

Two Masterful Mixologists

In addition to Bennie and Clovis Martin (the Martin Brothers of po-boy fame), New Orleans had two cousins named Martin, esteemed the world over for their skill in mixing cocktails.

Albert and Aristide Martin were first cousins, each the grandson of Norbert and Eliza Cosse Martin. Aristide gained renown across the nation as the longtime head bartender of the famous Sazerac Bar, while Albert mixed incredible drinks for many years at the Bon Ton Café. So wonderful were Albert's concoctions that "Trader Vic" Bergeron sought Albert's advice in creating the iconic tropical drinks for his international Tiki empire.



Aristide Martin, pictured in the center of this photograph, serves a Sazerac cocktail to a female reporter for the Item on opening day of the Sazerac Bar in its relocation to the Roosevelt Hotel in 1949. Prior to that day, the historic bar had maintained a 99-year tradition of not serving women drinks except on Mardi Gras day.

Both Albert and Aristide were born in Plaquemines Parish, Albert in Jesuit Bend, Aristide in Pointe à la Hache. Albert and Aristide's

grandfather, Norbert Martin, Sr., a rice planter, “claimed to have built the first rice mill in the state – the Red Empire Mill at Pointe à la Hache,” according to Albert’s daughter, Ethelyn Baxley. Albert’s father, Norbert, Jr., owned a rice plantation at Jesuit Bend, which had been ruined by a flood (and then it snowed) when young Albert (only 14 years-of-age) made his way to New Orleans looking for work. His first job was as an apprentice at the Bon Ton on Magazine Street. His boss (and later partner) was Anthony Commander, who would later found Delmonico Restaurant on St. Charles Avenue, opened in 1895.

