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# It Isn't Iron and It Isn't Brewed, But Irn-Bru Hews to Its Orange Hue

*Scotland's 'Other National Drink' Hopes Nobody Will See Tweak in Its Secret Recipe*

By [PAUL SONNE](#)

CUMBERNAULD, Scotland—Every month, a retired 72-year-old accountant named Robin Barr pulls up to an industrial complex in this suburban Glasgow town to carry out a secret mission.

He ducks into a secure building and mixes about 10,000 liters of flavored syrup using a recipe he knows by heart. The secret formula, he says, is known only by him, his daughter and an unnamed confidant.

The result is Irn-Bru, a glowing orange beverage spiked liberally with caffeine and sugar that is worshiped in Scotland and often belittled elsewhere.

Mr. Barr and the 135-year-old company his family started have built Irn-Bru (pronounced Iron Brew) into a genuine phenomenon in Scotland, where it duels with Coca-Cola to be the No. 1 soft drink and enjoys a maverick reputation, owing to its powerful taste and controversial advertising.

Alan Stuart, 60, who downs 50 cans of Irn-Bru a week, mixes the drink into popular pork sausages sold at his butcher shops in Fife.

For nearly half a century, the man behind "Scotland's other national drink" has been Mr. Barr. Since 1961, the six-foot-six Mr. Barr has borne the responsibility of blending the Irn-Bru recipe first concocted by his great-grandfather and great-uncle 109 years ago.

But these days, Mr. Barr's drink is threatened. The U.K. Food Standards Agency is pushing British food-and-beverage makers to remove artificial coloring agents that may cause hyperactivity in children. Those include Sunset Yellow and red Ponceau 4R, the so-called azo dyes that give Irn-Bru its hyper-orange sheen.

Though the family recipe will remain the same, the tasteless dye that gives Irn-Bru its color is to be replaced. [A.G. Barr](#), the company Mr. Barr's family started, has already removed the dyes from other drinks it makes. But it has taken extra time to formulate the new color of Irn-Bru, realizing that any slight change in its complexion could provoke a national outcry.

Indeed, the color and recipe of the drink haven't changed since it was developed in 1901, Mr. Barr says, and Irn-Bru's fans will be dismayed if the company gets the new color wrong.

Donnie Aitken, a 51-year-old driver from Cumbernauld, said devoted drinkers would know if it were even a shade off. "There will be riots in the streets...rebellion, anarchy," Mr. Aitken said. "It's part of our heritage. It's as Scottish as kilts."

A misstep would be bad news for David Shaw, a 21-year-old originally from Falkirk, who had the Irn-Bru logo tattooed on his chest. "I got it on my heart," says Mr. Shaw. "The color, for me, is distinctive. It's radioactive orange, which is part of the phenomenon of it all."

For years, Mr. Barr prepared the secret Irn-Bru "essence" at the company's old factory in a Victorian structure that workers called "Robin's Nest." Though the location has since changed, the mixing ritual is the same: The bespectacled Mr. Barr samples each flavor from its large tank, confirms that it's fit for the purpose and calibrates the proportion required to make the sugary drink "taste like magic."

There's a jolt of caffeine, a hint of bubblegum, a pinch of quinine—32 flavorings in all to conjure up Scotland's nectar of the gods. With 34.7 grams of sugar per can, the drink is widely accepted as a miracle hangover cure. That's because the taste, Mr. Barr says, "makes your palate feel like there's life after death."

Though Mr. Barr retired as chairman last year, he has kept abreast of the color recalibrations, a process overseen by company CEO Roger White, believed to be the unnamed third person with knowledge of Irn-Bru's secret.

A company team of about 10 people is 90% finished with the research needed to find a new dye that replicates

the orange color and doesn't fade in sunlight, according to Mr. Barr. It's a lengthy task, in part because the researchers must carry out shelf-life tests and observe the new color's behavior over time. A can of the stuff has a shelf life of 18 months.

"We think we're almost there, but until we're absolutely sure, we certainly won't change," Mr. Barr says. The company did not say when the new color will be introduced.

The Barr family has experience coping with threatening U.K. regulations. After World War II, Mr. Barr's grandfather removed choice vowels from the drink's name ahead of proposed legislation about products living up to the claims on their labels. Iron Brew, it so happened, had only trace amounts of iron and was not, in fact, brewed.



Over the years, Irn-Bru has also weathered controversy over its advertising, which has long played to the drink's maverick, Scottish image. Most Scots seem to revel in Irn-Bru's promotions, especially the drink's onetime tagline, "Made in Scotland from girders."

At the Cumbernauld offices, Mr. Barr paged through a commemorative book filled with Irn-Bru ads, landing on a fusty, pipe-smoking old man posed next to two yellow hounds. "There's the poster that got the prize for the best poster for the last 21 years," he said proudly, referring to the 2007 Scottish Advertising Awards. The tagline: "I love Irn-Bru and so do my bitches."

The trouble with Irn-Bru's orange dye has come just as Mr. Barr prepares to pass off his mixing duties at A.G. Barr, still 25% owned by his family. During recent blending sessions, Mr. Barr has tag-teamed with his daughter Julie, the company secretary, who stands to inherit the mixing mantle.

"The truth is, if the bus hit me, she could do it tomorrow," Mr. Barr says. "But I still see her as an apprentice."

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