

Chapter 1:

The Irish Brief

1973 ☆ Baileys Irish Cream

“Oh no,” he said. “Two policemen came in this afternoon and demolished the whole bottle between them.”

The initial thought behind Baileys Irish Cream took about 30 seconds. In another 45 minutes the idea was formed. But it was a little more complex than that.

I once asked a designer friend to draw me a cartoon for an article I was doing for a magazine. I briefed him over the telephone and he faxed me a superb cartoon 30 minutes later. I called to thank him and remarked about the speed of his response. “It was too quick. 30 minutes. Wow!” He came back at me fast: “It didn’t take 30 minutes. It took 30 years”.

Baileys was like that for me. A decade of experience kicked in and delivered a great idea. It wasn’t as instant as it seemed.

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The Irish Brief

“What are we going to do about this bloody Irish brief?” I asked, testily, challenging my business partner Hugh to feel some pressure. I was annoyed by his ability to take things a great deal more calmly

than I ever did. We'd only been in business together for a month and that alone, I thought, warranted a greater sense of urgency. We had families to support.

"What Irish brief?" he replied. We'd discussed it on Friday last, but Hugh was very good at switching off for the weekend.

"IDV," I reminded him, "International Distillers & Vintners. Its Irish company wants us to create a new drinks brand for export." They hadn't said what kind of drink, just that it should be alcoholic.

The technical people at IDV's research and development department in Harlow had concocted some 'heather and honey' traditional-style liqueurs as a starter but no one was much inspired by them. As usual in those days, there was no written instruction and we described the sparse expression of the company's objectives as the 'Wexford Whisper', so vague was the outline of what they wanted. The only proviso was that we should limit the amount of Irish whiskey we used because IDV didn't have any strong relationships with Irish distilleries and wouldn't be able to control supply of the stuff.

Hugh stared at the ceiling. His morning coffee hadn't kicked in yet and he was a self-confessed slow starter. I was still seething from his languid entrance to the office 90 minutes after mine.

We were, I suppose, unlikely business partners. Hugh Reade Seymour-Davies was a 'toff'. He was a 'gentleman copywriter', educated at Eton and Oxford, and an unapologetic classicist. He could quote all the Latin and Greek greats with real facility and would 'get some Latin in' to documents or labels when I felt we needed to impress some of our more intellectual clients. He was steeped in Shakespeare, admired Beethoven and Mozart certainly, but anything written, composed or painted after about 1830 fell into the category of mid-nineteenth century arrivistes.

I, on the other hand, was most definitely an 'arriviste', having fled South Africa in 1961 aboard the Cape Town Castle to occupy

a mattress on a floor in a shared room in Earl's Court. Leaving behind me a possessive Jewish family, I'd escaped to London to make my way in advertising. Just before I left South Africa, where I'd been involved with ads for medicines to cure piles and devising promotions for patent fingernail clippers, I'd read Martin Mayer's book *Madison Avenue USA* about the explosion of the ad industry in New York and on which the current hit TV series *Mad Men* has surely drawn.

If the sexy and successful Don Draper had been invented then, he would have been my role model. Well, I smoked as much as he does. Like me he had come from a back-water to the glittering city lights to take his chance in the exciting new world of post-war consumerism in which, after so many years of rationing, even Britain would be open to new and exotic things to eat, drink, drive or wear.

Having spent the sixties as an account executive – also known as a 'suit' – in various advertising agencies, I had managed a transformation to become a product development consultant. That is what brought me to Dean Street.

A wacky idea to take to people I'd never met.

It was now 1973, twelve years after my arrival in England and Hugh and I had set up on our own in an office that looked out onto the garish sex parlours in the heart of Soho. It was the throbbing neon heart of creative London in those days. *Private Eye*, the satirical magazine, was in full swing, Ronnie Scott's jazz club was the place to go and there were TV production houses and recording studios on every corner.