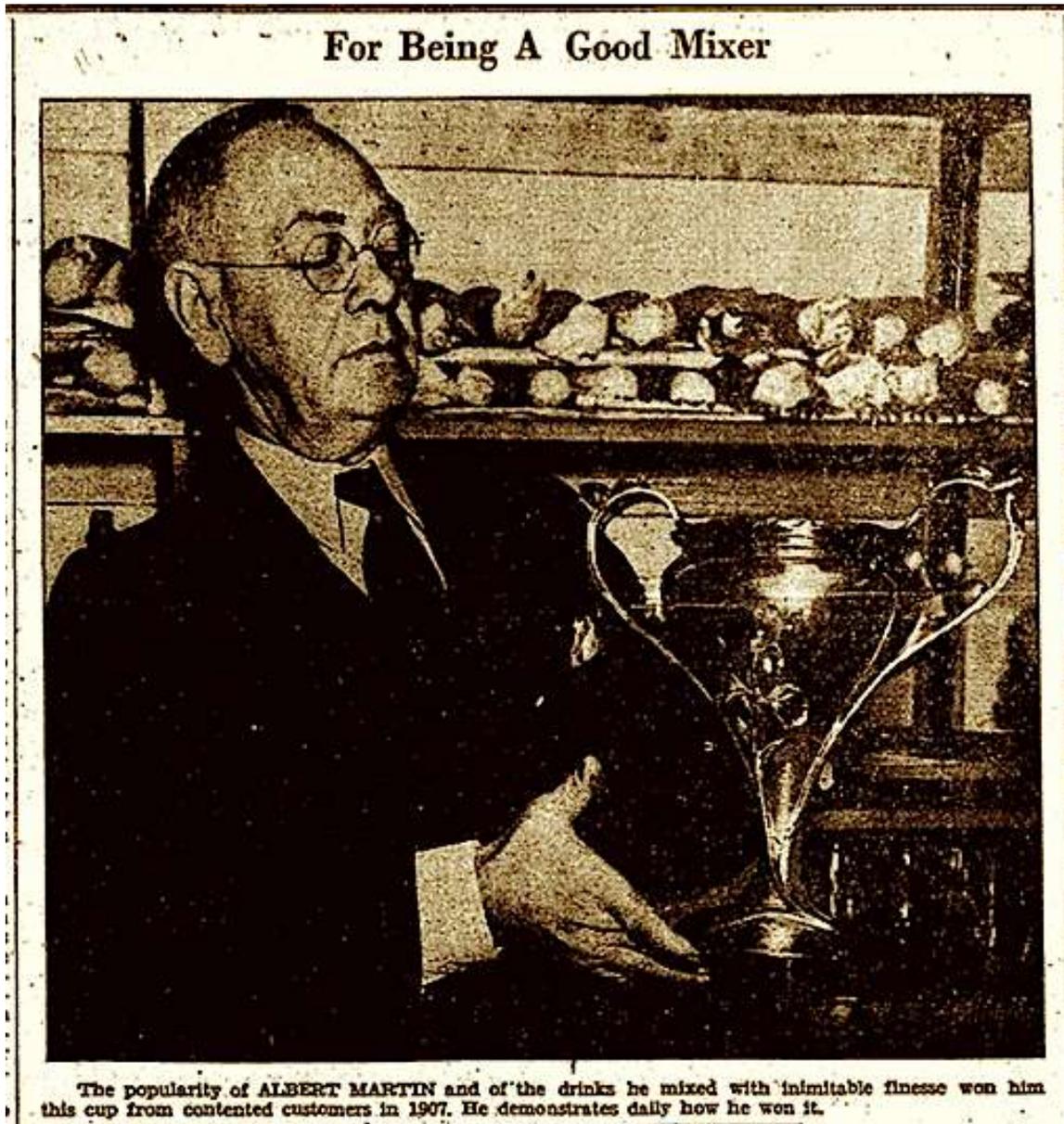


1871 Currier and Ives lithograph of Woodland Plantation, also located in Pointe à la Hache, Louisiana, which was licensed for use on the Southern Comfort label after Prohibition ended

The name “*Pointe à la Hache*” is French for “axe point”, or “cape”. Jesuit Bend was settled in the early part of the 18th century by Jesuits, who brought with them from Japan the easy-peeling citrus known as the satsuma, farmed in the area since that day.

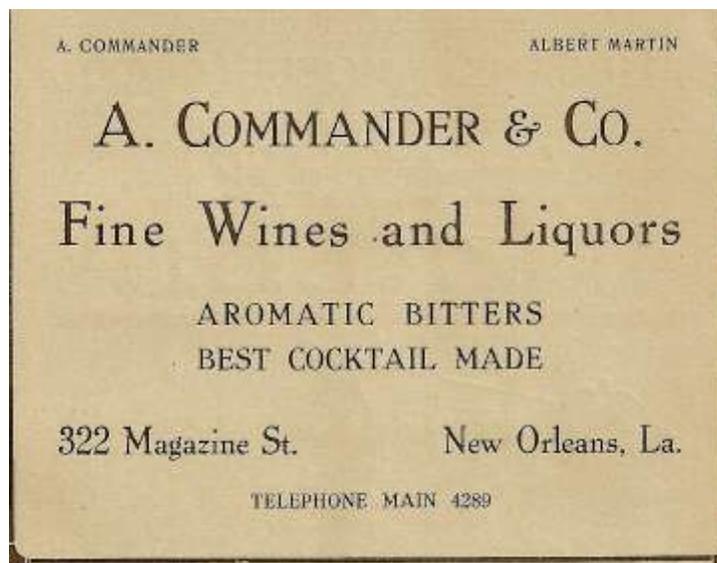
The year of Albert’s arrival in New Orleans must have been in early 1892. The New Orleans *Daily City Item* disclosed that, on August 31, 1891, “numerous crevasses along the Mississippi river, from the mouth of the Red river to the middle of Plaquemines parish, destroyed many acres of rice that had been planted.” And on January 15, 1892, the *Picayune* reported snowfall in the Crescent City, only the second time since 1852, a forty-year period. Additional proof that 1892 was the year Albert Martin began his career as a mixologist is an article in the

Sunday Item Tribune, dated February 7, 1937, which stated that Albert Martin was "celebrating his 45th anniversary as a mixer of drinks this Carnival." An earlier article, however (in the *New Orleans States* in 1935), stated that he "was 20 years old before he was allowed to mix a drink." His career, nonetheless, began in 1892 as an apprentice of only 14 years-of-age.



Awarded for "the drinks he mixed with inimitable finesse," Albert Martin, who presided behind the mahogany at the Bon Ton Café, eyes his 1907 trophy.

