Loose on the High Seas
Covert Winemaking on the Wawona

On June 26, 1936, as fishermen heaved twenty-pound Bering Sea codfish over the cap rail onto the sailing schooner Wawona, sailor Don McInturf stole to the galley. He helped himself to a three-gallon wooden keg, brown sugar, raisins and other dried fruit, six lemons, and sourdough starter. Then he scooped fresh water from the hold. “I felt like a chipmunk, going back and forth from the galley to my room, shirt full, pockets full,” wrote the thirty-two-year-old radioman in his diary. Sequestered in the ship’s four-by-six-foot radio room, McInturf mixed the ingredients into the keg, which he stowed in the headspace of his bunk and waited for them to turn into wine. On the “4th of July,” he wrote, “I’ll be full.”

McInturf honored a tradition probably as old as the first extended voyages of the European Age of Discovery. As vessels ventured farther and stayed out longer at sea, provisions of salted fish and meat, dried vegetables, hardtack, oils, cheese, butter, beer, rum, and wine had to last as long as the voyage did. It is likely that the libations never held out, so sailors learned to make do with whatever was on hand in order to have an ample supply of drink at their disposal. After Scottish surgeon James Lind discovered in 1742 that oranges and lemons could prevent scurvy, fruit became a shipboard staple, providing sailors with the perfect raw material for making secret stores of wine.

Through the centuries winemaking know-how passed from sailor to sailor. The methods changed little as seafaring mariners who, when pressed, will admit that with just a few provisions and a little time they can concoct a wine you’ll never find in a three-star restaurant.

Don McInturf most likely picked up his vintner skills during his ten years in the merchant marine. Born August 4, 1923, in Longmont, Colorado, he liked to cook, and he worked in a bakery for a time. In his early twenties McInturf received radio training and worked aboard ocean-going passenger steamers throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s. In 1956 he signed on to the cod fishing schooner Wawona.

From the 1860s until 1950, schooners from San Francisco and Seattle sailed to the codfish grounds of the Bering Sea. The owners of the three-masted, 165-foot wooden vessel Wawona hired fishermen and crew to bring home three hundred thousand codfish—headed, gutted, split, and embalmed in sea salt. Wawona’s crew, made up mainly of Scandinavians with a few Nova Scotians, one or two sailors like McInturf born in the United States, and one Italian, set sail from Seattle on April 15, 1936. The diary McInturf kept for his wife, Irene, and five-year-old daughter, Diane, recounts the daily lives of fishermen in one of the last fleets of commercial fishing vessels under sail on the West Coast.

The official responsible for food and drink aboard Wawona was sixty-eight-year-old Jean Bagger. While the ship lay docked in Seattle, Bagger spent four or five weeks preparing for the five-month trip. Two hundred and fifteen food items filled the requisition form. Bagger ordered canned and dried fruits and vegetables, including split and whole peas, white and brown beans, apples, apricots, peaches, prunes, and raisins. Fresh oranges, lemons, and seven tons of potatoes kept well in the musty and naturally frigid hold. The ship carried thirty barrels of hard wheat flour, corn meal, and rolled oats. Bagger stored cases of table salt, baking powder, baking soda, and sugar and stowed six thousand pounds of coffee. He seasoned his meals with pepper, sage, savory, cinnamon, ginger, mustard, cloves, allspice, nutmeg, celery salt, chili pepper, caraway seed, and bay leaf.

Bagger’s food locker held several hundred pounds of eggs and dairy products. Suppliers scaled each egg with a film of paraffin, and they packed the eggs in fifteen wooden crates holding thirty-six dozen each. Bagger turned the cases every week to prevent the yolks from settling to one end of the shells (if the yolk touched the shell the egg would spoil). He bought cheeses, canned milk, and six 12-pound kegs of one-pound sticks of butter preserved in brine.
Bagger canned hundreds of pounds of fresh beef or pork, saving the cooking juice for gravy. Suppliers rolled aboard 250-pound barrels of salt beef and pork. Smoked ham, smoked bacon, summer sausage, and garlic sausage were hung in the locker. Fresh cod and halibut fleshed out the protein diet. On sailing day a butcher delivered fresh beef halves. Bagger hoisted the halves high into the rigging to thwart theft. The meat lasted two weeks. All of these provisions were necessary to fortify the men who would lift twenty- to twenty-five-pound fish with hand lines from depths of two hundred or more feet for up to fourteen hours a day.14

