
EDIBLE IMBIBABLES

Al Capone Drank Here: The Rebirth of Templeton Rye

BY KURT MICHAEL FRIESE

It was the Jazz Age, a time of speakeasies, gangsters and bathtub whiskey. Railroad cars crossed the country carrying hobos and the occasional load of table grapes with stenciled warnings, “Caution: Grapes—Do Not Add Yeast or Fermentation Will Occur!” The Volstead Act had become law and the nation went dry.

Or more accurately, the nation’s rivers of booze went underground and gave rise to a new industry: bootlegging. Almost overnight a vast criminal enterprise sprang up across the nation and gangsters became rich and powerful running whiskey and operating secret, password-protected bars. None became more powerful than the New York born Alphonse Capone.

Capone made his name in Chicago as the head of the vaguely named “Chicago Outfit,” even though his business card referred to him as a used furniture dealer. In truth he was an accomplished manager of a network of bootleggers. Occasionally, the “heat” in Chicago would cause him to take refuge in the comfort of the Julien Inn in Dubuque, Iowa, where he frequently availed himself of a favorite whiskey, Templeton Rye.

The tiny town of Templeton is located in northwest Iowa, about an hour-and-a-half drive from Des Moines in Carroll County. The story goes that just before Prohibition, a traveler wandered through town and had heard that there may be some libations to be had. Stopping at the first house he came to, he inquired where it might be found. The kindly woman pointed to a yellow house down the street. “That house,” she explained, “is the only house that doesn’t sell Templeton Rye.” That house was the Rectory.

When Prohibition took hold, and revenue agents or “revenueurs” seemed to be everywhere, such openness and generosity vanished, although Templeton Rye did not. No one knows how



From left to right: Keith, Kody and Meryl—three generations of Kerkhoffs stand in front of their still and behind every barrel of Templeton Rye

many households continued to “cook whiskey,” and only a select few will admit it even to this day, so strict were each family’s secrets, and so feared were the revenueurs.

One family though, the descendants of Alphonse and Frances Kerkhoff, proudly proclaim the prowess of the family’s prohibition-era recipe, and now Iowan’s can enjoy it legally for the first time. Templeton Rye is now a licensed distilled spirit made only in Templeton and available only in Iowa.

Rye whiskey differs from its cousins, bourbon and scotch, in number of ways, most notable that it must, by law, contain a minimum of 51% rye grain. Rye’s contribution to the flavor of a whiskey is a spiciness, and it adds a sort of fruity dryness and a warmth to the finish, according to Michael Jackson, author of *Whiskey: The Definitive World Guide*. “What the rye grain gives to bread, it also imparts to whiskey,” he writes. “Rye whiskey has that same hint

of bitterness. It is reminiscent of bittersweet fruit—perhaps a hint of apricot—spicy, a little oily, almost peppermint.”

While Jackson tells us of Rye’s origins in colonial Pennsylvania and Maryland, it is Templeton’s bootlegging history that the Kerkhoff’s son Meryl, grandson (and master distiller) Keith, and great-grandson Kody hope will attract the attention of Iowa’s (and some day the nation’s) whiskey connoisseurs. They proudly flaunt the Capone connection and their family recipe’s prohibition-era *bona fides* in all the marketing. The revenueurs caught Alphonse and Frances three times back then, the third offense leading to prison time for Alphonse.

Some of the best stories are of the secret hiding places people would use to store, or in some cases distribute, the contraband whiskey. One story Meryl likes to tell was that his mother was

Photos by Kurt Michael Friese



After more than 80 years it's finally legal to enjoy a shot of Templeton Rye

told that the jug was hidden behind the toilet tank, and if any strangers were to come in the yard, she should dump the contents down the stool right away, before even opening the door because it might be a revenuer. One day while Alphonse was out it happened, and Frances dutifully dumped the whole gallon of whiskey only to find that it was just a salesman in her yard.

All this makes for great marketing, but still, it is the supple, amazingly smooth flavor that results from Minnesota rye, distilled and triple-filtered, then aged in oak barrels from Missouri that are what will really win the palates of whiskey enthusiasts around the country. Templeton Rye was very well received at April's "WhiskeyLive" event in New York City, where many patrons called it the best of the show. This summer, they plan to unveil a limited edition batch in honor of the town of Templeton's Quasquicentennial July 6 – 8.

The Kerkhoff's hope to be licensed to sell their Rye in Chicago by this fall, and around the country soon after, but for now legalities and a supply keep it exclusively in Iowa. Lucky us.

For more information about Templeton Rye, visit www.Templeton-Rye.com. For more information about the Templeton Quasquicentennial, visit www.TempletonIowa.com

TRADITIONAL RYE COCKTAILS

Two famous cocktails are traditionally made with Rye, the Sazerac and the Manhattan.

SAZERAC:

- 1 teaspoon Pernod or Herbsaint liqueur
- Ice cubes
- 1 teaspoon sugar, 1 sugar cube, or 1 teaspoon simple syrup
- 1 1/2 ounces rye whiskey
- 3 dashed Peychaud's Bitters
- 1 lemon peel twist

Put the Pernod or Herbsaint in a chilled old-fashioned glass and swirl to coat the bottom and sides completely. Discard the excess.

In a cocktail shaker combine 4-5 ice cubes with the sugar, rye, and bitters. Shake and strain into the old-fashioned glass. Twist the lemon peel over the glass to extract oils, then drop in the twist and serve.

MANHATTAN:

- 1 1/4 ounces rye whiskey
- 1/2 ounces sweet vermouth
- 2-3 dashes Angostura bitters
- Maraschino cherry for garnish

In a mixing glass with ice, combine the rye, vermouth, and bitters. Stir and strain into a cocktail glass, garnished with the cherry.