In 1907, there was a contest to determine who among the city's most reputable mixologists should earn the title "Peer of New Orleans mixologists." The list included some great bartenders, past and present: Henry "Carl" Ramos of the Ramos Café, Billy Wilkinson of the Sazerac (who died February 22, 1904), and Albert Martin, by then owner and proprietor of the Bon Ton Café. A committee of 25 prominent businessmen, headed by Hugh McCloskey, chose Albert Martin for his "Strawberry Bon Ton" cocktail and presented him with a sterling silver loving cup, chased with silver roses and dated August 23, 1907. Ramos earned his fame for creating the immensely popular Ramos Gin Fizz, and Billy Wilkinson was one of the mixologists credited with putting together the present-day components of the Sazerac cocktail.



In addition to the operation of the Bon Ton Café, Commander began marketing bitters, as shown in this 1909 advertisement

An article in Charleston's *South Carolina News and Courier*, dated April 11, 1937, revealed one of the secrets of Albert Martin's success:

"Martin, when a young man, had his own bar and had won considerable success in New Orleans, but he could not mix the Ramos gin fizz. That secret was known only to its originator, Carl Ramos," who Martin later bested in that 1907 tournament of champion bartenders.

"Efforts to buy the formula were futile," so Albert went undercover to acquire the recipe for the cocktail later made famous by Huey Long.

"One morning Ramos was surprised to find a new mixer," (or shaker boy, as they were known), "behind his polished mahogany. Martin had decided to go to work in an effort to learn the formula. In the course of a month he had the desired knowledge," but Martin made a fair exchange. He gave Ramos the recipe to eighteen special drinks he had concocted. Under a special agreement with Ramos, Martin could sell a "gin fizz" but could not attach to it the name Ramos. "Martin kept his bargain and remained a fast friend of Ramos."

Anthony Commander, previously a bartender at Thomas Handy's Sazerac Saloon (after it had moved to Carondelet Street), was not the original proprietor of the Bon Ton Café. That distinction belongs to Englishman Edward P. Prophet, who in 1877, rechristened his "St. James Saloon" with a new name and a new location: "The Bon Ton" at 36 Magazine. In 1892, Albert Martin began his career at the Bon Ton Café as a spindley-legged glass washer, and on May 9, 1908, he and Anthony Commander became co-partners. Eventually Albert Martin became the historic restaurant and bar's sole owner, the Bon Ton Café's sixth proprietor.

In 1894, Anthony Commander began selling a product he called "Commander's Aromatic Cocktail Bitters," which he aggressively marketed, claiming it was as good a product as Peychaud's (from whom Thomas Handy claimed he had purchased the formula) but much cheaper. And the label was virtually identical to Handy's, his ex-boss! He significantly hurt Handy's business, and their sales fell from eighty-one cases a month to a mere twelve. In August 1894, Thomas H. Handy & Co. filed suit to stop Commander and won in court.

Aristide Martin, born March 24, 1880, was about three years younger than his cousin Albert. During his lifetime he tended bar at the Sazerac Bar, first at 116 Royal Street (where patrons bellied up to a 125-foot-long bar), later at Carondelet and Gravier, and finally at the Roosevelt Hotel. He also tended bar at the St. Charles Hotel and the old Grunewald Hotel (which became the Roosevelt).

He made a special trip to Washington, D.C., to introduce the nation's capital to the Sazerac cocktail. Various articles state that Aristide had been bartending since the 1890s. His obit said he had been a resident of New Orleans for 57 years, which would make his earliest possible stint as bartender circa 1897 when he was about 17 years old. If that is correct, he was just five years behind cousin Albert.

When Prohibition hit the Crescent City, the Sazerac (bar) closed, but Aristide stayed on as "generalissimo of the Sazerac restaurant," wrote *Item* reporter Meigs Frost in 1921.



Aristide attends to the ladies circa 1950 at the Roosevelt's Sazerac Bar

Frost listed Martin's assistants and what they were doing then, thanks to the Volstead Act:

"Leon Dupont, who operated the old People's restaurant in Royal street for a while but is now visiting in France. Fred Dietriche, who is now boosting the merits of French Market coffee. Henry Souchon, who has a grocery in Dumaine street. Harry Huse, who is selling automobiles in Mobile."

There were also "Willie Martin and Joe Viola," who were both killed in accidents. Of that number, there "were always four efficient, white-aproned young men to mix the drinks.

