Crack Open a Bottle of General Lee – A Second Course

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Abstract
Welcome back, fellow historical diners. Last time, you joined me in comparing a fine selection of Union generals to food. Today, we’ll be examining some of their southern counterparts. Let’s dig in!

Robert E. Lee – Aged, Fine Red Wine with a Side of Steak

Consider the following: red wines are often consumed with red meats such as steak. Steak can be enjoyed in any number of ways, from a backyard barbecue to the finest of dining establishments. In this sense, steak is the former Confederacy, ranging as it did from the most rural farmers to the opulent planters. [excerpt]

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Comments
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Crack Open a Bottle of General Lee – A Second Course

December 30, 2015

By Ryan Nadeau ’16

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In memory, Lee is the Confederacy’s classic companion: the red wine to the red meat, though perhaps one better suited to a classier setting. A dish stereotypically and frequently associated with masculinity, paired with an emblem of class. When considering a general frequently held up as the ideal gentleman of the South, could such a combination be any more fitting?

Lee is the wine with a companion steak rather than the opposite, however, because of one specific detail: the aging process. Like a fine old glass of red, General Lee has aged remarkably well. He maintains fans on both sides of the Mason-Dixon, even among otherwise strident Northerners, for reasons such as his storied brilliance as a commander or his much-revered personal character. Even in this age of increasing scrutiny over Confederate icons, Lee’s status as a Southern George Washington—a near infallible marble man whose virtues far outweigh his faults—seems to have suffered little. But how much of this legacy is just hype built solely on this reputation that continues to perpetuate itself? Just the same, are ancient wines all they’re cracked up to be, or is part of their reputation simply the joy of drinking something older than you?

And then there’s steak which, you know, goes bad quickly.
Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson – Hardtack

As one of the principle rations for Union soldiers during the civil War, hardtack was notorious for being unpleasant. Soldiers casually referred to hardtack as “worm castles” for its tendency to become home to a royal plethora of unwanted critters. Hardtack frequently lived up to its name as well—reports exist of soldiers damaging their teeth eating it. The stuff lasted a long time, at least; examples of Civil War era hardtack exist to this day. Kind of like a nineteenth-century Twinkie without everything that makes Twinkies fun.

Despite all this, hardtack is today a favorite of Civil War reenactors; there’s probably something to eating what the actual soldiers would have eaten that increases one’s immersion while reenacting. It probably helps the situation that variations produced today are done so in more favorable conditions than an early factor (and are free from worms).

Similarly, Stonewall Jackson has become a favorite of Civil War buffs since the war. Like Lee, he enjoys a near sterling reputation in the South for his devotion to the Confederate cause and remains respected as a commander in the North. During the war itself, however, this was not always the case. Soldiers who served under Jackson frequently found him to be personally cold, an overly-harsh disciplinarian. Following his great successes in battle, he was at least tolerated, but before, he was treated with “irreverence [and] down-right hostility” by his own men. Like
hardtack, Jackson was consummately military, unyielding in personality (and probably to the teeth as well) and generally unpopular, even if he did, in the end, get the job done.

**Jubal Early – High Fructose Corn Syrup**

This comparison is unique among those I’ve made thus far in that it has nothing to do with Early’s wartime record or personality. Rather, it has everything to do with his post-war activities.

At the conclusion of the war, Early became notorious as an early (pun completely intended!) proponent of the *Lost Cause*. For the sake of casual readers, the Lost Cause is the branch of historical revisionism that romanticizes the pre-war South as an ideal society and turns their defeat into an inevitable tragedy at the hands of the “oppressive” North. The Lost Cause ideology was, and frequently still is, the accepted narrative of southern apologists. Even though Lost Causism is widely discredited by professional historians today, elements of it continue to color the historical discussion, such as the insistence of states’ rights as the cause of the war rather than slavery.

Considering this, I would compare Early’s lasting influence to one of the most notorious ingredients of our age: high fructose corn syrup. Despite its poor public image, HFCS continues to show up in all kinds of unexpected places, from soda, to bread, to salad dressing. Like the Lost Cause, even as we reject it, it just seems to keep kicking around. And both are highly problematic: HFCS has been linked to health issues such as fatty liver, a frequent precursor to diabetes. Furthermore, the chemical process by which HFCS is created exposes it to toxic substances, such as mercury, which may make their way into processed foods. As for the Lost Cause, it’s simply bad history that warps reality and poisons our understanding of events. Both, really, should be avoided.

But especially the Lost Cause. Gross.

Sources:


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