

In GSL37, I introduced a little experiment my wife and I had decided to undertake—trying to recreate an authentic 18th or early 19th century recipe for a ginger wine I had found among the ephemera in the archives of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Perth Amboy, New Jersey. I was looking for material related to Thomas Mundy Peterson, the first African-American in the U.S. to vote under the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870, when I came across the handwritten manuscript. It was attributed to Andrew Bell (1759-1843), a fascinating figure in the city's history both during and after the American Revolution. Click [here](#) to read all about Bell and his ginger wine in the first installment.

Resurrecting Andrew Bell's Ginger Wine

Part 2

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I had already bought a liter-size oak cask from a home-brewing supply company along with brewer's yeast and Irish moss—as a vegetarian substitute for the isinglass clarifier derived from fish bladders. A day or two before, we bought the eggs, lemon, and ginger from the supermarket.

Mr. Bell's recipe made 10 gallons—obviously not something we were able to do in our condo! So everything was converted down to a one gallon size.

Since that would make more than a liter, we also made some in a sealed plastic container as a control against what was in the wood barrel.



Pouring a gallon of water into the pot.

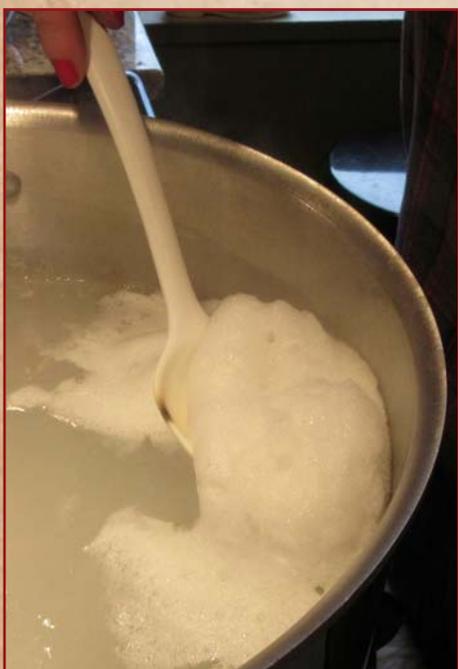


Adding one and a quarter cups of sugar.



Beating the whites of one egg.

The first step was adding 1.25 cups of sugar to a gallon of water. To this was added the well-beaten whites of one egg. This was brought to a rolling boil while periodically skimming off the white foamy film that gathered on the surface. While this was coming to a boil, we peeled and bruised 2 ounces of white ginger which was added to the pot for twenty minutes. While that was boiling, we prepped one lemon by removing the rind and pips and finely-slicing it into small bits. According to Mr. Bell, only the peeled rind was to be put into a pan and the boiled water, sugar, egg white, and ginger poured on top of the peels. While waiting for it to cool, the bits of lemon, free of rind and pips, were to be put into the cask. Since the bung-hole in the liter cask is small, we had to chop it fine in order to fit through it. Since it will likely be impossible to remove this, the cask will probably need to be a write-off.



Skimming the foam.



Adding 2 ounces ginger.



Cooling after being poured over the lemon peels.



Adding the lemon to the cask.



Pouring the liquid.



Adding the barm (yeast).

After the water, sugar, egg white, ginger, and lemon peel had adequately cooled, it was poured into the cask using a funnel. The remainder (along with the extra lemon) was also poured into the plastic container. Lastly was added a half-teaspoon of "barm"—brewer's yeast—and an eighth-ounce of Irish moss. Mr. Bell admonished not to stir it and that the cask would be ready for closing up the next day.

The cask was left open, sitting on a paper towel against leakage for 24 hours. It was soon obvious the fermentation process had begun in earnest. Thick yeasty-smelling ooze would form up through the hole, pushed by the pressure within. This was why Mr. Bell advised it be left open, to permit the pressure to dissipate before attempting to seal it. The next day, I snugged the plug into the hole with a rubber mallet. The cask leaked for the first couple of days, though the liquid lost was minimal. This may have



Adding the Irish moss.



The mixture in the plastic container.



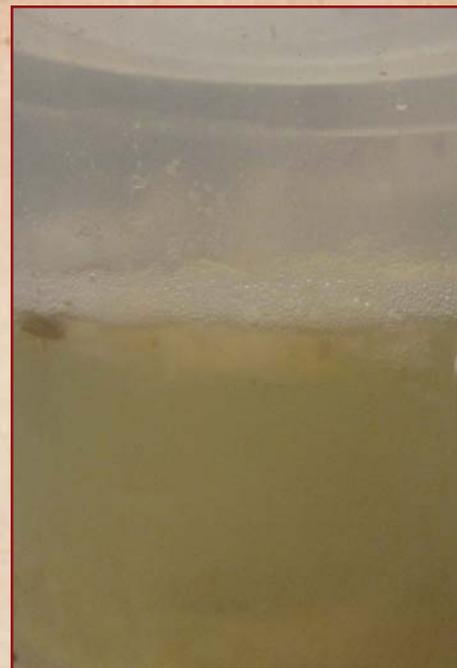
Fermenting ooze pushed out by pressure was pushed back in.



The cask (placed into a pot) leaked at first but self-sealed.



The mixture in the plastic showed signs of fermentation.



Side view of the concoction fermenting away!

been due to my having not performed the barrel prep correctly. I had followed the instructions that came with it to fill it with water and allow it to sit so the staves would swell enough to seal the joints. Nevertheless, it evidently self-sealed with the sticky fermenting liquid plugging the holes.

Mr. Bell asserted it would be ready for bottling "in a fortnight or three weeks as you like it for sweetness." It will be three weeks after this issue is released, but we have repurposed some cleaned bottles, some for the results from the cask and for the plastic container. The latter serves three purposes. The first is simply that we don't waste the difference in ingredients between a gallon and a liter. Another is that since it is translucent, we can observe what's happening as an analogy for what might be happening in the cask. (We placed the plastic container inside a paper bag to keep it dark in case light exposure affects the chemistry.) Thirdly, since the inclusion of the lemon will likely make reusing the cask difficult, if we want to make it again, it would be more convenient—and less expensive—to not have to buy a new cask each time! Beer brewers often use plastic pails, though the wood of the barrel is important to the flavor of wines and liquors.

Once bottled, it will have to wait until we return from some holiday travels, but we are going to invite some friends for the first tasting. We have no idea what this will taste like! Have we done it right? Did converting the ingredient portions down change it? Perhaps we will want to tweak it if we find it worth making again. There are other modern recipes for "ginger wine," but they mostly call for using wine as the base spirit. Given yeast is used for the fermentation, what we have here is maybe better-described as a beer.

Nevertheless, this is likely the first time in perhaps as much as 175 years that anyone has tasted Andrew Bell's Ginger Wine!



The story of this project is also being published on "Eating New Jersey," a blog run by NJ author and food critic, Greg Caggiano.

Check it out!
<https://eatingnewjersey.net/>