You could spot local luminaries such as Peter Cook and Richard Ingrams in the modestly appointed pub *The Coach and Horses*. Barrow boys walked alongside painters like Francis Bacon, lunched on cheap oysters and propped up the same bars, feeding off each other. Jeffrey Bernard was in very good health. Friday afternoons

would be celebrated with champagne in Gaston Berlemont's French Pub, aka The York Minster, in Dean Street.

Much of these first weeks had been taken up with furnishing the office, buying materials and writing to a host of people who might become potential clients. It was exciting but also quite daunting. Business wasn't exactly streaming in. The early pressure was beginning to tell and I'd been in the office that day since 8am.

We chatted aimlessly for a few minutes about the Irish Brief and then I raised the issue of my previous Irish involvement. "Can we take anything from my Kerrygold butter experience?" I said. (I was in the team that created the Kerrygold brand in the early 1960s.) "Is there something in Ireland's reputation for dairy produce that we can apply to an alcoholic drink – all those lush green rain-sodden pastures and contented cows?"

Hugh looked at me with an almost earnest stare. "What would happen if we mixed Irish whiskey and cream?" he said. "That might be interesting." He sat back and waited for a response.

"Let's try it," I replied. Where Hugh was more likely to intellectualise and think through the appalling consequences of dropping cream into Ireland's beloved whiskey, I was all for doing it there and then. I jumped up, almost grabbed him by the lapels and marched him out into the street and into what was then International Stores at the southern end of Berwick Street market in the middle of Soho. It was the nearest supermarket to our office.

We bought a small bottle of Jamesons Irish Whiskey and a tub of single cream and hurried back. It was a lovely May morning. 1973. We mixed the two ingredients in our kitchen, tasted the result and it was certainly intriguing, but in reality bloody awful. Undaunted, we threw in some sugar and it got better, but it still missed something.

We went back to the store, searching the shelves for something else, found our salvation in Cadbury's Powdered Drinking Chocolate and added it to our formula. Hugh and I were taken by surprise. It

tasted really good. Not only this, but the cream seemed to have the effect of making the drink taste stronger, like full-strength spirit. It was extraordinary.

The whole process had taken about 45 minutes, from the moment Hugh looked at me to the moment we poured our mixture into a cleaned-out screw-top Schweppes' tonic bottle and I called Tom Jago, our client at IDV. I suggested that we meet immediately. I went on my own. Either Hugh had had second thoughts and decided that the gentry at IDV would cast out our muddy concoction with suitable disdain – or he didn't have an available suit hanging up in the office. I suspect it was the latter. Ten minutes later I was in a cab heading for 1 York Gate, an elegant Georgian house in the outer circle of London's beautiful Regent's Park.

In the cab I tried to bring some logic to this wacky idea. Apart from the great taste, which triggered the thought that 'alcoholic drinks don't have to taste punishing', I was interested in our serendipitous discovery that the drink tasted stronger than it really was. I think our original mix was, very roughly, 25% alcohol by volume. Maybe it could be pitched against stronger liqueurs like Tia Maria, where it would appear to be as strong, but would attract much lower duty. It could therefore be more profitable. I was excited. Very excited. Convinced we'd cracked the Irish Brief.

We had just started out as an independent business a few weeks earlier and I don't think we took in that this was an imperative brief that had to be solved in a hurry. It was just something that cropped up in a casual conversation with Tom. We saw nothing in writing. I was to discover some time later, a lot later, that Gilbeys of Ireland management had reached an agreement with the Irish Finance Minister that export earnings on the new brand would be tax exempt for a period of ten years. I seem to recall that at the time of the Baileys' tenth anniversary party – and it was some party – the company had sold about 4 million cases the previous year. Who

needed a written brief?

When I got to York Gate I went in to see Tom. I'd first met him in Italy on the shores of Lake Maggiore, which may sound exotic except for the fact that we were both there for a Unilever Research symposium back in 1969.

