

How to Run a Shebeen

There comes a time in every man's life when he puts his empty glass down on the counter, looks around for someone to serve him and finally in despair mutters to himself, "I could run a better pub than this lot."

Most people are happy to leave it at that but not my father. He had owned one pub and managed another and he just couldn't let the opportunity of one last boozier pass him by. Nowadays we'd call it a retirement project; some men dream of long afternoons on the golf course or taking a cruise round the Med, but not Dad. He just couldn't stop working till working stopped him.

My father had inherited a country shop and saw the opportunity to put his life skills as a farmer, publican and armchair philosopher to good use. He would transform from grocer to spirit-grocer, but without any of the tedious legal formalities.

A word on the law; there are a few benighted individuals out there who delight in setting the police on an honest businessman. It is likely that one day a cop will call at your door. If he's just an average cop he will say "we've had reports" and give you a stern look, but if he's a clever cop he'll wait until a sunny day and arrive in his shirtsleeves and announce, "Is there e'er the chance of a bottle of beer? The drouth is choking me." The answer is always no. I can't be clearer about this; a firm but polite "No" will save you a world of trouble and your name in the papers.

I will always remember the day two young Guards called to our shop, put their caps on the counter and calmly appraised the rows of empty grey beer crates my old dad had stacked high against the wall. One of them ordered a Cavan Cola – which was suspicious in itself, while the other asked my father if he had anything stronger. My poor dad looked up at them with his cornflower blue eyes and Sellotaped glasses, and intoned in a mixture of sadness and shock, "We don't sell any of that stuff here." We never heard from them again.

The whiskey should always be a premium whiskey. A second-rate whiskey decanted into an empty premium bottle is acceptable in the cities, but don't try it with any countryman over the age of twenty. You do not sell brandy. No vodka. Nothing blue or orange or green. No ice. Tins of beer may seem like a good idea but need to be kept cold, and anyway the older drinker prefers a bottle; it's just the right size. Your local licensed premises isn't your competition, it's your wholesaler. They will be only too glad to sell you a few extra crates of beer and a few bottles of whiskey on a regular basis.

There should be no jukeboxes, no pool tables, no optics and no high stools. No peanuts or dartboards. There should be no happy hours or anything else that comes between a hard-working man and a quiet drink. Remember, this is your home, but it's where your customers get to socialize and tell lies and recall the exciting moments of their lives. So, as it's partly their home, make sure it is always clean and warm. An open fire is preferable to central heating in a shebeen no matter what people say. A turf fire is ideal, with

coal added if the priest calls, because the priest is a blessing on any house he visits and anyway, some of them have been known to buy a drink. Having said that, keep a back-up gas heater for the worst of winter weather, when you are kept busy making hot whiskeys and Irish Coffees.

There is a lot to be said for Irish hospitality, but it cannot always be extended to young yahoos who do not yet know their limits or to the drunk driver; they must be firmly warned off. This is not a "public" house, it is your house and you must decide who enters under its roof. For my father the ideal customers were farmers and council workers (the men who breast feed the shovel and take a nice long nap in the cab of a big yellow lorry while the rain pours down outside). Best of all were the retired men who will buy a loaf and a litre of milk, and buy a half 'un and a bottle of stout as an afterthought. They tend to get up in the morning, so their custom is to be encouraged as they won't try to sit you out.

In many ways my dad's shebeen (he never liked the term) was a day care centre for the elderly bachelors and widowers of the surrounding townlands. Pension day was the busiest day of the week. The customers would start to arrive around eleven o'clock for a leisurely drink before lunch. Throughout the afternoon old codgers in long black overcoats and peaked caps would appear, and soon the kitchen would soon be full of pipe-smoke and heated conversation. All the while the old fellow presided from an armchair in the corner rarely raising his eyes from the crossword unless for the latest gossip or to voice his opinion on some current political impasse. The topics of conversation were what you might expect when Border men of a certain vintage foregather: the winter of '63, the Gunner Brady, how to treat glanders, the right way to sharpen a scythe, as well as the dos and don'ts of smuggling and poteen-making, Kerr Pinks versus Arran Banners and the usual births, deaths and marriages of the parish.

There were a few old hands who could be relied on for a song or a recitation when they were sufficiently lubricated. A seasoned reciter in full flow could rattle the windows and scare the dog, taking his cap off at the most poignant moments for added effect. If the reciters played it for laughs, the singers expected total silence through the full sixteen verses of *The Chapel of Swanlinbar* complete with footnotes bemoaning the lack of fighting spirit in the men of a certain townland. The *craic* would continue until late afternoon when the party would break up and everyone headed home. The men on bicycles would glide off through the mizzle with their shopping bags swinging from the handlebars, heading for secluded cottages up long, lonely lanes.

Over time my dad's older customers died off and weren't replaced, and so the shebeen gradually wound down. Dad was winding down himself, but the shebeen had given him a second wind at the latter end of his life. I doubt he ever really made a profit on the venture; it hardly covered the cost of the old man's cigarettes (Player's Navy Cut, twenty a day and he smoked them like each one was the last he'd ever smoke) but he had a wealth of friends, and it's always a good feeling to get one over on the forces of law and order.

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Belfast with his wife, daughter and cat.