

Trails of the Cocktail

Few cities can boast more historic significance in their cocktail culture than the Crescent City: birthplace of the Sazerac, Ramos Gin Fizz, the Grasshopper, the Hurricane, and (backed by one of the best apocryphal origin stories ever concocted) even the cocktail itself.

In 1769 Spanish Colonial Governor of Louisiana Alejandro O'Reilly issued a proclamation allowing one *limonadier* (lemonade seller), twelve taverns and six billiard halls to dispense alcoholic beverages. Closing time was ordained to be 8 pm, but bribes to the necessary officials extended the hours over the years. Rum came into the port of New Orleans and was taxed by the Spanish colonial government.



Pat O's, Home of "The Hurricane"

The "Hurricane", the most popular drink at Pat O'Brien's in the French Quarter, was created during World War II when liquor such as whiskey was in short supply. In order to purchase just one case of these preferred liquors, liquor salesmen compelled bar owners to purchase as many as 50 cases of rum, which was plentiful. In an effort to utilize the excess of rum, Pat O'Brien's famous recipe emerged. The name came along soon after when a glass (shaped like a hurricane lamp chimney) was used to serve the popular rum cocktail.

Don the Beachcomber (1907 — 1989), founding father of Tiki culture (Tiki bars, restaurants and nightclubs), enjoyed great popularity in the United States — mostly from the late 1940s through the mid-1960s. He and his friendly rival “Trader Vic” Bergeron are still remembered for their cultural influence. Each claimed to have invented the rum-based “Mai Tai”. Born Ernest Raymond Beaumont-Gantt, Don spent many of his youthful years with his grandfather in and around New Orleans. Thanks to these pioneers, New Orleans got the Bali Ha’i at the Beach (That’s Pontchartrain Beach) with its “Tiki Bowls”, “Fogg Cutters” and “Samoan Typhoons”. “Trader Vic”, however, gave much of the credit for his wonderful drink recipes to bartender extraordinaire Albert Martin of the Bon Ton (who worked there from 1892 to 1943).

The Bacardi Rum empire was started by Don Facundo Bacardí Massó, who immigrated to Cuba from Spain in 1829. He found that existing Caribbean Rums were too rich and dark for his more refined European tastes, so he took on the task of creating a lighter rum. By 1862, having devised a filtering process to make such a rum, he purchased a building in Santiago de Cuba to convert into a distillery. The structure, however, had its rafters loaded with fruit bats, which are strangely considered good luck in Cuba. Don Facundo’s wife suggested that a bat become part of the Bacardi logo (still seen on the bottles today).

The “Hurricane” acquired some serious competition with the potent melon-flavored “Hand Grenade®”, created by Earl Bernhardt and Pam Fortner, owners of the Tropical Isle® bar founded during the Louisiana World Exposition of 1984. A federally registered trademark since 1987, “Hand Grenade®” is used to identify this high octane cocktail served in a translucent, green plastic yard glass with a happy-faced hand grenade at its base. Marketed as “New Orleans’ Most Powerful Drink”, it is served both on the rocks or frozen at five locations in the French Quarter.

The yard glass (made to hold ale) is said to have originated in seventeenth-century England, where it is also known as the “Cambridge Yard”, “Long Glass” or Ell Glass” (the ell was once a cubit, or the length of a man’s arm from the elbow). One can find yard glasses mounted on the walls of some English pubs, some of which are named “The Yard of Ale” tavern or pub.



The "Hand Grenade®" and a British yard glass of ale

Cosimo's Bar, at 1201 Burgundy Street, corner Governor Nicholls, was established back in 1934. Although a French Quarter tavern, it has all the charm of a traditional New Orleans neighborhood bar, with low lights, wood-paneled ceilings, comfortable sofas, generous drinks and great bar food. The bar, however, was not named for the recording studio proprietor and recording engineer, Cosimo Matassa, responsible for countless R & B and rock and roll hits (especially throughout the 1950s and 1960s). In 2012, Cosimo received the long-overdue honor of being inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as a non-performer. But for whom was Cosimo's Bar named?



