

A CHEESE HIKE ON THE WEST COAST

THIS 100-MILE-LONG TRAIL IN **NORTHERN CALIFORNIA** IS A DAIRY LOVER'S DREAM

ALSO: TV-VIEWING POWER TO THE PEOPLE / STUNT MAN FOR THE STARS / Q&A WITH GEN. RICHARD MYERS



NOVEMBER 01, 2013

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Wise Bird

A GROUP LIKE THIS doesn't come together very often. These guys are from all over the country and have different gigs and are in different states and different stages of life. Sure, they're bonded by one defining element: Their checks come from the same processing center. But members of this group would come together — if given the ways and means — on their own because of the guest of honor.

He sits there leaning back in his chair, hands clasped over his chest, and casually looks around the table. His eyes move; his head doesn't. Ten of us are seated before him. And unlike the guest of honor, who has a relaxed, almost laissez-faire demeanor, the rest of us are at the edges of our seats, elbows on the table, chins in our hands, awaiting a lesson of sorts. That's when Jimmy Russell clears his throat and begins the first of many stories we would hear on this night.

I am the one person at the table who does not work with the rest of these guys. My friend, Scott, and his boss, Duffey, do. After needling Scott to get permission from Duffey to bring me to this dinner, I am included. Yes, I want to have a nice steak with the rest of these guys and sit around and chew the fat — figuratively and literally — but when Scott said that Jimmy Russell would be in town and that he would be holding court to the tune of a nine-person audience, I just had to be the 10th.

Jimmy Russell is a stately man of modest presentation. He is thick-necked and barrel-chested with silver hair along the rim of his head. He speaks slowly, a proud Kentucky drawl accenting every word. And to these guys, Jimmy Russell is to their industry what Steve Jobs was to his. He's pushing 80 years old, and for 59 of those years, Jimmy Russell has been the master distiller of Wild Turkey bourbon.

Fifty-nine years.

It's true, I'm a fan of Wild Turkey. I'm a fan of all American spirits — bourbon my favorite — and Wild Turkey is my brand. But that's not why I begged to be the 10th man on that night. Above all else, I strive to be the best in my chosen profession of journalism. It's something I've wanted to do since my preteen years, much like Jimmy Russell wanted to work for Wild Turkey since he was old enough to realize that he lived only four miles away from the Lawrenceburg, Ky., distillery. For me, striving to be the best journalist means becoming a student of the human condition. And there's no better condition to study than that of a man who has been plying the exact same trade for 59 years.

I think something happens the longer you do something: I think the more time you commit to your life's work, like it or not, you slowly become an expert. It's one thing to carry the flag of your profession and take your place on the long line of those who do what you do, and it's an entirely different animal to become the person in front of that line whom everybody follows. After 59 years, there isn't a single person in the spirits world who would argue with this statement: Nobody knows bourbon like Jimmy Russell.

Jimmy knows this. How could he not? But as a true Zen master of his craft, Jimmy has honed a valuable character trait along the way: humility. "I know what I am, and I know what I'm not," Jimmy tells the table.

And what is he? He is the judge and the jury of bourbon. There is no higher authority. He is Yoda to all of us Skywalkers around the table. That's what 59 years means.

This issue is chock-full of Yodas, as well as Yodas-in-training. On page 44, we have retired four-star general and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Richard B. Myers. He is a lifelong commander, dating back to the Vietnam War, and he gives our reporter a rare exclusive interview. Octogenarian Dean Smith (page 102), an Olympic gold medalist from the 1952 games in Helsinki, has been the definitive Western stunt man on the silver screen for half a century. All the stunt men these days have taken their cues from Dean, who essentially wrote the Hollywood stunt-man playbook.

The myriad cheesemakers along California's 100-mile Sonoma Marin Cheese Trail, you will learn (assuming you haven't already tasted their wares firsthand), are the Yodas of cheese (page 40). And then we have our cover subject, Jonah Hill, who would be a Yoda if not for his Skywalker-esque age (page 60). Jonah is already one of the funniest actors in Hollywood, and while some of his comedic ilk are starting to fade, he's getting stronger and more versatile with each movie.

I have met Jimmy Russell and I was honored to absorb his humor and wisdom. I have never met Gen. Richard Myers, Dean Smith or any of Sonoma's cheesemakers, nor have I met Jonah Hill. But because they are masters of their crafts and trades, I believe they must embody a similar Jimmy Russell-brand of humility. And because I believe this, I believe they would appreciate the master distiller's recipe for the perfect mint julep:

- Sterling-silver mint julep cup
- 2 to 3 sprigs of fresh mint from Mountain Valley (8 to 10 leaves depending on how much mint you want)
- Muddle some of the mint leaves.
- Mix 1 teaspoon (a little more or a little less depending on how sweet you want it to be) of twice-refined powdered sugar with some distilled glacier water.
- Add that sugar-glacier water to the muddled mint.
- Now, in the sterling-silver cup, add shaved ice. Not cubed ice, shaved ice.
- Pack it full, and the silver cup will start to sweat.
- Take one long sprig of Mountain Valley mint and stick that down in the ice.
- Add 200 milliliters of bourbon and the glacier water-sugar-mint mixture to the sterling-silver cup and mix with a bamboo swizzle stick — four rotations, counterclockwise.

Then throw all that away and drink a Wild Turkey.

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