Now, a few years later, here I was in his office presenting our mucky brown liquid in its recycled bottle with huge enthusiasm. He liked it immediately. Over the years I have come to the conclusion that the real heroes of ideas are not the people who have them – they are the people who buy them. Tom could easily have said, “Sorry old chap, but it's not our sort of thing” – which it really wasn't, given the strong focus on wine, sherry, and 'serious' spirits like gin, whisky and vodka at IDV. But he was as excited as we were about our 'Heath Robinson' product.

Tom and I went for a curry in Drummond Street, near Euston Station. Given the totally revolutionary nature of the product, and the fact that nothing like it had ever been made before, we decided that we would develop it completely before we showed it to the Irish. This was odd coming from both Tom Jago and me, as we were both terribly impatient. (His attention span was not of heroic proportions and I once considered petitioning for the word 'jago' to become adopted as a unit of measurement for attention deficit syndrome). But in this instance we had to take our time about it: there were too many imponderables about our creation. It could turn out to be a very tough sell. Or no sell at all.

We took it to the technical group in Harlow, which is in Essex, about 40 miles north of London, a few days later to present it to Alan Simpson, who ran the division, and his second-in-command, Mac Macpherson. They were 'boffins' or 'techies' and knew about the science of drink production. Mac was in a white coat while Alan looked like the proprietor of a fine wine emporium. “Good suit” I thought. I stood in Alan's office with our precious bottle burning

a hole in my raincoat pocket. I was eager for him to taste it there and then. He wasn't quite so keen and when I read his lips the words "later perhaps" seemed to form.

"After lunch" he said and steered us towards a burgundy tasting. Oh dear. He was a wine man at heart. It didn't help that I managed to get quite a bit of wine over my tie and the style of my spitting left much to be desired.

They finally tasted our concoction after lunch – after a bottle of decent red – and there was no doubt, by the expression on their faces, that they thought it was quite disgusting. It wasn't a fine wine after all. It didn't look like wine. It didn't look like any known liqueur and it didn't even taste like whiskey. What was it? We'd gambled on the fact that they might like the taste, but it was evident that they did not. Perhaps it had aged in the five days since we made it.

Yet strangely Mac looked up to us from his awful beige-streaked glass and nodded almost imperceptibly. Whatever we were doing, no matter what he thought of the taste, he knew what we were aiming for. Just a nod, that's all he gave us. Not a 'yes' but better than a 'no'. Mac would be the man who would have to run with this. And he did.

The Baileys brand comes to life.

Although IDV didn't have the technology to mix alcohol and cream together, Tom insisted that the team apply resources to studying it. The technical challenge was under way and Tom was now in a hurry to do the branding: the bottle, the label and the name.

I remembered once, during the Kerrygold days, being told by a well-known Irishman that so many Irish names sound quaint when applied to brands. His name was Tony O'Reilly and O'Reilly's Irish Cream might indeed have sounded a bit whimsical. I could see what he meant and it had stuck in my mind. We needed what they called an 'Anglo-Irish' name. We were sure that a family name might be better than a 'thing' or a place name. That was the popular

convention of the business in those days. After all, many drinks were named after the people who made them.

As the office that Hugh and I shared in Dean Street was only temporary accommodation, we were planning a move within Soho. Hugh insisted that we had an office close to a game butcher's – in this case Parrish & Fenn. He liked his new season grouse. We visited some premises in nearby Greek Street, alongside a pub called The Pillars of Hercules and above a restaurant of no fixed ethnicity that was called Baileys Bistro

We were still struggling to find a name for our revolutionary new drink and there it was, emblazoned above the window. Baileys. Was it really right in front of my face? It was certainly Anglo-Irish and in a flurry of post-rationalisation I managed to dredge up from my memory a dairy of that name in the Port Elizabeth of my youth in South Africa. This gave it a kind of relevance in my head. I called Tom: "How about Baileys Irish Cream?" I proffered hopefully, "It sounds right, perfect I think".