Cosimo de' Medici (1389 –1464)

No, it wasn't named for Cosimo de' Medici of the powerful political family of the Italian Renaissance. Cosimo's Bar was, in fact, founded by Cosimo Joseph Lobo, Sr. (June 11, 1908 - December 29, 1967), but the popular French Quarter watering hole did not always remain in family hands. Cosimo was married to Lela Pellegrin (born in Violet, Louisiana, August 2, 1912), who died at age 80 in New Orleans on August 4, 1992. Her obituary states that she was a "former owner of Cosimo's Bar and retired cashier at Morrison's Cafeteria", where she worked for twenty years.

The traditional New Orleans narrative on the origin of the word "cocktail" is set forth in Stanley Clisby Arthur's *Famous New Orleans Drinks & how to mix 'em*, first published in 1937. Arthur relates the tale of Antoine Amédée Peychaud, Creole apothecary famous for creating a gentian-based "bitters" essential in mixing the Sazerac (called America's first cocktail). This "cocktail" began as a stomach remedy made by mixing Peychaud's bitters with brandy in an egg cup — a container known to Peychaud in French as a *coquetier*. Distortion of this word by Peychaud's customers, who perhaps did not speak French, morphed the pronunciation "coh-KET-yay" into "cocktail".

Edna Ferber fleshed out this creation story in her best-selling novel of 1941, *Saratoga Trunk*:

"Potent, slightly bitter, the *coquetier* seemed to leap like a tiny tongue

of liquid flame from her throat down to her vitals ... 'What's that you called it?'

'*Coquetier*'

'Oh, now I get it. *Coquetier*. Cocktail! Of course. What's that in it? Brandy? Well, if that's medicine, everybody in Saratoga is going to have the complaint it's good for.'"

After first appearing at Peychaud's apothecary shop, so the story goes, the cocktail was soon dispensed in the city's finest coffee houses, then a euphemism for alcohol serving establishments. The Sazerac Coffee House on Exchange Alley gained its name and fame from using the French brandy *Sazerac de Forge et Fils* to mix the cocktails. Some say the original brandy cocktail contained absinthe, but other reports state that absinthe was added later, perhaps by bartender Leon Lamonthe, some time between 1858 and 1870. By the mid 1860s, an American aphid-like bug called *phylloxera* began to destroy entire vineyards in France, causing grape vines to rot away. It crippled wine production, as well as brandy. Rye whiskey was soon substituted for the brandy to make a cocktail. But the Sazerac name did not fade away. In time the "Sazerac cocktail" would emerge, but was not mentioned in print until 1899. As for the Great French Wine Blight, since the *phylloxera bug* was of American origin and only bothered American vines, French vines were grafted onto American rootstocks. Now nearly all French wines are the result of these graftings, and the United States can rightly claim its part in some of Europe's most venerated vintages.

Trouble with the New Orleans cocktail birthright, however, is that the apothecary on Royal Street did not open until 1838, and (unless the Peychaud family came up with the recipe for a bittered alcoholic drink years before) the term "cocktail" appeared in print very much earlier.

On March 16, 1798, London's *Morning Post and Gazetteer* reported that a Downing Street publican (pub owner) won a lottery and chose to forgive all his customers' outstanding debts. On March 20, 1798, the *Morning Post and Gazetteer* satirically reported the details of seventeen politicians' pub debts, including the first known reference to the "cocktail" as an alcoholic concoction:

"Mr. Pitt,

two *petit vers* of 'L'huile de Venus' 0 1 0

Ditto, one of 'perfeit amour' 0 0 7

Ditto, 'cock-tail'

(vulgarly called ginger) 0 0 3/4"

The "Mr. Pitt" mentioned above is William Pitt the Younger, Britain's youngest Prime Minister, famous for leading Britain in the great wars against France and Napoleon. The fact that the "cock-tail" was listed as part of Pitt's bar tab might suggest that the word "cock-tail" might have its origins in the French language, but further analysis indicates that the ginger reference might pertain to feaguining, or increasing the liveliness of a horse by inserting an irritant, such as a piece of peeled raw ginger, in its fundament (between the buttocks), causing its tail to cock. "Cocktail", therefore, may have originated as a vulgar term for a drink concoction that livened one up.

