



Episode 6, 2012: Bootlegger's Notebook

Kevin: I'm Kevin O'Connell. When my dad passed away, I inherited a box of beautiful leather-bound books that belonged to my great-grand-uncle Mike. I remember Uncle Mike from when I was young. And he was a great guy. When I was going through the books, in the box, inside one of the covers I found this book. I started reading it and what it appeared to be was manufacturing recipes for a fairly substantial bootlegging operation.

So I asked the people of my father's generation. And their answer was, "What? What are you talking about?"

So what I'd really like to know is, does this book contain the secrets to a large-scale bootlegging operation during Prohibition?

Elyse: I'm Elyse Luray. Who doesn't love a good cocktail?

Booze. Prohibition. Illegal bootleggers: this is my kind of story.

I'm excited to meet Kevin and see his recipe book. Why do you think this book is so unusual?

Kevin: It's got recipes for making spirits or booze in significant quantities. Look at this--30 gallons, 40 gallons, 30 gallons, 30 gallons.

Elyse: A lot of booze.

Kevin says the notebook reads like a manual for a complete illegal operation.

Kevin: This book contains the plan all the way down to such things as the glue for the labels.

Elyse: Was he in the liquor business?

Kevin: Oh, no, he wasn't in the liquor business. He was in the construction business. He owned a construction company with his brother Tom. And Tom and he were, I was gonna say "thick as thieves"- were very tight and they were in business together. And I think they may have been, uh, dabbling in side businesses.

Elyse: And where is Uncle Mike from? Did he live in New York?

Kevin: He did. He grew up on the Lower West Side on Bethune Street.

Elyse: And do you have anything else for me to go with?

Kevin: I've got some papers of Mike's and his family's here that, I don't know if they'll help you or not, but you're welcome to them.

Elyse: All right, Kevin. I have all your stuff. I'm gonna go look into this. So just remember, some skeletons might come out of that closet.

Kevin: Okay with me.

Elyse: All right, I'll get back to you.

On January 16, 1920, one year after the states ratified the 18th Amendment, the nation officially went dry.

But the law did little to stop America's thirst for booze. In New York City, alone, there were more than 30,000 speakeasies. Did uncle mike run one of them?

The book's in pretty good condition. But it's still a little fragile. The book itself looks like a book that you would see around the turn of the 20th century, up to about 1920, 1930 they carried books like this. Then the paper changes. So the paper looks period. Every recipe is for big quantities. It's consistent throughout this book.

Some of the recipes are for drinks I have never heard of—Holland gin, old tom gin, and others are a little confusing.

Elyse: The title of the recipe is "Rye or Bourbon flavor". And then the end of the recipe it says, makes a good rye or bourbon. So like which one is it? Are you making a rye or bourbon or you making a flavor? You know there's a lot of ingredients here that I don't recognize. It says "NE rum". I've never heard of that. Hold on a second.

This says "Ape" or maybe "Apl" 90." That could be april 90.

And now here's another one, they're only on a couple of pages.

It's in the column that shows quantities.

They could be the dates that these recipes were made up.

The other documents don't offer any clues: a will, an envelope, and a letter written by mike's brother tom. The letter is dated during prohibition, but it's certainly nothing criminal.

Elyse: I am going to scan this book, because I don't wanna carry it around it's just -- it's in really good condition. I don't wanna jeopardize it at all.

First law of detective work: visit the scene of the crime.

Meaghan Dorman, head bartender at Raines law room, agrees to take a look at the book and whip up one of uncle mike's possible bootlegger concoctions.

Here is the book that I told you about. It says here on one of these recipes, "rye or bourbon flavor."

Meaghan: To me it looks like someone was trying to make rye or bourbon without having any access to a distillery. This looks like something you could do in your basement.

Elyse: That makes sense to me that during prohibition they would be doing that, right?

Meaghan: People were definitely just trying to fill that demand for alcohol and doing it much cheaper and much quicker. Let's see if it tastes like a good rye.

So, let's see, let's scale this down a little bit cause we're not gonna drink 44 gallons.

Elyse: Right

The recipe starts with cooks malt and prune juice. And then the Angelica.

Meaghan: We've got an extract here.

Elyse: NE Rum, what does that mean?

Meaghan: That would most likely be the New England rum which in the 1800s um actually Americans made quite a bit of their own rum. We don't have a New England rum like they would have had but I picked a pretty high proof and funky Jamaican rum which I think you can smell it here.

Elyse: Wow.

Meaghan: It's a lot like they would have had.

Elyse: But, Meagan explains the main ingredient is neutral grain spirits. A bootlegger's favorite, it's also known as moonshine.

Meaghan: Which is a spirit that's really high proof. Doesn't really have any specific flavor to it.

Elyse: Is it basically a grain alcohol?

Meaghan: Yes. Okay, ready to have a taste?

Elyse: I'm not sure, I guess so. Now that I know what's in it I'm even more scared.

Meaghan: Okay. Cheers.

Elyse: Cheers. Oh, migawd! Woo!

Meaghan: Woo.

Elyse: Wow! That's awful! That's awful. (coughs)

Meaghan: Although if you can get past the heat of this alcohol ...It does have some spice. You know like a rye whiskey would.

Elyse: Well I guess during prohibition and boot legging uh, they weren't really picky. Do you think that during prohibition they would be making recipes like this?

Meaghan: I do.

Elyse: I mean, were cocktails big during prohibition?

Meaghan: Not really during prohibition. It's actually -- there's a whole movement before that called temperance which led up to prohibition. And that really led to a lot of small laws that outlawed drinking and made states dry. So it was really like 1860 to 1890 that cocktails were really big in the United States.