Without any hesitation he bought the name. He was like that. If he saw an idea and it worked for him he could be very quick on the draw. We designated it an 'Irish Cream Chocolate Liqueur'. Names can be tough and often really easy to reject with a comment like "I just don't like it". Being words, not graphic designs, they are within everyone's purview so anyone can reject them. Getting to Baileys as quickly as we did was unusual. Indeed, as I discovered in later years, it was incredible.

A few weeks later I telephoned my mother. "Was there a dairy in Port Elizabeth called Baileys back in the early days? I'm sure I can remember it." "No" she said "Definitely not". There went our brand's 'certificate of provenance'. I would have to settle for Messrs. Chesterman and Cymborg, owners of Baileys Bistro and our future landlords. Not an especially Irish pair.



Baileys Bistro on Greek Street, 1973.

The next step was packaging, and we needed a bottle. Not being confident enough in the overall idea to suggest spending money on a new mould which could have run to several thousand pounds, we looked around for an existing bottle and Tom found one for an Irish whiskey brand that the company distributed called Redbreast. We decided we'd use that.

It was brown glass, squat and round like a typical liqueur bottle and seemed very appropriate for Baileys. But there was a problem: it had a prominent 'R' embossed on the shoulder of the bottle. I guess we could have changed Baileys to a name beginning with 'R', but Baileys was now fixed in our minds and it would have been hard to change. We had started to use it in conversation.

We also had to give it an address, so the very first label carried the legend 'The Dairy Distillery, County Monaghan'. It was a complete fabrication of mine – but it sounded good. And very Kerrygold.

Hugh and I had a secretary called Amy Wagner. Her husband Bob was a graphic designer and they lived on a small boat on the Thames at Kingston. Rather than drag Bob all the way in to London when he could be working, I wrote out a design brief and asked Amy to show it to him and get him to submit some designs as soon as he could. The brief asked for Kerrygold butter styling – but for an alcoholic drink: contented grazing cows and lush green pastures– we wanted an Irish rustic idyll on a label.

A couple of days later Bob delivered. I think in those early times he was paid five guineas (\$6.67) a design and he had sent about twenty (\$133) for us to choose from. Amy laid them out on our table and Tom, Hugh and I looked them over and immediately lit on one. That was it. We even liked the streaky magic marker khaki that was the dominant colour.



Bob Wagner's first design. Note the 'magic marker' effect, in khaki colouring.

It was pretty close to the Baileys label that you see today, give or take several tweaks and many millions of pounds over the last forty years. These were still early days in our product development lives

and there was a huge buzz seeing an idea begin to assume a physical form. I was no designer so depended on other people to perform this magic.

We had another cunning plan. Let's not rush to Dublin with their new drink yet. Let's show the Baileys bottle with a printed label. In those days we usually dealt in rough designs rendered with crayons and magic marker pens. There were no computers to produce perfect facsimiles of the real thing. We felt that showing Baileys as a rough design would make it look like a tentative idea: one which people would want to change and modify. We wanted Baileys to look irresistibly authentic.

Market research: Use it or lose it.

"It's a girl's drink."

The liquid product itself started to take shape in the June and July of 1973 but there were two other things we wanted to do before making the journey to Dublin. We would set up some focus groups, in which we would present Baileys in a proper bottle – as if it already existed – and ask real potential customers what they thought about it. That would be the theoretical world.

Secondly, we would put a couple of bottles into a bar and see if anyone actually asked for it and paid for a glass. That would be the real world. It was small stuff really. In those days market research was not the all-powerful force it is today, and it certainly wasn't in the drinks trade. But we thought it would make us look professional when we went to Dublin for the Big Sell. Cream and chocolate with Irish whiskey needed all the help it could get.