Early in the voyage McInturf described a typical meal: “Roast beef, mashed spuds, carrots and butter, hot rolls, brown gravy, and mince pie.” The fishermen washed it down with coffee, boiling hot, with “a whoosh to cool it and a wheep to drink her down.” All Bagger’s galley lacked was a wine list. So, McInturf and a few crewmembers formed a clandestine committee called the Wawona Brewing Society.

On the 4th of July, ship’s captain Thorsten Haugen, a thirty-year veteran, noted a gale in his log and 180,246 fish caught to date. There was dense fog off the Alaskan Peninsula, and it was too rough for fishing. As Old Glory snapped at the top of the 110-foot mizzenmast, the men enjoyed Jean Bagger’s roast chicken lunch and listened to an old-timer play fiddle. Afterward, eight or nine fishermen gathered near McInturf’s cabin to open his keg, which belched acrid scents of yeast and alcohol vapor. McInturf recalled, “I sat on the deck and scooped it up in a bowl, kind of thick and sweetish.” With all eyes on him, he tipped the bowl and drank, then wiped at the drips in his red beard. “We had the window open and pretty soon there were four or five more squatted outside on deck tossing bowls off.” In a matter of hours, two-thirds of his keg was gone. And so was the crew. One fell down a ladder; another passed out at the galley door.

McInturf and his fellows later discovered the wine’s unexpected medicinal properties: “Now it so happens that, just as the drinks had been large in their proportions, so were they laxative in their propensities.” Wawona had no toilet for the men in the forecastle, the shipboard bunkhouse; they had to position themselves carefully out over the bow. Soon the “head was lined with bare fannies exposed to the elements. [The men] didn’t dare leave either, for some time, it just meant a wild dash back.” McInturf was able to laugh at his loose-bowelled friends only because he enjoyed the privilege of the captain’s lavatory.
During the voyage McInturf learned that one fisherman was making wine beyond the purview of his Wawona Brewing Society. On July 24, 1936, Bagger smelled something leaking in a room that housed a small gas engine for recharging batteries for the shipboard lights. When McInturf went to investigate, he discovered a keg stashed by "some low person" that had spilled half of its contents, some of it running into the galley. "I came back and told him my distilled water had turned over," he wrote. "Left a note on the keg for an interest in the contents." On August 9, McInturf found another keg in the same room "way back under the bench." He rolled it into his own berth, where he strained it and shared the drink with two friends. "Ah, but it's rare old stuff, too, all of two weeks," he wrote. "And I believe one would call it a fruity port inasmuch as I saw some raisins and a couple of dried peaches, among other things, floating around, when I strained if off."

By the time they returned to Seattle in early September, McInturf and his fellow seafaring enologists had made and consumed no less than four kegs of wine. Nearly forty years later, Captain Haugen recalled McInturf’s rotgut “with amusement.” Haugen was smart enough not to interfere with tradition. "Wise chiefs made sure nothing ever got out of hand," commented Frank Young, a winemaking sailor who served in the US Navy, “and wise officers soon learned to develop serious cases of Nelson’s Eye Syndrome.” McInturf and company’s winemaking didn’t prevent Haugen from pulling his ship back into port with just under three hundred thousand cod.

Today, it’s a good bet that there is at least one cargo ship or naval vessel somewhere out at sea with a keg of young wine fizzing in a dark corner.

Above: A cook and his helper, called a “flunkey.” Late 1930s.

Courtesy of Northwest Seaport Collection
Raisin Jack

It’s easy enough to make rotgut wine as long as your expectations remain low. Here is a recipe for raisin jack that approximates McInturf’s wine, but I offer no guarantees as to its medicinal properties.

