
One can't help but think of the undocumented worker, leaving his farm back home to work the land of another.



"They were caught between needing to make money and needing to keep quiet about it," writes Thompson. "This put them in a predicament of perfect vulnerability into which the unscrupulous could enter and take advantage. And they did."

Thompson shows the human side of the stereotypical lawless, backwoods moonshiner. He breathes life into the hard-pressed men fighting to keep their farms and feed their families.

One can't help but think of the undocumented worker, leaving his farm back home to work the land of another and eke out a living for his loved ones. *Just Men* invokes these present-day struggles as much as its historical ones. In between its pages' rich depiction of illicit whiskey in the "wettest section in the USA," the thought arises: As we debate how best to regard and treat the immigrant population in the United States, we could learn a lot from the lives and times of mountain moonshiners. 🍷

Katie Walsh is a Texas-based freelance writer and editor with a passion for food and all things cultural.

PHOTO, PAGE 11: Buffalo Trace Distillery, Frankfort, Kentucky. Photograph by Kate Medley.



WATER INTO PORT

Eugene Walter taught me how to drink

by Jack Pendarvis

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I GREW UP IN THE COUNTRY , on a bad curve. It wasn't unusual to wake up at night to the sound of a car crash. Somebody had taken the curve too fast and sailed into the ditch. Dad would get up and go out to see if he could help. He has stories about it he still won't tell me.

This was the Gulf Coast of Alabama. There was nothing around. A few other houses. And, for some reason, a restaurant, just on the other side of the curve. I don't remember ever walking to it. We would get in the car and drive a couple yards away to go to the El-Bo. That was the name of the restaurant: the El-Bo.

It's still there, but now it's called the Lighthouse. I was there last year and had a great soft-shell crab po-boy. So if you're ever near Bayou La Batre, which you won't be, check it out. The Wednesday night special is fish and grits; has been for decades.

Back when it was still the El-Bo, I was eating lunch there one day with my grandparents. These were my big-city grandparents—my mom's parents. They lived in Mobile. They were down for a visit. And my grandfather did something astonishing. He ordered a glass of beer to go with his gumbo. A glass of beer! This shocked me, and I burst into tears right there at the table.

I was thirty-four years old.

No, I was probably eight, and definitely Southern Baptist. On Easter Sunday we did have communion, but it was Welch's grape juice and saltine crackers.

I was secretly excited by the thought that Catholics drank wine in church. It seemed fancy. And as I got older, I was a skeptical Sunday-school student. They would tell us that yes, Jesus drank wine, and Paul told Timothy, "Take a little wine for thy stomach," but that was a different kind of wine. They had a long explanation, something about how wine wasn't really fermented in Bible days. It was really just grape juice, old grape juice. But I would ask, "If it wasn't fermented, then why does the Bible say 'Be not drunk with wine'?" They had an answer for that, and also an answer for why we have hair on our arms, which was what tempted me to believe in evolution.

My natural skepticism didn't have any real-world applications. When my grandfather ordered that glass of beer, it was obvious he was a secret drunkard. Now this was a tiny glass as I remember it, like a Holiday Inn gives you for orange juice. But he was certainly a

backslider...or was he saved at all?"By their fruits ye shall know them."

As the years flowed on, my sanctimony only became more sanctimonious. I preached a mini-sermon to my eleventh-grade girlfriend when she wanted to sneak some champagne after a school event. I later heard she had made out with a guy who had a mustache. Oh, Tammy!

I really liked port. Port was what sent me over the line from nondrinker to drinker. Looking back, it must have been pretty cheap port.



When I got to college, I magically became more liberal, maybe because I met a French girl who had a dead lover and underarm hair, smoked cigars, and listened to Oingo Boingo. I also met Eugene Walter—food writer, cook, novelist, poet; collaborated with Fellini and Zeffirelli...on and on. He came to speak to my English class and I decided to interview him, because I was also taking a course in journalism. He seemed like he'd be more fun than my original subject, teen suicide.

Here's some useless trivia: I went to college with Jimmy Buffet's mother. She was a lot older than me. She had re-enrolled to take fiction-writing classes, I think. She knew Eugene, and since I was going to his house for dinner, I asked her advice. She said I should bring a bottle of Bolla Soave. This was the first time I had heard of bringing a bottle of something to somebody's house. I didn't have any idea what Bolla Soave was. I'm pretty sure I didn't know there were different kinds of wine, aside from red and white, which I had heard about in a Billy Joel song.

I declined to have wine with dinner during my first meeting with Eugene, though he did convince me to try peppermint schnapps beforehand and a glass of port after dinner. I really liked port. Port was what sent me over the line from nondrinker to drinker. Looking back, it must have been pretty cheap port. Eugene didn't have a lot of money.

But as I got to know him, and went over to his house fairly regularly, he taught me this civilized thing of having an aperitif and a digestif...or several. The more I had, the more civilized I became. Anisette was my favorite, aside from port. Basically, I enjoyed anything that tasted like candy. In fact, we once had floats made of vanilla ice cream and sloe gin for dessert. Mostly sloe gin. When times were especially hard, Eugene would pull out this bottom-shelf stuff called "apple bourbon." (He knew my background, and never got tired of telling me that a Baptist preacher had invented bourbon.)

I remember him serving Kirschwasser once. While we were sipping it, he said, "You can taste the stems."

And I realized that wow, yes, along with the cherries there was a sharper green flavor, like, I don't know, sticks and leaves. For the first time, I really stopped to taste the complexity of something.

And when I left I probably had to drive around the corner as usual and take a nap in my 1974 Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme, waking up hours later with my face sticking to the white vinyl. 🍷

Jack Pendarvis has written three books. His columns appear in *The Believer* and *The Oxford American*.



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