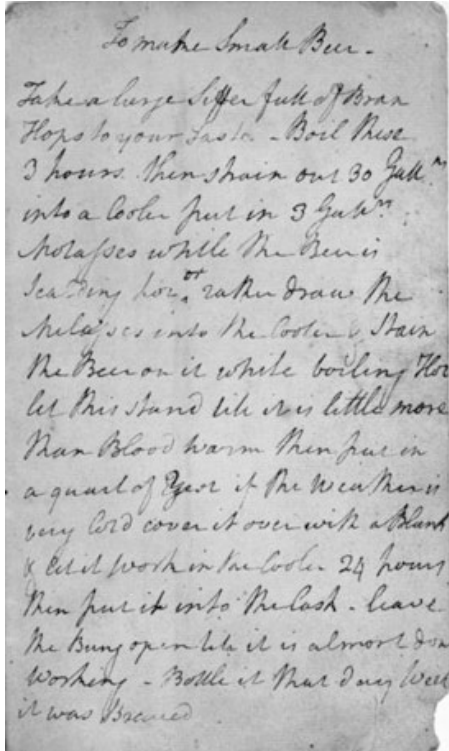


Beer History: Swapping Homebrew Recipes with the Founding Fathers

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There has been a trend in craft brewing lately to include a wide variety of 'non-traditional' ingredients—hot peppers, chocolate, coffee, juniper and rosehips are just a few that can be found in a number of popular brews. But residents of colonial America were not shy about brewing with additions we might find peculiar today. Potato beer was quite popular, with recipes for this '[excellent beverage](#)' published in a number of sources. Potatoes continued to be a common addition to the brewing process in the nineteenth century; in 1832, Lydia Maria Francis Child suggested that they made beer, '[a good family drink](#)', more '[spirited](#)'. Molasses, ginger, spruce, treacle, and even [peas](#) were not unusual to find in brewing recipes of the era.

Like most householders of their age, the Founding Fathers made beer at home (or, more typically, their wives, servants, and slaves did the hard work of actually brewing) and given their fame (and tendency to keep good records), we are lucky enough to have their recipes. George Washington famously [boycotted his beloved imported British porters](#) just before war broke out—he lent his support to a bill that called for the avoidance of British beer, tea and other cornerstones of daily life. (The bill in question was crafted by one Samuel Adams). [The New York Public Library](#) is the keeper of Washington's personal formula for 'small beer'—an everyday drink that might be consumed by children, servants and the infirm. If brewed strictly to his methods, this beer would clock in around the 11% mark; the addition of ample amounts of molasses makes for a heady beverage.

Thomas Jefferson originally left the brewing to his wife, Martha—in the early 1770s she was managing the production of [15 gallons](#) of small beer every two weeks or so. Brewing at Monticello fell somewhat off Jefferson's radar for a time, but he seemed to enjoy a renewed interest in the early part of the new nineteenth century; he began purchasing books on brewing, and mentioned it more frequently in his correspondence.

Jefferson engaged [Joseph Miller](#), an English brewer unable to return to his native country thanks to the outbreak of the War of 1812, to improve Monticello's beers. Miller taught the enslaved [Peter Hemings](#) (brother of Sally, and himself an accomplished cook) his skills. It is perhaps somewhat surprising that Jefferson, a committed

chronicler of just about everything else, did not leave a full recipe for Monticello's beers, but it is possible to tease out his ingredients and methods [through his papers](#) (including the design of his start-of-the-art brewhouse); we know he never minded using corn for his malt.

Other Founding Fathers also had a hand in beer—James Madison proposed founding a national brewery and creating a Secretary of Beer, but Congress did not support his grand plans. Benjamin Franklin [felt](#) that his fellow printers imbibed a little too freely:

every day a Pint before Breakfast, a Pint at Breakfast with his Bread and Cheese; a Pint between Breakfast and Dinner; a Pint at Dinner; a Pint in the afternoon about Six O'Clock, and another when he had done his Day's-Work. I thought it a detestable Custom. But it was necessary, he suppos'd, to drink strong Beer that he might be strong to Labour. I endeavour'd to convince him that the Bodily Strength afforded by Beer could only be in Proportion to the Grain or Flour of the Barley dissolved in the Water of which it was made.

But Franklin kept a recipe around for making spruce beer. Like Washington's recipe, it called for [large amounts of molasses or sugar](#). He used **essence of spruce** rather than fresh sprigs, though other contemporary recipes, mainly from New England, used the plant directly. Other brewers further differentiated between white spruce beer, made with sugar, and brown spruce beer, using molasses; it seems Franklin enjoyed both.

These days, recreations of historic beers are typically adjusted a bit for the modern palate—and for a population that is not accustomed to drinking alcohol all day, every day. **Yards Brewing Company's** Ales of the Revolution series ([reviewed here](#)) includes George Washington's Tavern Porter, Poor Richard's Tavern Spruce Ale, and Thomas Jefferson's Tavern Ale. Each beer is based on [thorough research](#), although there are certain refinements that ensure each one is pleasing to drinkers today—brewer Tom Kehoe has [noted the difficulty](#) of using some of the historic ingredients on a commercial scale. Modern brewing techniques also ensure consistency from batch to batch, something early American drinkers could rarely hope to enjoy.

Starr Hill has also used Monticello's records to create [Monticello Reserve Ale](#), available on-site at Jefferson's home. Their brewer, Levi Duncan, intends to brew an entirely historically accurate (and, in all likelihood, [quite sour](#)) version for testing purposes at some point in the future.

If you're seeking a more exact replica of early American beers, [head to Colonial Williamsburg](#); their [Historic Foodways](#) program lets visitors watch the eighteenth century brewing process [in person](#)—and occasionally there is some sampling.

George Washington's small beer is [soon to be recreated](#) by Coney Island Brewing Company for a private reception at the New York Public Library; the public will have a chance to taste it at Rattle N Hum on May 18th.

But there's still a large, untapped market out there for potato beer, don't you think?