

# Upping the Ante on Irish Coffee

The Dead Rabbit brings in a ringer to perfect its recipe for the boozy brew

By CHARLES PASSY Jan. 27, 2016



Dale DeGross tops off his Irish coffee at the Dead Rabbit. PHOTO: ANDREW KIST

Since its opening three years ago, the Dead Rabbit has become one of the top spots for the mixology-minded set and racked up industry honors as the “world’s best bar.”

But for all the attention and accolades, the Irish-centric lower Manhattan bar has yet to perfect its recipe for Irish coffee. So, in honor of National Irish Coffee Day, Dead Rabbit co-founders Jack

McGarry and Sean Muldoon invited Dale DeGroff, the James Beard Award-winning mixologist, to a challenge of sorts. Could Mr. DeGroff improve upon the Irish coffee the bar serves?

“You always use the best recipe until a better one comes along,” said Mr. Muldoon, speaking before Monday’s event, held in the bar’s cozy, third-floor reception room. A few dozen guests attended the coffee confab, snacking on Scotch eggs, spring rolls and mini burgers, among other finger foods.

There are no secrets when it comes to the ingredients in Irish coffee—Irish whiskey, sugar, cream and, naturally, coffee. But the drink, which was invented in Ireland in the ’40s and became popular in America starting in the ’50s, is all about finding the right balance.

Mr. DeGroff, often hailed as “King Cocktail,” said many bartenders add too much coffee, giving the drink a pronounced bitterness. The choice of whiskey is also crucial



Jack McGarry and Sean Muldoon. *PHOTO: ANDREW KIST*

“I want the whiskey to fold into the drink. I don’t want it to take over,” he said.

Mr. DeGroff especially obsesses about the cream, hand-whisking it so that it has just enough stiffness to float atop the coffee and booze. Ideally, the finished drink should look like a properly poured pint of Guinness with its signature foamy head, he explained.

“It’s just got to be under-stiff,” he said as he demonstrated to the curious crowd.

The Dead Rabbit proprietors served their current version of Irish coffee sheepishly alongside Mr. DeGroff’s. They admitted theirs didn’t quite have the sweetness that makes the drink such a crowd-pleaser—perhaps because the proportions of coffee, whiskey (they favor the classic

Jameson) and sugar weren't as carefully calibrated as in Mr. DeGroff's version. They also conceded the cream didn't have the desired texture, perhaps because they used a hand blender.

But Mr. DeGroff, who's a regular at the Dead Rabbit, didn't fault the bar's version too much—with one exception: the nutmeg that Messrs. McGarry and Muldoon sprinkle on top. It puts a sip that can be enjoyed year-round into eggnog-style Christmas territory, Mr. DeGroff noted.

"We like nutmeg," Mr. Muldoon responded.

In the end, the Dead Rabbit team said it was swayed by Mr. DeGroff's approach and planned to use his recipe from now on, even if that meant foregoing the nutmeg (unless a customer specifically requests it). But they were quick to point out the current version has its fans, noting the bar can sell upward of 200 Irish coffees a night.

Indeed, during Monday night's taste-off, some attendees expressed a strong preference for the current version. Beth Meyers, a graphic designer from Brooklyn, said she liked the fact the fact the whiskey seemed more pronounced. But she echoed Mr. DeGroff's criticism: "I would have liked it without the nutmeg."