

# BALTIMORE WHISKEY—SUPER-SIZED

By Jack Sullivan

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“Do you want to super-size your order?” None of us escapes being asked that fast food question in the new Millennium. In the whiskey trade, however, super-sizing was the norm in the 19th and even into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

The practice began in the 18th Century when whiskey was dispensed by merchants to customers who brought their own containers, usually jugs, to be filled. In those days bigger was better. It meant fewer trips to the store for replenishment. So whiskey often was taken away in one, two, three and more gallon jugs. If it could be lifted when full, that was all that counted.

In the 19th Century the practice of bringing one's own jug faded as merchants began putting their liquors in their own containers, usually with their name attached and sometimes with a statement of ownership so that the customer was obliged to bring it back for a refill. These jugs also tended to be quite large. In the latter part of the 1800s, however, the merchandising of whiskey changed. Glass bottles began to replace stoneware jugs. Containers got smaller. Customers gravitated to quarts and even smaller sizes.

Some distillers and whiskey distributors, however, continued to sell their products in “super-sized” quantities. Among them were two Baltimore outfits: The Triaca Company and Samuel Bass.

The name Triaca first appears in Baltimore directories in 1882 under the name of its founder, Marcello Triaca. At that point the company was identified as a wine and liquor distributor, located at 98 Light St. Wharf and 1 Camden. By 1890 the firm address had changed to 300 Light Street and 5 W. Camden. In 1898, Marcello's name had been dropped and the firm became Triaca's Exchange, located at 312-318 Light Street. Another name change occurred in 1906 when it became the Triaca Company.

About 1909 the firm moved to the southwest corner of Pratt and Light Sts.

All these locations were in the vicinity of the Baltimore wharves where steamboats regularly plied up and down the Chesapeake Bay and beyond, carrying passengers and consumer goods, whiskey included.

Self-described as “importers and dealer,” in liquors and wine, the Triaca Co. had a strong advertising presence and at least a regional and even a national market for its multitude of brands. They included Old Triaca Club Whiskey, Special Reserve Celebrated Rye, Old Shoreman, Old Pardex, and Old Nestor. Gin brands were Old Orchard and Tipperary Dry.

Triaca consistently featured its whiskey super-sized. Gallon jugs were the norm. Evidence that Triaca still was super-sizing into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century is evidenced by the later Triaca Company jug

that once again is a gallon.

Even as late as the 1915 when most dealers were putting their liquors into quart glass bottles, Triaca continued to advertise its brands in large stoneware containers.

Triaca's gallon (or more) jugs from an advertisement of that year. It touts Old Shoreman, Special Reserve Rye, and Old Pardex. Some Baltimore collectors, however, question whether these jugs actually existed outside of the ads since no matching actual ceramics have been found. But who knows what might turn up in some future dig?

Triaca Company had a close relationship with another Maryland whiskey distributor, Ciotti & Vincenti Co., and often advertised its products along with its own. Among these were Old Troy Maryland Rye and Colgate brand, which Ciotti & Vincenti registered in 1907. A shot glass ties them together. The glass touts Colgate as the “best whiskey bottled expressly for family & medicinal use.” It has the C&V monogram in



the upper left of the glass and "The Triaca Company" on the bottom.

The shotglass may provide a slim clue as to where Triaca obtained its whiskey stocks for juggling and distribution.

Colgate also was a brand name used by the Federal Distilling Company of Colgate, a Baltimore-area community. That distiller may have been at least one source for the spirituous

liquids being purveyed by Triaca. Since Baltimore boasted many distillers, however, Triaca probably had little difficulty getting the raw supplies for its brands. Compared to the name-changing, constantly moving, nationally advertising Triaca Co., another Baltimore whiskey super-sizer seems positively dull. That was Samuel Bass, self-described as an "importer and wholesale" liquor dealer. This outfit appears to have been content to make its market chiefly in Baltimore. The business strategy apparently worked. The Bass firm shows up first in city directories in 1894. Its address in that year was 2 W. Pratt St. and it remained under the same name and at that address for the next quarter century.

Sam Bass resembled Triaca in the preference for putting his whiskey into large jugs. The firm used a variety of containers with a range of labels. Given its highly stable history, Samuel Bass does not seem to have been bragging.

Both Triaca and Bass avoided one of the great disasters to have befallen the Baltimore whiskey trade: The Great Fire of 1904. From February 6 to 8 of that year, a major conflagration in the downtown and wharf area claimed 140 acres, more than 70 blocks. Destroyed were 1,526 buildings. More than 2,500 business were burned out. The guru of Baltimore whiskey, **Jim Bready**, notes that

among them were many of the city's liquor wholesalers and distributors. They had tended to cluster together, often side by side, along S. Gay Street, Exchange Place (300-400 block of Lombard) and Pratt St. Many of their offices, liquid inventories and records went up in flames. Bready estimates that 48 of some 75 Baltimore wholesalers were burned out.

Thus, it is common in Baltimore city directories to see major changes in locations for whiskey dealers in 1904 and 1905. Yet both Samuel Bass and the Triaca Co. continued unabated at their addresses after the fire, although the fire may have been a close call for Triaca. A map of downtown Baltimore, with the fire area shaded, reveals that while everything north and east of Pratt and Light burned, businesses like Triaca that were south and west on Light survived. Bass's Pratt St. address also was outside the fire zone.

Neither firm, however, could avoid the disaster that Prohibition wrought on the whiskey industry in Baltimore and elsewhere. Both went out of business in 1919, never to reopen their doors. Whiskey super-sizing also disappeared with Prohibition. The largest container liquor is

sold in today is the half-liter. Unless, of course, one ventures into the hills for a jug of moonshine.

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Material for this article comes from a variety of sources, including Baltimore city directories. A key source was Jim Bready's article entitled "Maryland Rye: A Whiskey the Nation Long Fancied -- But Now Has Let Vanish," that

appeared in the Winter 1990 issue of the *Maryland Historical Magazine*.

