee imported to the United States was grown in the West Indies. Unlike today, most coffee in the Federal Period was sold raw, to be roasted and ground after purchase and immediately before serving. The earliest consumption of coffee in the new world took place in coffeehouses, which also functioned as centers of commerce and trade. By 1800, many of these commercial functions became their own professional industries, and the coffeehouse instead became associated with culture and socialization.

Although chocolate is often viewed as a food today, it was primarily a beverage in early America. Cocoa beans are native to Central America, South America, and parts of Mexico. The Aztecs introduced chocolate beverages to the Spanish colonizers, who then brought it back to Europe. During the Federal Period, chocolate was available in unsweetened blocks, similar to unsweetened baking chocolate today. These chocolate blocks would be grated and mixed into hot water, milk, red wine, or brandy, along with sugar to sweeten. Some recipes also included spices and flavorings such as cinnamon, nutmeg, or chili peppers. The ingredients were combined in a chocolate pot that included a molinillo, or wooden whisk, in the center. The drink would be mixed and frothed with this whisk, and finally served.



Wine

*“The wine was so bad I drank
but three glasses.”*

– Charles J. Nourse, 1812

Wine is a beverage made from fermented grapes. The earliest known evidence of wine is from 8000 years ago in the Caucasus region. The tradition of winemaking was brought to the new world by European colonists. The North American continent was lush with grapevines, and the English hoped that grapes and wine from the colonies would become a new cash crop. Unfortunately, the native grapes made sour and musky wine, and the grape vines imported from Europe failed to thrive.

In the beginning of the Federal Period, wine was still not made on a large scale in the United States. Although the majority of Americans primarily consumed cheaper beverages such as cider and whiskey, the wealthy greatly preferred wine. Thomas Jefferson, a known wine connoisseur, consumed at least three glasses per day, which equals roughly 42 gallons in one year, or almost 220 modern bottles of wine. The majority of the wine consumed by early Americans was imported from Europe, however, some wine was made in the United States out of other fruit such as cherries,

blackberries, and persimmons. These fruit wines were generally only consumed by the wealthy, due to the large amount of sugar needed for their creation. The most common variety of wine consumed in the early United States was Madeira, which is a fortified wine from Portugal. Fortified wines such as Madeira, Sack, and Port tended to fare better in the journey across the ocean due to the higher percentage of alcohol acting as a preservative. Some upper class Americans preferred the lighter wines of France and Italy, however these wines were expensive, difficult to transport, and rarely imported.

Near the end of the Federal Period, several varieties of wine made in the US gained popularity. Many of these varieties came from hybrid grapes, which combined species native to the Americas with European grapes. These hybrids resulted in wine with excellent flavor and resistance to native pests and disease.

Madeira

Many wines imported from Europe spoiled before they ever reached the United States, however, the several features of the unique character of Madeira allowed it to thrive on the long journey. First, the wine is fortified, which means brandy is added to the wine, acting as a preservative to prevent spoilage. Second, the wine gains additional flavor from heat, and the wine is exposed to plenty of heat on the journey. Finally, unlike many French wines, which were bottled prior to shipping, Madeira was shipped in casks that were far less likely to break. Early Americans appreciated the sweet taste of Madeira, and also appreciated that the wine did not need special storage, such as a wine cellar.



Water

Water was not often consumed by early Americans. In and near cities, water sources were tainted with sewage and refuse. Even in rural areas with safe wells and springs, people often mistrusted water due to its reputation for spreading disease. Early Americans often consumed boiled water in their tea, coffee, and chocolate, and combined water with alcohol such as distilled spirits or wine. Early Americans knew that these beverages did not make them ill, although they did not understand why. Germ theory was not well understood until the late 19th century, and therefore they did not know that the heat and alcohol killed the bacteria in the water.

*“Water is not wholesome,
sole by itself, for an
Englishman.”*

*– Andrew Borde,
Physician, 1542*





Early American Engraving Depicting Social Issues, Circa 1850's

Slavery

Alcohol was sometimes used as a weapon of control over slaves. Plantation owners would give slaves a few days of time off around Christmas, and would encourage their slaves to drink to excess. This would cause them to be too intoxicated to run away. Abolitionist leader and writer Frederick Douglass wrote about his experiences as a slave, explaining that slaves would come to equate their small amount of freedom during the holidays with the pains and sickness of overindulgence. Douglass stated, “We staggered up from the filth of our wallowing, took a long breath, and marched to the field – feeling, upon the whole, rather glad to go, from what our master had deceived us into a belief was freedom, back to the arms of slavery.”



Distilled Spirits

Distilled spirits are strong alcoholic beverages, such as whiskey and rum, which are created through a heating process called distillation. This process heats ingredients such as ground barley or corn, called a ‘mash,’ to create vapor, and then condenses this vapor back into a liquid. The end product is a liquid with a high alcohol content and increased purity. In the year 1800, Americans consumed 7 gallons of distilled spirits per capita, which would fill almost 600 modern day shot glasses. The most common distilled spirits during the Federal period were Rum, Whiskey, and Brandy.

Rum is made from fermented molasses, a by-product of the sugarcane industry. During the period, rum was manufactured both in the West Indies near the sugarcane plantations and from imported molasses in the Northeast US. It was rarely consumed on its own, and was often included in mixed drinks and punches. Rum is known for its connection to the slave trade, which is often referred to as a “triangular trade,” because it included three legs. The first leg brought slaves from Africa to the Americas, the second brought sugar and molasses to the Northeast, and the third brought rum and other goods to Africa.

Brandy is produced by distilling wine. Due to the difficulty of growing grapes in the United States during the period, most brandy was imported from Europe. Similarly to wine, brandy was also made in the early United States out of fruit grown nearby, such as apples, pears, peaches, plums, and cherries. Known for its sweet taste, brandy was a common ingredient in desserts and dessert drinks.

Whiskey, which is made from grain mash, enabled farmers to turn perishable crops into easily storable spirits for later sale and consumption. Settlers from Ireland and Scotland brought whiskey to the new world. Bourbon, which contains at least 51% corn mash, was adapted from these recipes to make use of the bountiful availability of corn in the new world. In the year 1800, common whiskey cost roughly 50 cents per gallon, which is equal to about \$10 today.

Distilled spirits were often combined with water and herbs to create bitters. These combinations were viewed as health tonics, and taken daily by all ages. These tonics evolved into the bitters that we know today, which are used as digestifs and to flavor cocktails.

“The benefits arising from the moderate use of strong liquor have been experienced in all armies and are not to be disputed.”

– George Washington, 1777



Punch

While some early Americans drank distilled spirits plain or mixed only with water, many found the taste harsh and preferred to consume punch. The word ‘punch’ is believed to come from the Hindu word “panch,” meaning five, which refers to the five traditional ingredients in punch: sugar, citrus, spirits, water, and spices. Punch was first imbibed by European sailors visiting South Asia in the 1600s, who brought the idea back to Europe and eventually the New World. Punch became a status symbol of the wealthy that combined expensive ingredients from around the world served in lavish bowls. However, average people continued to make and consume punch using whatever ingredients were available.

*“What harm in drinking
can there be,
Since punch and life
so well agree?”*

*– Thomas Blacklock,
Poet, 1788*