When the night of the focus group came, I looked nervously around the room. This was the male group. But then these were men who were prepared to turn up for a free drink and get paid for

it. We showed them the bottle that we were so proud of and began pouring out the glasses. Among most groups of drinking men there's always one who seems to dominate proceedings – you know who he is, he's the one who sits right in front of the interviewer and talks the loudest. It was vital for us to have him on our side and I kept my eye on him for his reaction. He drank it down, and then the researcher asked him what he thought.

"I'm a pint drinker," he said, looking down at his schooner. "And when I've had enough beer I move to shorts, like Scotch or vodka."

Oh dear. To make matters worse, being a talker, he went on: "It's a girl's drink," he said. There was an outbreak of nods and echoes of agreement among the other men. After this what man was going to openly lay claim to liking 'a girl's drink'? It was an absolute no-no. But when we looked at their glasses every one of them had been drained. It might not have been their kind of drink, but there was nothing wrong with the taste.

The women's group, on which we were now relying, wasn't really any more encouraging. One of them said "It looks and tastes like Kaolin & Morphine", which was a popular medicine for diarrhoea (it's still around).

So the research didn't deliver a hugely successful result and I didn't feel totally confident about making the trip to Dublin on the back of it. Mind you, it was unlikely that IDV's Irish team would have been considered as research-obsessives back then. Concurrent with this 'exhaustive' market research (three focus groups) we also had our real world test: two bottles behind the bar at the Allsop Arms just north of the Marylebone Road. I'd chosen this pub particularly because it was on my way home from Tom's office at York Gate.

I'd call in bright with hope, smile at the landlord and say, "Any sales yet?" He would shake his head slowly and carry on cleaning his pint pots as the two un-opened bottles glowered down at me from



The Allsop Arms today.

their place on the shelf. I wondered if that was where our Baileys would forever stay, getting dustier and duller, having travelled only a few streets up from the offices of IDV. Then I called in one evening and one of the bottles had gone. It looked like the landlord would no longer give our Baileys shelf space but “Oh no,” he said. “Two policemen came in this afternoon and demolished the whole bottle between them.”

“Right!” I said to myself. That was the incontrovertible evidence we were seeking. “Dublin, here we come...”

* * *

Called to the Bar.

I was working for an ad agency at the time that counted soap powder and fish finger manufacturers among its clients. The symposium had been deadly dull, except for one bright moment when a German delegate asked why Domestos claimed to kill ‘99 per cent of all known Germans’. The actual advertisement said 99 per cent of all known germs.

Tom was the star guest and being one of the few English speakers in the group, I was given the task of taking him out to dinner. My boss had issued me with the instructions not to spare on expenses as Tom was ‘in the wine trade’ – and these people expected to be entertained lavishly. It was a challenge to a callow young South African like me. Tom Jago was tall and handsome, in his late 40s, and he wore his suits well. Born in Cornwall, the son of a Camelford bank manager, he’d been a protégé of the Oxford University luminary A.L. Rowse.

On first acquaintance I found him quite formidable. But, as I discovered over the years I worked with him, he had a good heart, a wonderful sense of humour and great

intelligence and vision. It was more like working with a friend than a client.

We dined well, as per briefing, and I prudently let him choose the wine. We sat up at the bar after dinner looking over the complex array of continental products on offer with their idiosyncratic labels. It was like being in a kind of art gallery. I loved the heritage and heraldry of it all: monks beavering away making liqueurs, widows fermenting champagne and black and white dogs selling whisky; exotic names like Himbeergeist and Poire Williams and the curious case of the bat on the Bacardi bottle. Tom was full of wonderful stories about the drinks business that really captivated me. And we managed to sample a few of the more unusual offerings along the way.

As the end of the evening approached I remembered that I was helping to run a new group in the advertising agency where I worked and we were looking for business. I have never been the world's most comfortable hustler, but it wasn't too difficult asking Tom if he might consider giving us some consultancy work. What a change from washing powder, cooking fat and chicken nuggets it would be.