

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Ojen Update

Below is an article I wrote in 2007 on *Ojen* cocktails, their popularity in the Crescent City (especially among carnival riders) and how the clock was running out on this Spanish favorite. Hundreds of cases were commissioned locally before the factory was to close its doors, and the supply lasted for some time. But what was left had almost run out by the time the article appeared. Now, although the last bottles have left the shelves, resourceful devotees have scrambled for a solution.

Banana Republics and *Ojen* Cocktails

The late Chuck Busch's richly colorful and tropical "*Mondo Kayo Social and Marching Club*" continues on each Mardi Gras with its devoted dancing followers of bliss. The club's musical genre can be described as Chiquita Banana meets Martin Denny, while the overriding premise of the organization is that New Orleans is by far the most exotic and northernmost "banana republic" in the hemisphere. To Chuck, a surfeit of modernity in most other cities of North America excluded them from this epithet.

Honduras was the first country to carry the moniker of "banana republic", and it came about by way of New Orleans. A young man named William Sydney Porter was working as a teller and bookkeeper for a bank in Austin, Texas. In 1894, accused of embezzlement, he was then fired but not indicted. He and his family moved to Houston the next year when a subsequent audit of the Austin bank brought federal charges against him. The day before he was to stand trial, Porter (who was also an excellent writer) skipped town and headed for New Orleans. From there he went to Honduras where he coined the term "banana republic".

Unfortunately, his wife was terminally ill and unable to join him in Honduras. Upon learning this, Porter returned to Austin in 1897,

surrendered to the court, and was sent to prison. A friend back in New Orleans forwarded Porter's stories to publishers until his release three years later for good behavior. He had fourteen short stories published under various pseudonyms while incarcerated. But the *nom de plume* that stuck was "O. Henry", and with it he would go on to write hundreds of stories more (famous for the twist at the end).

This story also has an interesting twist. The name "O. Henry" brings to mind an alcoholic beverage long famous in the traditions of New Orleans. A product of Spain, *Ojen* has a similar pronunciation to that of the short story writer. The "j" is pronounced "h" in Spanish, so this anisette liqueur is enunciated "Oh Hen".

Ojén is the name of a pretty village of small, whitewashed *casas* nestled in the mountains behind Marbella in Andalucía. Andalucía is that part of Southern Spain named for the Vandals (Arabic has no way of pronouncing the "v" sound). The Moors were there from their arrival in 711 (*Hasta la vista, Visigoths ... too many "v" sounds*) until the *Reconquista*. The town of *Ojén* derives its name from the Arabic word, *hoxán*, meaning "rough, rugged or bitter place". Medicine, philosophy, astronomy and mathematics might not be what they are today without the translations of original Syriac Greek texts by scholars assembled by the Moors of Andalucía.

The town of *Ojén* is famous today for its Flamenco music but was once renowned for its anise-flavored *Aguardiente de Ojén* (*aguardiente* being the generic name for a liquor of between forty and forty-five percent alcohol). Spaniards consumed this "fiery water" in their morning coffee, and its daily consumption became such a part of daily Spanish life that "*una copita de Ojén*" was a common phrase. Exported to London and Paris and ports beyond, Picasso chose to immortalize its coffin-shaped bottle on canvas, and the original distillery is now a wine museum. Despite this fame, this is not the *Ojen* New Orleanians have delighted in for years.

Back in 1937, Stanley Clisby Arthur wrote of the charms of *Ojen*. He related its production by Manuel Fernandez, S. A., of Jerez, its pronunciation as "*oh-her*", and that it "is a word shortened from the Spanish *ajenjo* (*ah-hen'ho*) meaning absinthe and wormwood in the musical tongue of Spain." Fernandez White Label *Ojen* won a gold medal at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, better known as the St. Louis World's Fair. Besides the alternate name origin, the neck of the Fernandez bottle has a distinct Adam's apple to prevent slipping from one's hands. No Picasso coffin shape in the New Orleans variety.

The "*Ojen* cocktail" is an icy frappé with a dash of Peychaud bitters. Long considered a hangover remedy at Galatoire's and Antoine's, Brennan's touts it as "the absinthe of the Spanish aristocracy." With its delicate rose-colored tint from the bitters, the cocktail is also known

as a "Pink Chemise". According to a 1990 article in "New Orleans Social Life", *Ojen* "is indispensable at Mardi Gras – in order to reach a great plain of levity and retain this plateau" and "is also helpful to the float riders because it acts like paregoric and it keeps the riders comfortable." The late Bruce Baird, Jr., stated in the article that "more *Ojen* was sold in New Orleans than anywhere else in the world; but we didn't drink enough; so the factory stopped producing it."

According to Marc Pelletier, that was in the 1980s. Fernandez was going out of business and closing their distillery so the owners of Martin Wine Cellar commissioned a huge final run of hundreds of cases. It is from that production that New Orleanians continue to enjoy the swirling *louche* of this traditional Spanish favorite. And while preparing any good cocktail, many prefer a twist at the end.

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"Banana Republics and *Ojen* Cocktails"
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Update written one week before Mardi Gras, 2011

Sadly, the Fernandez White Label *Ojen* bottle is no longer available at Martin's. Cedric Martin informed this author that he and his staff are hard at work making connections with Spanish distillers to once again duplicate the popular anisette of Andalucía. Gone for now, though, is Fernandez's *Ojen* and the distinctive bottle with its amusing recipe on the back ... one for a "JITTERS COCKTAIL –

1/3 Fernandez White Label *Ojen*.
1/3 Gin.
1/3 French Vermouth.

