

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

The French 75

How is it that Arnaud's Restaurant in the New Orleans French Quarter has a popular bar named for a famous cocktail first concocted at Harry's New York Bar in Paris, France?

It all began when an internationally acclaimed American thoroughbred horse racing jockey scored his very first win on March 6, 1889, at the Fair Grounds Race Course in New Orleans.



If you remember the lively patriotic 1942 musical biopic *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, you can't forget James Cagney (as actor/songwriter George M. Cohan) dancing and singing:

"Yankee Doodle came to London,

Just to ride the ponies.

I am a Yankee Doodle Boy."

And that "Boy" was James Forman "Tod" Sloan (August 10, 1874 - December 21, 1933), the American jockey who began life as a small and frail child in Indiana and went on to become the toast of two continents. After his very first win in the Crescent City, the gifted rider won almost 30% of his races in 1896, upping that number to 37% in 1897, and increasing it again to a remarkable 46% the following year.



James Cagney as George M. Cohan playing jockey Tod Sloan

Sloan traveled to England in 1897, where he began riding. In 1898, Tod rode five consecutive winners at the Newmarket Racecourse.

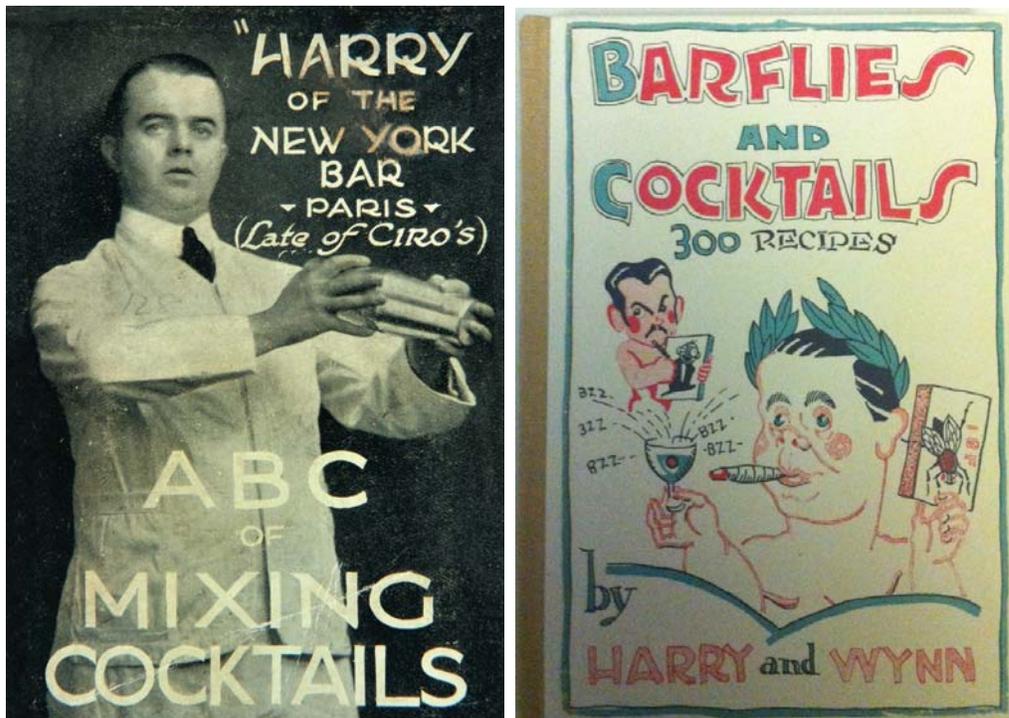


1899 Vanity Fair caricature of Sloan in his "monkey crouch"

The British made fun of his forward seat style of riding, which they called the “monkey crouch,” and (although they initially mocked it) this style revolutionized the sport worldwide. Sloan captured a number of wins including his 1899 ride on *Sibola*, and in 1900 he won the Ascot Gold Cup on *Merman* for owner Lily Langtry.

Sloan's spectacular racing career was sadly finished by 1901, under suspicion that he had bet on races in which he himself had competed. After some time (and since this charge was dubious at best), British racing historians ultimately restored Sloan's reputation. He was inducted into the National Museum of Racing and Hall of Fame in 1955.

But it is what Sloan did soon after his jockey career came to an end that brought about the creation of “the French 75”, and some other classic cocktails. He hired Harry to run his “New York Bar”.



After having a brief run as a one-man show in a New York vaudeville theatre, Tod Sloan went to Paris, France, where in 1911 he turned a petite bistro into the world's famous New York Bar, later known as Harry's New York Bar. Located at 5, *Rue Daunou* between the *Avenue de l'Opéra* and the *Rue de la Paix*, the establishment included an actual bar from Manhattan that was dismantled and shipped to Paris. Sloan had obtained the bar from a New Yorker named Clancy, but the man Sloan got to run the place was mixologist extraordinaire Harry MacElhone from Dundee, Scotland – the Harry in “Harry's”.

