

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Shaken, Not Stirred**

"Just the old fellows with a tender spot in their hearts and a longing in their stomachs for the ripe days of yore when mixed drinks were cool and smooth and stimulating, poignant and refreshing, expanding and enheartening, trouble erasing and joy bringing, plentiful and inexpensive - just the old fellows who were the good fellows are invited to read this column.

Upstarts, turn to some other story. Ladies, bless you, this won't interest you. Raw liquor drinkers, there's nothing here for you either."

Don Higgins of the New Orleans *Item-Tribune* penned the above words as a tribute to Henry Charles Ramos (born August 7, 1856), famed New Orleans bartender and mixologist. The Sunday after Ramos' death on September 18, 1928, the paper ran Higgins' column once again.

This all-inclusive writer, however, welcomes upstarts, ladies and raw liquor drinkers to read on - to learn about the Ramos Gin Fizz and its illustrious creator.

It all began with a fizz, not a bang. Not Charles Dickens' famous illustrator, Hablot Knight Browne, known as "Phiz", but fizz. The first printed reference to a fizz (spelled "fiz") was in the 1887 edition of Jerry Thomas' *Bartender's Guide*, which contains six fizz concoctions. This new type of mixed drink (a variation on the older sour) featured an acidic juice (like lime or lemon) along with carbonated water.

In 1874, Henry Ramos (his friends called him Carl) worked the bar at Eugene Krost's lager beer saloon on Exchange Alley, just off of Canal Street. After running saloons in Baton Rouge and Birmingham during the early 1880s, he returned home to the Crescent City in 1888 and purchased from Emile Sunier the *Imperial Cabinet* saloon (located at the corner of Gravier and Carondelet streets). On the second story

was a popular restaurant known as *The Old Hickory*. It was there at the *Cabinet* that Henry Ramos likely served the first gin fizz that differed so radically from the other frothy gin mixtures served in other establishments. Others say the drink was first served at Meyer's Restaurant in New Orleans (that Ramos owned).

Ramos stayed at the *Imperial Cabinet* until 1907 when he purchased Tom Anderson's *Stag* saloon opposite the Gravier Street entrance to the St. Charles Hotel. It was a surefire tourist destination for thirsty fizz followers. At times the *Stag* became so crowded that customers waited an hour before being served. This necessitated a corps of busy shaker boys behind the bar steadily vibrating the long metal shakers until the mixture obtained body (or got "ropy" as an experienced bartender would say).

During the 1915 Mardi Gras, demand was so high that 35 shaker boys nearly shook their arms off. As a shaker boy tired, he would toss his shaker to the one behind him to carry on. After all that "shakin' goin' on", the drink would be served in a tall non-tapered 12 to 14 ounce glass. Two of the key ingredients, while not usually found in most cocktails, are orange flower water and egg whites. One poetical sipper of this frothy delight mused, "It's like drinking a flower!"

The *Times-Democrat* referred to the shaker boys as doing "duty as agitators behind the bar. Then for two minutes the delicious concoction is shaken and jostled, the ice tinkling against the glass, the rich cream rising; the delicate color becoming richer. A deft movement, the silver cornucopia is removed, and the fizz in all its toothsome glory stands ready to be sipped in ecstasy by its fortunate purchaser."

Ramos, hard-working and inventive, was "recognized as the most famous mixologist of the South" (wrote the New Orleans *Times-Democrat* in 1895). With a robust moustache and goatee, Ramos had a courtly, dignified bearing.

Temperance was a fundamental principle at all of Mr. Ramos' emporiums. Drunkards horrified him; and if word got around to him that a customer was hitting the sauce too hard (even though he arrived sober), Mr. Ramos would call him aside and suggest that he stay away until he had mended his ways. And promptly at 8 o'clock every evening the doors of the bar were closed, and no one remained within. "Prohibition would never have come to pass," wrote the *Item* after his death, "if all the saloon-keepers had been like Mr. Ramos".

But Prohibition did come in 1919, and the honorable Henry Ramos closed his saloon for good. "I've sold my last Gin Fizz," he announced at the stroke of midnight. But, as a gift to the ages, he published the secret recipe for his previously proprietary drink in the New Orleans

*Item-Tribune:*

"That delightful old gentleman, Henry C. Ramos, whose palace de palate, coarsely called a bar, was known before July of 1919 to every real connoisseur of drinks in the civilized world, has consented to publish for the first time his formula for the 'ONE AND ONLY ONE,' otherwise and more commonly named RAMOS' ORIGINAL GIN FIZZ."

Here is his recipe, verbatim:

"(1) One tablespoonful powdered sugar.  
Three or four drops of Orange Flower Water.  
One-half lime (Juice).  
One-half lemon (Juice).  
(1) One Jigger of Old Tom Gin. (Old Gordon may be used but a sweet gin is preferable).  
The white of one egg. [Because of possible raw egg health risk, most bartenders use powdered egg whites - NH]  
One-half glass of crushed ice.  
About (2) tablespoonsful of rich milk or cream.  
A little Seltzer water (about an ounce) to make it pungent.  
Together well shaken and strained (drink freely).

To those who may have forgotten, a 'jigger' is a stemmed sherry glass holding a little more than one ounce."

Close your eyes and find yourselves standing once again with a foot on the rail before the mahogany at the old *Imperial Cabinet* or *Stag*. During Prohibition, that's just what some folks had to do. After the repeal of the Volstead Act in 1933, the Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans trademarked the Ramos drink name in 1935. The Ramos Gin Fizz was one of several "house" drinks at the old Roosevelt Hotel Bar in New Orleans back then. The Roosevelt made a practice of adopting great old New Orleans drinks that had lost their home, such as the Sazerac.

The Roosevelt Hotel continued to popularize the drink, as did Governor Huey Long's fondness for it. In July 1935, Huey brought a bartender named Sam Guarino from the Roosevelt to the New Yorker Hotel in New York City to show the staff there how to mix the cocktail, so he could have it whenever he was up there. After Huey's quality control inspection, one of his bodyguards quoted him: "I'm merely sampling this to make sure you gentlemen are getting the real thing." Five gin fizzes later, Huey proclaimed, "And this, gentlemen, my gift to New York."

Stanley Clisby Arthur wrote that veteran barkeepers were at odds over the inclusion of two drops of vanilla extract. Old-timers who worked for Henry Ramos in the past declared the original Ramos included no vanilla. Others argued "that the twin drops of extract wrung from the

heart of the vanilla bean either make or break a real gin fizz - make it taste like heaven or the reverse."

Arthur advised that, "when you mix your fizz, add the two vanilla drops or leave them out, just as you please." And remember that Ramos' fabulous creation is in no way a sloe gin fizz, which contains sloe gin (a red blackthorn plum flavored liqueur), simple syrup, lemon juice and carbonated water.

Many thanks to that consummate bartender, who could meticulously pour a Roffignac, a Sazerac, Brandy Crusta or "those juleps that he alone could build, with their cool greenglades and limpid pools surmounted by a dazzling ice cap which sparkled in a hundred iridescences and sent forth the beautifully blended aroma of lemon, rosebuds, mint and cherry!"

The artist that he was, and the thoughtful care with which he supervised his fizzes, Henry Charles Ramos was truly one of the Crescent City's great "movers and shakers".

## **NED HÉMARD**

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