

Budding Boilo Baron Peddles Pa. Holiday Cocktail

MICHAEL RUBINKAM, Associated Press

RINGTOWN, Pa. (AP) — A peculiar sort of alchemy takes place each Christmas season in Pennsylvania coal country, where skilled practitioners huddle over big pots of steaming liquid, coaxing a potent but soothing elixir from secret recipes handed down through the generations.

This alcoholic yuletide cocktail, called boilo, has been a household staple for more than a century, sipped warm or hot to celebrate the holidays and ward off winter's chill. Boilo parties are in full swing right now as coal-region kitchens fill with the fragrant, intoxicating aroma of spices and citrus.

"It warms you up," said Chris Brokenshire, "and it warms your spirits, too."

The 40-year-old forklift operator from Ringtown knows of what he speaks. He's been making and drinking boilo for nearly 20 years. And now he's hoping to export this obscure cultural oddity to the masses, developing a drink mix that he began selling last month in a few brick-and-mortar stores in Schuylkill County — the epicenter of the boilo-making tradition — as well as online at his website.

Purists may sniff that Brokenshire's powdered boilo mix is a rather generic facsimile of the homemade concoction that's typically made with ingredients like honey, oranges, lemons, caraway and anise seeds, cinnamon sticks, ginger ale, and whiskey.

But people are buying it as fast as his manufacturer can produce it and Brokenshire can bag it. Brokenshire sold out of his initial run of 1,000 bags within a few weeks, and he projects he'll sell 30,000 bags by April, when the arrival of warmer weather marks the end of the traditional boilo-making season. He dreams of replicating — on a smaller scale — the success of Yuengling beer, another coal-region staple that has crossed over to the mainstream.

The budding boilo baron figured his target market would be consumers who don't have a good recipe of their own, and those who simply don't have time to make it from scratch. But he had no idea what to expect when those first \$8.99 bags hit stores. After all, this is a tradition in which family recipes are treated like fine heirlooms.

"It was a very scary thing," said Brokenshire, who invested \$30,000 in the fledgling business, and whose father and fiancée are helping him get it up and running. "I didn't know how the community would react, because it is so popular and (a commercial version) has never been tested and tried."

The early returns have him ecstatic.

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"It's just shooting through the roof," he said. "I never expected to be in a situation like this."

The invention of Lithuanian immigrants, boilo shares ingredients with krupnikas, a traditional spiced honey liquor that has been consumed in Lithuania and Poland (where it is called krupnik) for centuries. Yet the name is unique to a handful of Pennsylvania counties where anthracite coal was mined by European immigrants more than 100 years ago. The cocktail also appears to be related to viryta, a drink popular with the Lithuanian-American community of Baltimore. In fact, viryta is derived from the Lithuanian word for "boil" or "cook."

Leonas Putrius, a researcher at the Lithuanian Research and Studies Center in Chicago, confesses to never having heard of either boilo or viryta before being asked about it. But he said it's clear that immigrants took a little of the Old World with them to the New.

"The first wave of immigrants brought their culture with them and made localized versions of an old tradition," he said.

Ann Wargo, 87, the daughter of Lithuanian immigrants who settled in Pennsylvania's coal region in the late 1800s, recalls a time when all boilo was made with moonshine, either "because they couldn't get anything else, or they didn't have the money to get anything else."

It was strong stuff. "I imagine they probably got into another world" after drinking it, she quipped.

Like most modern boilo makers, Wargo forgoes the illicit hooch in favor of Four Queens, a \$10 whiskey distilled in New Jersey.

In a nod to that tradition, Brokenshire's mix calls for the addition of Four Queens (as well as honey and water). Put it in the blender, nuke it for a few seconds, and you have instant boilo.

Mark Kowalonek, third-generation proprietor of the century-old Kowalonek's Kielbasy Shop in Shenandoah, was the first merchant to stock the mix. He hasn't been able to keep it on the shelf.

"We may not sell many to the (local) people because everybody makes it," he said. "But from far away, people are just grabbing them up."

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