After all, a jittery carnival float ride along bumpy New Orleans streets can cause a jittery stomach. And the "*Ojen* cocktail" with a dash of rosy Peychaud bitters is an excellent remedy for calming the stomach. Peychaud's, originally created in New Orleans by pharmacist Antoine Amédée Peychaud has long been associated with the Sazerac cocktail. It is an aromatic gentian-flavored bitters, similar to Angostura, but with a lighter body, more floral aroma and sweeter taste.

So how did *Ojen* consumers in the Big Easy solve the problem of this missing commodity?

D. Irwin Mackenroth, Jr., offered the answer. "Vicente Bosch," he said. "That's the new *Ojen*. You can buy it at Elio's Wine Warehouse."

That's uptown on South Miro Street. At Elio's, the answer was the same. "It's the new *Ojen*."

"Vicente Bosch" was actually the name of the distiller, boldly printed on the label. The true name of this *Ojen* replacement is *Anís del Mono*, the trademark of a popular anise-flavored liqueur also made in Spain. The name in Spanish is "The Monkey's Anisette". First produced in 1870 under the trademark name *Anís del Juliano* or "Julian's Anisette," this product is not produced in Andalucía but in the eastern Catalan town of Badalona, begun by the Romans in the third century. Located near the city of Barcelona, it is situated on the left bank of the Besòs River and on the Mediterranean Sea, backed by the *Serra de la Marina* mountain range.

And although it's "the new *Ojen*" to many folks in the Crescent City, it has been known as *Anís del Mono* for over a century. Stuart C. Weese, a long-time *Ojen* aficionado, finds *Anís del Mono* to be "lighter than *Ojen*" and touts its stomach calming virtues, just as his father had so many years before for the original *Ojen*. Dr. Winston Holbrook Weese (1924-2000) rode in Rex on the same float as his friend, Bruce Baird, Jr., and extolled the "carminative powers of *Ojen*," as well as the alcoholic content that soothed the "fevered brain" of the night before. Others say it enables the float riders to go a long time without a visit to *el baño*.

Inquiring minds by now are trying to figure out how this delightful digestif acquired the unusual name, "Monkey's Anisette". Over a century ago, Vicente Bosch was a Catalan businessman who owned an anisette distillery and numerous merchant vessels. In one of his ships, they brought back a monkey from America that later lived in *la fábrica* next to the beach at Badalona. By the end of the nineteenth century, the operation became known as "the distillery of the monkey" and the anisette as "Anisette of the Monkey". On the label (with a bearded human head and a long tail) sits a monkey holding a bottle in one hand and a parchment in the other, which reads:

"Es el mejor
La ciencia lo dijo
Y yo no miento"

"It is the best
Science has said it
And I don't lie"

There are two theories about the visage on that monkey. Some say after a time they decided to put the body of the monkey with the face of Vicente Bosch as the logo on the bottle. Another theory says that Bosch himself took advantage of the vigorous debate over Darwin and the theories surrounding evolution to publicize his anisette and his

trademark. Some say that the evolved humanoid primate on the label is none other than Charles Darwin himself. Darwin was often the subject of such caricature, especially the one of him with an ape's body in an 1871 issue of *The Hornet*. New Orleans' Mystick Krewe of Comus did its own share of Darwinian caricature in its 1873 tableau, "The Missing Links to Darwin's Origin of the Species". One is welcome to compare all these many wondrous images.

Anís del Mono is considered, along with the French *Marie Brizard* anisette, to be the finest of its type. Winning prizes in Paris and Madrid in the 1870s, this delectable liqueur has been popular for many years. Spanish painter and sculptor Juan Gris incorporated the unique trademark label into his 1914 Cubist collage, entitled "The Bottle of *Anís del Mono*," the Queen Sofia Museum, Madrid.

The bottle, too, is symbolic and quite beautiful. Vicente Bosch went on a trip to Paris and returned with a bottle of perfume as a gift for his wife. After requesting the rights to the packaging from the *perfumerie*, he registered the bottle in 1902 and connected the famous label with its bottle.

Anís del Mono is composed of *matalahúva*, the seed of the *anís* (anise) plant (only first quality, rigorously selected, which grows throughout the Mediterranean region), from which the essential oil provides a characteristic bouquet. Additionally, the colorless alcoholic beverage includes pure water and sugar syrup chemically refined and filtered. The distillation process is carried out in the factory's original nineteenth century copper stills.

Anís del Mono is shipped to numerous other countries in Ibero-America. It is very popular in Peru, as is the nation's own brand *Anís Najar* (produced in Arequípa, Peru, since 1854). It seems that climbing up to Machu Picchu, the pre-Columbian 15th-century Inca site located 7,970 feet above sea level is way up in the mountains. Peruvians also appreciate the beverage's carminative virtues for such high-altitude sojourns.

And back in Spain, *Anís del Mono* is popularly known "*el chulo de Badalona*" ("The Dandy of Badalona"). For now, the "Monkey's Anisette" is doing a dandy job of substituting for a New Orleans favorite.

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