Another theory is that "cocktail" is a corruption of the French *coup d'oeil*, meaning a glance, or quick survey. So, if taking a "*coup d'oeil*" or "cocktail" (that is, an eye-opener in the morning) involved taking one's "bitters", that could also explain the word's origin. .

Other theories abound as to the origin of the cocktail. Was it first created in Mexico and named for an Aztec princess? Did Catherine Hustler of Lewiston, New York, make the first cocktail, or was it the brainchild of Richard Stoughton, who blended bitters in his apothecary shop just south of London Bridge?

Most seem to believe the cocktail was American in origin, and that was the opinion of Charles Dickens upon his travels through the United States.

An account in *The Farmer's Cabinet*, published by Joseph Cushing, Amherst, New Hampshire, April 28, 1803, recorded, "Drank a glass of cocktail — excellent for the head".

The first definition of the word "cocktail" appeared in a Hudson, New York, newspaper, *The Balance*, on May 13, 1806:

"Cock tail, then, is a stimulating liquor, composed of spirits of any kind, sugar, water, and bitters — it is vulgarly called bittered sling, and

is supposed to be an excellent electioneering potion, inasmuch as it renders the heart stout and bold, at the same time that it fuddles the head. It is said also, to be of great use to a democratic candidate: because, a person having swallowed a glass of it, is ready to swallow anything else." Appropriately, the word "sling" derived its name from the Low German *slingen*, which means to swallow.

That then is the essential definition of a cocktail: any drink that contains spirits, sugar, water and bitters. In the present day, of course, the word "cocktail" has become a catch-all term for all mixed alcoholic drinks.

Another definition comes from *Transatlantic Sketches*, by James Edward Alexander, 1833:

"For the receipt-book let the following be copied: — First, Cock-tail is composed of water, with the addition of rum, gin, or brandy, as one chooses — a third of the spirit to two-thirds of the water; add bitters and enrich with sugar and nutmeg: in sling, the bitters are omitted."

Arguing in favor of "*coquetier*" is the similarity of Peychaud's recipe to the definition in the Hudson *Balance* as well as to the modern Sazerac cocktail, which replaces the original brandy with rye whiskey. But 1798, 1803, 1806 and even 1833 are much earlier sightings than at the Peychaud's apothecary shop on Royal Street in 1838.

Years passed. The city suffered hurricanes, wars, floods, yellow fever and prohibition. Peychaud's bitters were marketed, as well as other Sazerac products. A Sazerac Bar was operated on Royal Street. Eventually, it was resurrected in the Roosevelt Hotel in 1949. Seymour Weiss, the hotel's canny manager, decided to let women into the bar on a regular basis. They'd been allowed in previously, only on Mardi Gras. He cleverly recruited cosmetic girls from Godchaux's department store to pack the bar on opening day. This event he dubbed the "Storming of the Sazerac". The Sazerac Bar today is beautifully restored once again, now in the "Waldorf-Astoria" Roosevelt.

In the early part of the 20th century, a number of European countries began banning absinthe, claiming it was a spirit that could make one crazy or criminal. In 1912, the United States became one of those countries, keeping the absinthe ban in effect until 2007. Thujone, the chemical compound from the wild plant known as wormwood, although present in the spirit in only trace amounts, was blamed for its alleged

harmful effects. Although vilified, absinthe has not been demonstrated to be any more dangerous than ordinary spirits. After the ban in France, André Hémard had been successful in creating an anise-flavored liquor, and his company merged with *Pernod Fils* to form a new company and a new product. Back in New Orleans, Herbsaint, a similar anise-flavored absinthe substitute that contains no wormwood, was created by locals J. Marion Legendre and Reginald Parker, who had learned the secrets of making absinthe while in France during World War I. Legendre began making Herbsaint in the attic of his home at Jefferson Avenue and Daneel Street after prohibition was repealed. Herbsaint, or the new Pernod, were for many years used in making Sazerac cocktails. And today, since the ban has been lifted, one may use absinthe once again. Herbsaint, so named for the French Creole term for wormwood, "herbe sainte" (or "sacred herb"), is also the name of a popular New Orleans restaurant.