During World War I, the bar became a popular rendezvous for members of the American Field Service Ambulance Corps. But by the

1920s the bar no longer belonged to Tod Sloan. Financial difficulties from lavish overspending forced him to sell his New York Bar and return home to the US. But Harry's continued on. It was the frequent watering hole of American expats and international celebs, those in the literary and artistic community, as well as tourists just visiting the City of Lights. The "Ivories" Piano Bar at Harry's is where *An American in Paris* was composed by George Gershwin. And you may have also run into Ernest Hemingway, Humphrey Bogart, Coco Chanel or Rita Hayworth – or perhaps the Duke of Windsor.

Even fictional characters showed up. James Bond's visit at age 16 to "Sank Roo Doe Noo," Ian Fleming wrote, culminated "in the loss, almost simultaneous, of his virginity and his notecase".

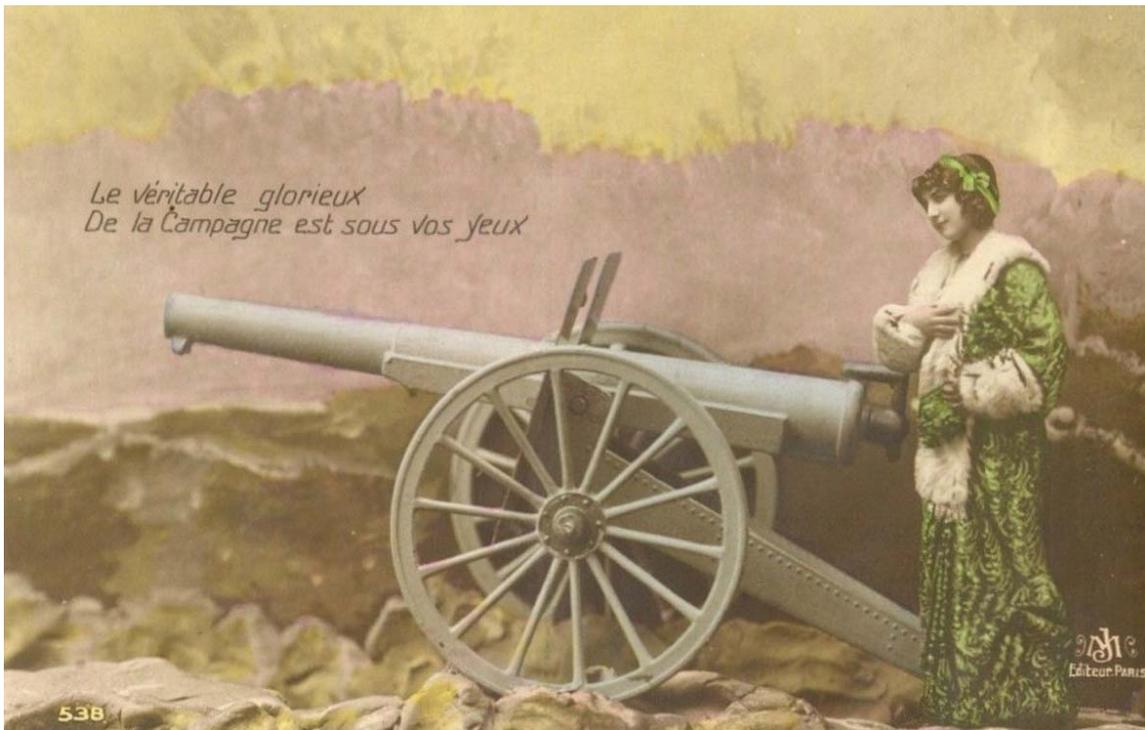
Although there are other claimants for some of these classic cocktails, Harry's is said to be the birthplace of not only "the French 75", but also the "Bloody Mary", "the Monkey Gland" and "the Sidecar".

The story goes that "the Sidecar" was named after the motorcycle sidecar in which a World War I Army captain "was driven to and from the little bistro where the drink was born and christened": Harry's Bar in Paris (although even Harry, in his *Barflies and Cocktails* gives credit for the recipe to "MacGarry, the popular bartender at Buck's Club, London". Stanley Clisby Arthur claims it was the accidental discovery by a French innkeeper so "confused and excited by news of damage to his side car" that he "combined separate orders of cognac brandy, Cointreau and lemon juice into a single drink."

And here, at last, is the story behind creation of "the French 75":

Harry MacElhone invented this cocktail (originally made with gin, champagne, lemon juice and simple syrup) in 1915 at his Paris landmark, Harry's New York Bar. The name is derived from the fact that the concoction had a direct but powerful kick like being shelled by the "*glorieux*" French 75mm artillery guns that were placed along the Maginot Line. The wondrous weapon on wheels saw widespread service in the first World War by the French and the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF).

