

Probably the best bartenders in the world

Two Belfast barmen are creating a taste of home and a stir in New York, with their new pub just named America's cocktail bar of the year and one of the pair, Jack McGarry, international barman of the year. Jack talked cocktails – and Manhattan history – with **Andrew Coffman-Smith**

MORE than 150 years after putting an Irish stamp on the new world and putting 'Bill the Butcher' six feet under, word on New York's streets is that the Dead Rabbits are back. Among their old haunts in the block on Water Street where George Washington gave a famous speech in one tavern and a female bouncer called Gallus Mag used to bite off and pickle the ears of unruly patrons in another, the Irish gang have found a home in a bar worthy of their name – The Dead Rabbit Grocery and Grog.

Founded by north Belfast men Sean Muldoon and Jack McGarry, The Dead Rabbit has been making a stir since it opened in January in more senses than one.

At an awards event in New Orleans this summer it was named 'World's Best New Cocktail Bar' and recognised as having the 'World's Best Cocktail Menu'. McGarry, aged just 24, was named 'International Bartender of the Year'.

Earlier this month Belfast Lord Mayor Mairtin O Muilleoir wrote to the pair, Ardoyne men both, telling them that all in their native city raised a glass to them for "sweeping the boards" at the Cocktail Oscars.

"The reaction has been unbelievable," says McGarry. "Our customers absolutely love it and we have the most publicised bar in New York city. People from every walk of life come through the doors of The Dead Rabbit."

Obviously, then, these aren't just run-of-the-mill cocktails. In fact, Muldoon and McGarry are trying to take punters back in time by recreating the long-forgotten beverages of bygone eras.

The Dead Rabbit's 1828, three-story brick building takes visitors back to 1845-1865 when Irish pub culture met high-end cocktail drinking in Manhattan. At the time, Water Street, near Manhattan's southern tip, was a dirty, filth-reeking, cramped slum along the docks.

"Water Street itself was the highest crime area in all of New York city and was festooned with brothels, dancehalls, boarding houses and watering holes," says McGarry.

"Street gangs were as plentiful as they were in the Five Points, which is nearby, and river piracy, murder and general mayhem were commonplace." Immigrants, seeking refuge from Famine-stricken Ireland but finding America inhospitable, formed gangs such as the Dead Rabbits for protection, as readers who have seen Martin Scorsese's 2002 film *Gangs of New York* may remember.

Legend has it their name came either from an impaled bunny that led them into battle or from an Anglicisation of the Irish word raibeard – a big, fearsome fellow – coupled with 'dead', meaning 'very'.

By shillelagh, musket and blade (and notorious street fighter Hell-Cat Maggie's filed-teeth and brass claws), the largely-Catholic Irish gang went to war



with Bill 'the Butcher' Poole and his Protestant 'Natives', as portrayed in Scorsese's movie, with Daniel Day Lewis in the Bill the Butcher role. The old world tribal loyalties were laid bare on tavern walls, on which, alongside portraits of George Washington, prints of English monarchs or

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Irish heroes such as Daniel O'Connell were hung. The sawdust-covered first-floor Taproom of the new Dead Rabbit brings back to life these illegal 'spirit groceries' and 'groggs'. Along with fine food, oysters, bottled punch, craft beer and what is reputedly the largest Irish whiskey selection in New York, there are also hard-to-find Irish and British grocery goods for sale.

The second floor Parlor, reminiscent of the sporting man's cocktail lounges of Lower Broadway, offers communal punch and 72 historically based cocktails concocted by McGarry who spent a year and a half researching the recipes of the 19th century's most celebrated mixologists.

A big problem in creating a pub that aspired to historical authenticity was updating centuries-old drinks to suit modern tastes, says McGarry. He discovered that many of the original recipes were "entirely unpalatable and very sweet", like Prohibition-era mixers that masked the taste – and the poison – of 'bathtub gin'.

"My whole ethos is to make the tastiest drinks possible and if that involves meandering round historical accuracy, then so be it," he says. Along with The Dead Rabbit being just around the corner from where Washington gave a punch-drunk

■ FIVE PINTS: Above, Jack McGarry, left, and Sean Muldoon, Belfast barmen making a mark with their Dead Rabbit bar, also top right, in a part of New York notorious in the 19th century for its gangs. Below, Daniel Day Lewis and Leonardo Di Caprio in the film *Gangs of New York*



farewell to his rebel army, McGarry says inspiration for the punch served came from *Imbibe*, a cocktail history book by US writer David Wondrich.

"At its peak, the ritual of the Punch Bowl was a secular communion, welding a group of good fellows into a temporary sodality whose values superseded all others."

"I really loved that quote," says McGarry. "The fact that there was no pretension about it – everyone there was to drink and to have some fun, which to me is what drinking in bars is all about."



But it's not just New York's shaken and stirred heritage that The Dead Rabbit draws upon for inspiration.

"We looked at our two favourite bars in Belfast which were The Bar at The Merchant Hotel which was the style we worked in and The Duke of York which was the style of bar we drank in. We wanted to bring these two ideas together," says McGarry. Muldoon and McGarry both got their starts in bartending in Belfast, respectively at Botanic Inn and The Hunting Lodge, before meeting at The Merchant Hotel where they worked together for five years. It was at The Merchant that bar manager Muldoon (42) mentored McGarry and put him in charge of the cocktail menu.

"The focus Sean had, and I totally shared with him, was to be the absolute best in the world. The Merchant was indeed the most awarded cocktail bar in the world while we were there and, to this day, probably is," says McGarry.

After The Merchant won 'World's Best Cocktail Bar' in 2010, a regular approached Muldoon and McGarry on taking their talent to the Big Apple. "He felt that we had reached our peak in Belfast and that there was nothing left to do but to win more awards," says McGarry. "He said if we were able to replicate what we had done in Belfast in New York, that the opportunities would be limitless."

It's fitting that the patron saint of the pair's New York bar is Dead Rabbit leader John 'Old Smoke' Morrissey. Within a week of arriving in town at the age of 18, the Famine refugee made a name for himself after fighting his way into an exclusive club. For that, Morrissey was recruited by the saloon's (and the Dead Rabbits') benefactor – Tammany Hall – to be a 'runner' to take control of fresh-off-the-boat Irish and a 'shoulder-hitter' to ensure voters cast their ballots early and often for the Democratic Party. Morrissey went on to become a bare-knuckle boxer, gambler, resort owner, congressman and state senator before he died, a respectable millionaire, at the age of 47. Following in the footsteps of Old Smoke, Muldoon and McGarry might have a lot of catching up to do but, according to McGarry, there are already plans in the works for them to develop their own poitin brand, partner with a large Irish whiskey company, talk of a new bar project and even a book deal.

■ The Dead Rabbit, 30 Water Street, New York, New York; www.deadrabbitnyc.com.