Elyse: why would uncle mike have been mixing up gallons of turn of the century cocktails? Is that what the "April 90" was referring to? What is this book? David Wondrich is the drinks correspondent for esquire magazine, and author of *imbibe* and *punch*. We're meeting at the New York distilling company in Brooklyn.

Okay. So, I figured this would be the perfect place for us to meet, right?

David: I feel right at home here, for some reason. I don't know.

Elyse: You feel at home, I feel at home. It's a good place. All right. Well, I'm excited for you to see this book...

David: Let's have a look. I don't see any distilling going on in here. They're not, , taking , fermented stuff like wine or beer, and running it through something like this to extract the alcohol from it in the first place. So, this is what we call "compounding".

Elyse: And what is compounding?

David: Compounding is when you take, uh, grain alcohol -- you know, very high proof, very pure, very cheap -- and, uh, add flavors to it, and dilute it, and water it, and stretch it out, and kind of fake your own liquors.

Elyse: Would somebody like a bootlegger be interested in compounding?

David says compounding was used in the 1920s, but often with cruder recipes.

David: This seems a little elaborate to me. The bootleggers weren't really interested in using 17 ingredients like some of these recipes. They just wanted it quick and dirty. You see quite a bit of it in the 19th century---1890, 1891, this stuff was kind of at its peak.

Elyse: Oh, well, you know, it's interesting that you say that. Because if you look on some of these pages, I found some dates here. There's April '90...there's May '90.

David: Oh, there you go, yeah.

Elyse: So, what do you think this is?

David thinks the book is from a different era of alcoholic lawlessness, decades before prohibition.

David: New York in the 1890s was a wide open town.

Elyse: While in the rest of the country organizations like the women's Christian temperance union worked tirelessly to sober up the masses,

In New York, thirsty citizens could fill their cups at 8,000 crowded saloons. A true sin city, New York was a center of prostitution, gambling and rampant alcoholism.

David: For a while there, we had Teddy Roosevelt as police commissioner, and he tried to shut everything down and make people behave, but that didn't last very long. It was, uh, the town where you could drink at all hours. If you had, uh, an urban saloon of maybe not the

highest, uh, caliber, uh, you could get some cheap old “bourbon”, in quotes, that you know never really saw the inside of a Kentucky warehouse,

Elyse: Did people notice the difference between it?

David: Yeah, they’d use the word “paison” or “poison” sometimes, uh, you know, if it was badly compounded. I mean, the things they put into this stuff

Elyse: At its worst – ingredients such as wood alcohol sometimes killed the unlucky drinker. More often – the compounded booze left a bad taste and a worse headache.

David: It would be hot pepper extract to make it taste like whiskey, to give it a little bite. Sulfuric acid, if you were really crazy.

Elyse: And was it regulated? I mean, did you have to tell your clients...?

David: Oh, hell no. It was always buyer beware, you know? This was – The 19th century, America was not heavily regulated. In 1906 the pure food and drug act was passed, which was a major piece of progressive legislation saying it has to be in the bottle what it says on the label.

Elyse: Ah, All right -- Well, if it's not a bootlegger that owned this book, who would?

David: My best guess is that this is a compounding book that was owned by a saloon keeper or a liquor store owner from the turn of the 20th century. In the nice parts, there were expensive saloons where you wouldn't get this kind of thing, And then there were the -- the dock areas, the Lower West Side, the Lower East Side, uh, full of immigrants and where every bar would have been serving exactly this.

Elyse: If Uncle Mike did own this book he had to have worked in a bar or in the liquor business.

Kevin said his uncle mike had worked in construction. But maybe he'd been a rough and tumble bartender, years before he became the family's favorite uncle?

Elyse: I think what I'm gonna do is go online and start with the census records and see if I can find any information about his occupation.

Mike was born in 1873. So I'm going to look at the 1900 and 1910 census, when he would have been of working age. Here he is – born in Ireland. Living on the lower west side...just the place where David mentioned a less than savory saloon might be. Here's the rest of the family... his brother tom...

Elyse: Ah, listen to this.

Elyse: Okay Kevin so I brought you here to Bassoon Street because why?

Kevin: This is where Uncle Mike grew up.

Elyse: This is where Uncle Mike and all his family grew up right here in this beautiful house.

First, I want Kevin to taste the liquor we made from the book.

Kevin: And it's after noon.

Elyse: It's a time for cocktails somewhere right? Kevin sniffs liquor.

Kevin: Whoa!

Elyse: Go ahead, take a sip.

Kevin: Who made this!?

Elyse: I did.

Kevin: Because I can't offend all your hard work, I'll finish it.

Elyse: Okay. It's better than me.

Now that I've loosened Kevin up, I'm ready to tell him what I've found out.

What you have here is a compound book. And what this book is is a book that kinda teaches you how to stretch alcohol.

I tell Kevin that his uncle tom was not an illicit bootlegger – in fact, the book is from thirty years earlier.

Kevin: Incredible.

Elyse: But it was still an era of alcoholic lawlessness.

Kevin: Is it Mike's book?

Elyse: Well you had mentioned that Uncle Mike was very close with Uncle Tom.

Elyse: Ah, let's see what it says for Thomas. Here he is, living with Uncle Mike. He was an accountant in the liquor business. So this book probably belonged to Uncle Thomas, not Uncle Mike.

I explain that I was able to compare the handwriting in the book to the letter he had given me written by tom.

Elyse: It's a direct match, I can tell you by looking at handwriting---

Kevin: ----it's his hand?

Elyse: You had the wrong uncle!

Kevin: Yeah.

Elyse: So it turns out that no one was a bootlegger. He was actually an accountant.

Kevin: That's a relief in some sense and a let-down in another. Um I'm really happy to understand what it is. Let's go to a bar and get some real bourbon.