3 lb raisins
1 lb sugar

Juice of 2 lemons

Water to 1 gallon

Chop or grind the raisins in a food blender with the lemon juice. Heat the sugar and water to boiling and pour over the raisins. A cup of raisin pulp will supply the natural yeasts needed for fermentation. Let the mixture ferment for 6 to 7 days. Strain off the sediment and place in a secondary fermenter with an airlock for 1 to 2 weeks. When the fermentation has ceased and the wine has cleared, put into bottles and seal.17

NOTES
1. Don McInturf, untitled journal, Wawona Collection (Seattle: Northwest Seaport, 1936). All subsequent excerpts are cited from this journal.
2. Scurvy, a disease caused by vitamin C deficiency, could afflict up to 75 percent of a ship’s crew. In 1768, on his three-year-long scientific voyage to the Pacific Coast, Captain James Cook of the Royal Navy made the first serious attempt to combat scurvy by stopping frequently to collect indigenous greens. The use of citrus fruits and juices, as well as the addition of sugar and lemon juice to grog, grew throughout the eighteenth century, and by the nineteenth century the practice was common in Royal Navy vessels. Ever since, British sailors have been called “limeys.”
3. Bob Quinn, a sailor who served in Guam and Guantanamo Bay during and after World War II, made a wine called “raisin jack” from raisins, sugar, water, and baker’s yeast in four eight-gallon water breakers, or kegs. In his autobiography Quinn recounts trying to convince his friend L.V. that it was critical to leave off the brass cap on top while the mixture fermented:

“No no,” he said, “the Chief [Petty Officer] told me exactly how to do it and be said to put the caps back on.” Well, I might have been the youngest in the crowd, but I wasn’t stupid. Even I knew that with the yeast, this concoction was going to start fermenting, and you shouldn’t seal the barrels. I said, “L.V., they’ll blow up if you put the caps on and seal them.” He was adamant. “Okay L.V.,” I said, “You do what you want to, but those kegs are not staying in my boat with the caps screwed on.” He got angry and said, “All right, I’ll just take my two and put them in another boat.” There was a friend of his whose boat I knew he had in mind. I said, “That’s fine with me,” I said (sic), “but you had better get them out of here now.”

Three days later, there was a muffled explosion from the bilges of his friend’s boat. The fermenting raisins, with the help of the yeast, had blown the keg wide open. There were raisins and a brown, sticky, watery mess all over his buddy’s boat. L.V. was contrite. I shared my raisin jack with him and the others. It had taken eight or nine days for it to get to the stage to achieve the effect we were looking for. We strained the beverage through a skinny shirt into a canteen cup. It was the color of clouded tea, but much more effective. We managed to get pretty drunk on that stuff. Our hangovers were such that we couldn’t eat for two days.”

4. Undated letter from Diane Colson, daughter of Don McInturf, to Paul J. Douglas, former board member of Seattle’s Northwest Seaport.
5. Wawona crew list, Wawona Collection (Seattle: Northwest Seaport, 1936).
6. Interview with Diane Colson, Olympia, Washington, 13 March 2004. The family gave a copy of the diary to Northwest Seaport, which owns the Wawona, still afloat in Seattle’s Lake Union.
7. Ed Shields, Salt of the Sea: The Pacific Coast Cod Fishery and the Last Days of Sail (Lopez Island, WA: Pacific Heritage Press, 2001). Much of the information for Bagger’s specifications comes from this memoir, which recounts voyages of the Sophie Christenson, a four-masted sister ship of the three-masted Wawona. The Sophie Christenson accompanied Wawona on the 1935 voyage to the Bering Sea. It is assumed that many of the Wawona’s needs were similar, although Wawona carried a crew of thirty-six, as opposed to the Sophie Christenson’s forty-five.
9. The water temperature of the Bering Sea outside the hold hovered just above freezing.
11. Ibid.
13. Orvia Parker, “Routine Aboard the Wawona When Fishing in the Bering Sea,” Wawona Collection, Northwest Seaport, Seattle. Parker was a member of the “dress gang,” seven members of the crew who gutted, headed, and split the fish so that it lay flat with its flesh exposed. It was then packed in coarse sea salt in the hold.
14. “Requisition Supplies for Schooner ______.”
16. British naval hero Lord Nelson lost his sight in one eye following a battle.