One of the 75's innovations, perfected for the first time in the history of field artillery, was a hydro-pneumatic long recoil mechanism designed by Major Louis Baquet that enabled the gun's wheels to remain motionless during the firing sequence. Since it did not need to be re-aimed after each firing, "the French 75" was able to deliver fifteen rounds per minute on its target, either high-explosive or shrapnel, up to about five miles away. "The French 75" performed its best during the Battle of the Marne in August–September 1914 and at Verdun in 1916, in that it was especially devastating against waves of infantry moving out into the open.



The Soixante-Quinze, French 75mm field gun, to the left of a French "Vanna White", from the postcard collection of Ned Hémard

World War I began July 1914 and lasted until November 11, 1918. But a tragic conflict's ending marked a happy beginning in New Orleans. It was that year that Arnaud's Restaurant was founded by a French wine salesman named Arnaud Cazenave. Count Arnaud (whose title was self-proclaimed and who opened his fine dining establishment a year before the Volstead Act was introduced in Congress) was renowned for ensuring that his patrons still got to enjoy themselves during Prohibition. Fines and incarceration were just part of the job.

Kit Wohl writes in her interesting and informative *Arnaud's Restaurant Cookbook, New Orleans Legendary Creole Cuisine*:

"The French 75 has always been served at Arnaud's, but it has returned to popularity with the resurgence of interest in cocktails. It would be difficult to imagine a happier combination than fine champagne and excellent cognac."

Kit explains the introduction of "the French 75" at the restaurant:

"The Count, having made his start as a liquor salesman, held a certain affinity for fine spirits. His daughter, Germaine, inherited his enthusiasm.

Arnaud's was one of the many restaurants providing a 'Gentlemen

Only' area, and here was the Grill Bar. Germaine scotched that notion soon after she assumed command, so today the *rendezvous* is the French 75, a smart champagne and cocktail haven for both sexes.

The drink, dubbed by American doughboys in WWI to honor a French 75mm artillery shell, was served before battle. As the war ended in 1918, Arnaud's opened and began serving this invigorating cocktail."



Cut-away view of the 75mm shell

Arnaud's French 75 Bar has been named one of GQ's top 25 bars in the US, "a historical bar (monkey lamps, varnished wood, 1920s French music) with perfect cocktails". This "sophisticated addition to nightlife in the French Quarter — a true New Orleans cocktail bar" and the drink for which it is named were also featured prominently in *Saveur* Magazine April 2013 special feature on New Orleans.

The reader will also notice that Arnaud's recipe for their "French 75" includes "excellent cognac" instead of the original gin. The ingredients for the Arnaud's "French 75" (featured in *Saveur*) are listed below:

INGREDIENTS

1 ¼ oz. cognac (preferably Courvoisier VS)
¼ oz. fresh lemon juice
¼ oz. simple syrup
Champagne, chilled (preferably Moët & Chandon Imperial)
Lemon peel for garnish

INSTRUCTIONS

Combine cognac, lemon juice, and simple syrup in a cocktail shaker filled with ice. Shake and pour into a champagne flute. Top with champagne and garnish with a small piece of lemon peel.



The liquid "French 75" and the 75mm field gun modèle 1897

Topflight resident mixologist Chris Hannah and the management at Arnaud's have made a persuasive case for the use of cognac over gin, although there are purists that insist on the original. "Trader Vic" Bergeron called his cognac version "the French 125" for some odd reason. In a city that is French in so many wonderful ways, I say:

"Vive la France et vive la différence!"

Ted Haigh, aka Dr. Cocktail, provides a beautiful description of the drink, but the reader should feel free to substitute the word cognac for gin:

"The parallels between the field gun and the sparkling cocktail named for it should be obvious ... smooth, yet packs a wallop. Still, the drink itself is rather counterintuitive. Who would imagine combining gin and champagne? Yet with the addition of a bit of sugar and a soupçon of fresh lemon juice, it is a refreshing choice in your arsenal."



Arnaud's postcard

from the collection of Ned Hémard

In 1978, the ownership of Arnaud's changed hands with its purchase of by Archie and wife, Jane Casbarian. The family worked diligently toward restoring the restaurant back to its original roots, when Count Arnaud was in command. Archie A. Casbarian (who died in 2009) described Creole food as a continuously evolving "exuberant, living cuisine." "We haven't deviated," he said, "into nouvelle or light or anything else." Today, Arnaud's is run by 4th generation Casbarians, Katy and Archie Casbarian, with their mother Jane. The French 75 Bar that lies next to the main dining room of Arnaud's (once for gentlemen only) was renovated in 2003, and is now known for its premium spirits and its fine cigars – a spiritual oasis now welcome to both sexes.

And as for Tod Sloan, who won his first race at the New Orleans Fair Grounds, he has become part of the English language – well, at least for Cockneys in the East end of London. His first name was adopted into the Cockney rhyming slang to mean "own" as in "on his own" (from Tod Sl "oan"). It follows then that someone "on his tod" is alone.

As for "the French 75": It stands "alone" as a champagne cocktail
New Orleans has chosen for "its own".

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