The modern Sazerac cocktail's other ingredients (besides the absinthe or absinthe substitute) are rye whiskey, simple syrup, Peychaud bitters (and sometimes Angostura bitters, as well) plus a twist of lemon rubbed around the edge of the cocktail glass. The absinthe liqueur should only line the inside of the glass before adding the other ingredients.

There are numerous other ideas as to where the term "cocktail" originated. H. L. Mencken believed this explanation: Colonial taverns kept their spirits in casks. The "cock," refers to the tap on a barrel of spirits, and the "tailings" were the remaining drops of liquor from the bottom of the barrel. These dregs of all types of various spirits (rum, gin, brandy, etc.) were once combined and sold at a reduced rate, and thus the "cocktail" was born.

"Cocktail" could also be a corruption of the Latin *aqua decocta*, meaning "distilled water".

One etymology states that it was customary to put a feather, presumably from a cock's tail, in a beverage to let teetotalers know that the drink contained alcohol (or perhaps purely as a decorative addition).

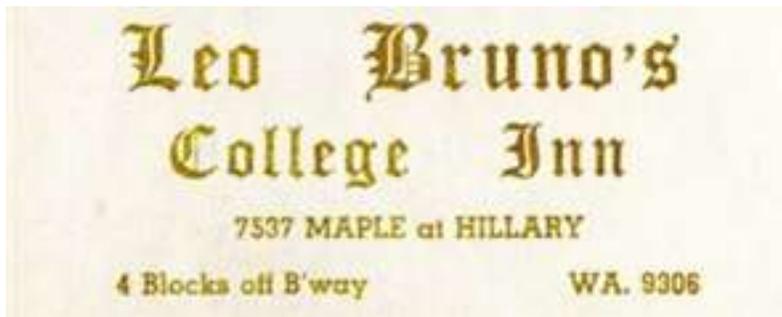
Another possibility, once again, has cocktails as an eye-opening morning beverage, with the "cock's tail" in the vessel symbolizing the rooster heralding in the new day.

On February 2, 1843, the New Orleans *Daily Picayune* suggested that

the term "cocktail" was rather vulgar and inappropriate for proper society, so an order of "a tail of the rooster" or "*une queue de Chanticleer*" was offered as a more appropriate term. *Chanticleer*, of course, appears in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in *The Nonnes Preestes Tale of the Cok and the Hen, Chauntecleer and Pertelote*.

Sometimes, hens are fat, as are tavern namesakes. "Fat Harry's" on St. Charles Avenue celebrated forty years of operation on June 25, 2011. Prior to that, it was "Gerald's Key Club", and this author actually owned a key. One very short-term employee at "Fat Harry's" lasted only one hour. She was Metairie-born Ellen DeGeneres (before becoming a big star), who was paid \$7 for her brief time worked.

Much earlier was Leo Bruno's at the corner of Maple and Hillary uptown. It was established in 1934, the same year as Cosimo's Bar. I especially miss Bruno's original hands-on bowling machine.



Notice the early phone number for Bruno's

Enjoyed by university students and locals for years, Bruno's current location is still popular and the result of a four-year project by the Melius family, still at the same intersection.

This July, New Orleans played host once again to this year's "Tales of the Cocktail®", bringing together lovers of beautifully mixed spirits and bartenders from around the world. From morn to night, there were lectures, competitions, tastings and seminars. And the city's great cuisine is always an excellent accompaniment by means of the "Spirited Dinners®" offered. Enthusiastic participants enjoyed drinking in the interesting cocktail history and culture that is such an integral part of New Orleans itself.

And remember, when imbibing cocktails, drink responsibly, as Dorothy Parker summed up so beautifully:

"I like to have a martini,
Two at the very most.
After three I'm under the table,
After four I'm under my host."

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Trails of the Cocktail"
Ned Hémard
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