

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Mint Condition**

While Iran continues to work on expansion of its nuclear capability, one is reminded of the origins of another Persian creation with explosive power. *Julâb* is the Arabic version of the Persian word *gulâb*, meaning rosewater. None of this sounds particularly nuclear, but by Fifteenth Century England *julep* came to mean a sweet syrupy drink (especially one to which medicine has been added). In the case of the Old South, that medicine was Bourbon.

The mint-steeped "dram of spirituous liquor" consumed "by Virginians of a morning" was described in print in 1803, and a brandy julep was mentioned in America in 1809. Both of these descriptions were before the advent of Kentucky Bourbon. But Bourbon in an iced silver goblet (mixed with sugar and crushed mint with a sprig on top) is the liquor of choice in this quintessential Southern concoction. With the ice taking a slow meltdown, the mint julep's potency can be quite atomic.

Probably first served in the early to mid 1700s in Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina, the early mint juleps were made with rum, rye whiskey and other available spirits. Kentucky Bourbon wasn't widely distributed until later in the 19th century. But after Bourbon found its home in Kentucky, native son Henry Clay introduced the refreshing minty favorite to Washington, D.C. No wonder the laws don't come out quite right.

One local historian, the late Stanley Clisby Arthur (in his *Famous New Orleans Drinks and How To Mix 'Em*), offers another possible origin story for the mint julep. He writes of a "San Domingo Julep" made with "sugar cane rum", and says it "seems to be the original mint julep that came to Louisiana back in 1793, at the time the white aristocrats, who were expelled from San Domingo by the uprising of the blacks, settled in New Orleans." In other words, the first mint julep was a Mojito.

The mint julep is traditionally made with four ingredients: Bourbon, mint leaf, sugar and water. And spearmint is the mint of choice in the Southern United States, especially Kentucky. A Mojito has very similar ingredients: white rum, sugar (traditionally sugar cane juice), lime juice, mint and sparkling water. The original Cuban recipe also uses spearmint, or *yerba buena*.

Cuba is considered the birthplace of the Mojito, and was a stopping off point for so many Haitian refugees on their way to New Orleans. Still, the exact origin of this classic cocktail has been debated for years. Some trace the Mojito to a similar 16th century drink, known as "*El Draque*", in honor of Sir Francis Drake. It was made initially with tafia, a primitive form of rum (but rum was used when the Saint Domingue diaspora arrived in Cuba). While this drink was not called a Mojito then, it was still the original combination of these ingredients. Some historians argue that African slaves, working in the Cuban cane fields, had a major role in the cocktail's origin.

The preparation of a mint julep calls for a fresh mint sprig as a colorful and aromatic garnish, to introduce the flavor and aroma through the nose. The actual treatment of the mint is commonly debated, as methods vary from one bartender to another. But, although the mint julep may be considered as one of a loosely associated family of drinks called "smashes", a better description of the "smashing" would be "muddling".

Meanwhile, back in Kentucky, the sweet cocktail of mint and Bourbon has been the celebrated drink of the Kentucky Derby for more than a century. And satellite Derby parties all across the land are not really Derby parties without mint juleps. Churchill Downs alone sells close to 120,000 mint juleps over the two-day period including Derby Day. But take a poll of Louisville bartenders, and a majority would agree most of the people who order the drink, around Derby time or otherwise, are tourists. Just like in New Orleans, most of the unladylike behavior for beads is by out-of-town visitors.

But down in the Crescent City, where the pace is slower, juleps are still popular. There's time to sip lazily. There shouldn't be, but there is. New Orleans guitarist Phil deGruy once noted that in New Orleans there are three speeds: "slow, stop and mildew".

New Orleans has its very own versions of a mint julep, and so does almost every state in the Deep South. Georgia has its special recipe and so does Louisiana. When visiting Natchez, Mississippi, I highly recommend the silver goblet variety from Monmouth Plantation. Their "Mr. Roosevelt" has been preparing mint juleps at Monmouth for over a quarter of a century and is renowned for his art, to the point where he has been bestowed the title of an honest-to-goodness "Kentucky Colonel". He displays his certificate proudly on the wall.

After the 1849 Gold Rush to California, New Orleans even offered a pineapple julep, served up at a popular local oasis known as Logan's Pelican Coffee-house located at the corner of Gravier and Union "in the rear of Clapp's Church". That's how Mr. Logan advertised it. Reverend Theodore Clapp (1792-1866) was a Yale man, who (in 1822) became pastor of the first Presbyterian Church in New Orleans. In 1834, he switched to Unitarian, and organized his new flock from a large portion

of his Presbyterian charge. He labored unceasingly through twenty yellow fever epidemics and being a neighbor of the Pelican Coffee-house.

Here's Stanley Clisby Arthur's recipe for a "New Orleans Mint Julep":

"Put the glasses or the metal goblets in the refrigerator the night before you are to serve juleps. This is a high-powered julep so you'll need two jiggers of Bourbon for every glass. In the serving glass drop a layer of mint leaves, fill one-quarter full with shaved or snowball ice, then one teaspoon of powdered sugar. Repeat until the glass is half full. Add one jigger of Bourbon. Repeat until the glass is full, the second jigger of Bourbon being the last to go into the glass. Serve on a tray with a straw or tube in each goblet so that hand does not touch the container, which is frosted white."

Kentucky Episcopalians apparently use one more jigger than the above New Orleans recipe. In *O Ye Jigs & Juleps!*, best-selling book by Virginia Cary Hudson (first published in 1962), the author writes of her Kentucky childhood in 1904. The book covers her observations on her upbringing and how a young Episcopalian learns to fix a proper mint julep:

"I ran to the mint bed and got the sugar and the ice and the whiskey behind the blankets on the top shelf, and Miss Fanny said, 'How much whiskey in here?' and I said, 'One jigger,' and Miss Fanny says, she says, 'that's for faith. Where's the hope and Charity? Go back and put two more.'"

Confederate General Simon Bolivar Buckner, who surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant, served as Governor of the Commonwealth of Kentucky 1887-1891. His son, Lieutenant General Simon Bolivar Buckner, Jr., was killed during the closing days of the Battle of Okinawa by enemy artillery fire, making him the highest-ranking U.S. military officer to have been killed by enemy fire during World War II. This fallen American hero once said it best:

"When all is ready, assemble your guests on the porch or in the garden where the aroma of the juleps will rise heavenward and make the birds sing. Propose a worthy toast, raise the goblets to your lips, bury your nose in the mint, inhale a deep breath of its fragrance and sip the nectar of the gods."

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