

Here is a traditional island recipe.

Take four pounds of corn meal, five pounds of sugar, four gallons of water, three or four packages of yeast, and a box of raisins. Put it all together in a large pottery crock, glass jug, or plastic trash can. Add an additional two pounds of sugar every few days or so. If you're so inclined add two or three dozen peaches or a couple of dozen bananas, or a comparable quantity of other fruit.

[Getting Everything Ready](#)



Cover the container with tarpaper or a piece of plywood and hide it in the woods or somewhere else that's secure. Let it brew for five or six days in the summer heat (longer, when it's cool). You'll know it's finished "working" when the bubbling stops and everything but the raisins settles to the bottom.

[Unidentified Islander Adding Meal to Brew](#)



Then invite your friends over to your outbuilding for a game of poker, a supper of fried fish, collards and "iced taters" or just to sit around, tell tall tales, laugh heartily, and listen to some good music.

[Adding Raisins & Bananas](#)



Strain your brew through some cheesecloth, or an old, fine-meshed window curtain, pour a quantity into a recycled chipped-beef glass, and enjoy. If a rat has happened to fall into the mixture and drowned, you'll probably want to wring him out (so you won't waste any of your concoction) and toss him out the window.

[It's Ready to "Work"](#)



When the jug is nearly empty, just down to the settlings, by all means don't dump the remains into the hog trough! That's what old Harry O'Neal did, and he should have known better.

Now there's no one around Ocracoke who knows more about meal wine than Harry did. He was what you might call a professional. But this story is not really about Harry. It's about Harry and Essie's little red pig. Essie told the story best, and you can listen to it on the CD "[Ocracoke Speaks](#)" produced by the North Carolina Language and Life Project under the direction of Walt Wolfram. But it's worth the retelling: Ocracoke has a long tradition of meal wine making, and meal wine drinking. The process is far from sophisticated. There is no elaborate still to construct, no connecting of copper tubing, and no danger from lead-based solder. It's about as simple as it gets, but the results can be highly rewarding.

I guess Harry just wasn't thinking straight when he dumped that mash into the pig's trough. Essie's sister was planning to come over that day to help with the weekly washing. Most folks on the island had gotten electricity in their homes by that time, but running water was still a luxury. Every house had a sizeable cistern, though. The older ones were constructed much like barrels with wooden staves held together by large iron rings. The tops were conical or curved, to prevent water, leaves, and other debris from rotting away the roofs. Later on, cisterns were often built of brick and vaulted tops were the norm. Guttering and downspouts carried rain water from the roof of the house into the cistern. When needed, it would be drawn out for drinking, bathing and washing.

[Ocracoke Cistern](#)



Most houses had a pitcher pump on the cistern, and at least one more in the kitchen. A small can or jar filled with water was always left nearby so you could prime the pump without hassle. Every now and then the leathers inside would need to be replaced, but all in all the pitcher pump was an improvement over a conch shell. Nevertheless, a large shell was often in evidence near the cistern as well, its long "tail" the perfect handle for an instrument that seemed designed for scooping out the best-tasting water around.

[Pitcher Pump on Cistern](#)



Of course, the cisterns needed cleaning every now and then. Mosquitoes would lay their eggs in any standing water, and openings around the downspouting or hatches provided a ready access for the ubiquitous insects. A piece of cheesecloth over your glass kept most of the "wigglers" out of your drinking water. Tree frogs could also be a nuisance in the summer months.

[Pitcher Pump at Kitchen Sink](#)



While Essie was filling the wash tub with water, getting her soap and washboard ready, and gathering all the dirty laundry together, that little red pig, unbeknownst to her, had been getting drunk.

All of a sudden that little pig started running around the yard, staggering from one side to the other, bumping into things and generally causing havoc. The chickens scattered, squawking and clucking, trying to get out of his way. He jumped up on the porch, then down again. He was running in circles and even doing summersaults. There was no stopping him.

Essie and Harry had a house full of younguns. They were the parents of eleven boys, and they all went after that pig, but he was too quick for them. It was total chaos...boys falling into the mud, yelling and screaming, and that drunken pig outwitting them every time.

It was about that time that Essie's sister showed up at the gate.

"Stop," Essie yelled. "Just stop. Wait. Don't come in this here yard."

Essie's sister had no idea what was going on. She was standing there trying to figure it out when that pig ran right between her legs and knocked her down. She fell over backwards, screaming and yelling. Meanwhile the pig ran down the sandy lane grunting and squeaking.

Two days passed. Harry was doing carpentry work in the village and whenever he came back to the house he asked Essie about the pig. "No," Essie told him, "the pig's never come back."

"Well, if he does, take a hammer and nail that pen shut so he can't get out again."

Eventually two young men from the Coast Guard knocked on Essie's door, and asked to speak with Harry. They wanted him to come down to the station. Essie was worried that something had happened, but then they told her they just wanted him to identify a hog. The story of Harry's drunken pig had gotten around the village, and the Coast Guard now had a stray pig in custody.

The lookout in the cupola had spied a figure swimming in the sound, heading towards Portsmouth Island. Thinking it was a red-headed man overboard, they went out to rescue him. By the time they reached the pig, it had climbed up onto Hog Shoal, of all places. He was so tired it didn't take much for the Coast Guardsmen to wrestle him into their vessel.

Sure enough, this was Harry's pig, and Harry brought him home and locked him up in his pen. The pig didn't do a thing the rest of the day but sleep. In the evening Harry and Essie dumped the uneaten food out of his trough and added fresh, but he still didn't budge. That pig just lay there in his pen and slept till the next morning.

"Oh well," Harry sighed with a knowing wink. "If you had a hangover like he's got...."

Some of the meal wine photos on this page were taken with a purloined Village Craftsmen camera by interloper and suspected revenuer, Warner Passanisi.