(Before Prohibition) "Each of us used to average about 400 cocktails daily," said Aristide. "We had a class of trade that could be moved quickly. It consisted mostly of regular customers and we knew just what they wanted and how they wanted it."

Due to these skills, "more than 500,000 cocktails were served over the bar every year and in addition the Handy Company bottled" the "Sazerac Cocktail" and sent it to every part of the country.

The question is, "Were any of the Sazerac Cocktails being marketed back then identical, more or less, to the Sazerac Cocktail we are familiar with today?" As you can see by the ad below, there were "Sazerac Cocktails" "prepared and bottled" as "Whiskey, Manhattan, Martini, Tom Gin, Holland Gin, Vermouth".

The Sazerac Cocktails

Whiskey, Manhattan, Martini, Tom Gin,
Holland Gin, Vermouth.

Prepared and Bottled by

Thos. W. Handy & Co. NEW ORLEANS, LA.

These Cocktails are made from the best liquors that can be procured; being mixed in accurate proportions they will always be found of uniform quality

FOR TIRED WOMEN As a tonic, Sazerac Cocktail should be in every home. They will put new life into one after a day's hard shopping. Endless worry of household duties can be done away with, if the needed tonic is at hand.

As a Ladies' Drink
The "Sazerac Cocktail" Has no Equal.

FOR TIRED MEN . . . After a busy day, see that you have at home a bottle of Sazerac Cocktails. As an appetizer and general tonic for the business man they have no equal.

**FOR SALE BY ALL
FANCY GROCERS**

and on
**BUFFET TRAINS of ALL
LEADING RAILWAYS : :**

An article in the *Picayune*, dated May 29, 1902, credited Billy Wilkinson (who also worked for Handy) as the "creator of that most soothing and invigorating, decoction, the Sazerac cocktail." But was it the Sazerac cocktail we know today, the one that has rye whiskey instead of the original *Sazerac-de-Forge et Fils* brand of cognac brandy, bitters, simple syrup and an Absinthe substitute? Or was it any one, or all, of the myriad cocktails advertised above?

Another article in the *Times-Picayune*, dated August 9, 1936, gives the credit to "Albert Martin, who says the Sazerac cocktail was born under

his eye, but was called the 'Bon Ton,' and he has an array of silver cups to prove what a swell mixologist he is!"



In 1935 Albert Martin, inventor of the Bon Ton Special, was enlisted by the Old Time Distillery of New York, producers of Three Feathers Whiskey, to spend ten days in the Big Apple demonstrating his expertise.

Edward Le Breton, writing for the New Orleans *Item-Tribune* on February 11, 1934, explained it another way:

“The Bon Ton cafe, now looking back on 75 years spent cheering the public, shared favor in its early days with another in the same block presided over by one Thomas H. Handy. In that block was born a drink which combined with marvelous felicity esthetic satisfaction and mental stimulation.

Patrons in those early days bought it indiscriminately at either bar. The Bon Ton called it by its own name, while Mr. Handy dubbed it Sazerac.”

So who invented the Sazerac as we know it today? Rye whiskey is said to have replaced the Sazerac Brandy in the original Sazerac Cocktail due to the phylloxera epidemic in Europe that devastated the vineyards of France in the late 1800s. But who came up with the idea to substitute rye whiskey? Handy’s establishment always used Maryland Club Rye. And who perfected the modern-day Sazerac cocktail? Was it Handy employee Billy Wilkinson (who died in 1904) or his co-worker Vincent Miret (who died in 1899) – or was it Albert Martin, who was working behind in the bar of the Bon Ton Café in the 1890s? At this point, it is difficult to know with certitude.



Who created the Sazerac Cocktail as we know it today?



In 1937, when this headline appeared in the Times-Picayune, cocktail connoisseurs could visit Aristide Martin at the Sazerac Bar's previous location "at 300 Carondelet street, corner of Gravier street".

Whoever *did* create the famous Sazerac, and regardless of where the cocktail made its home, it was a big hit with a number of celebrities over the years, including Phil Harris, Jimmy Durante, Orson Welles, Raymond Burr, Sonny and Cher, Forrest Tucker, John Wayne, Joe E. Lewis, Jack Dempsey, Desi Arnez, the Mills Brothers, Xavier Cugat, Lee Marvin and Nelson Rockefeller, to name but a few.

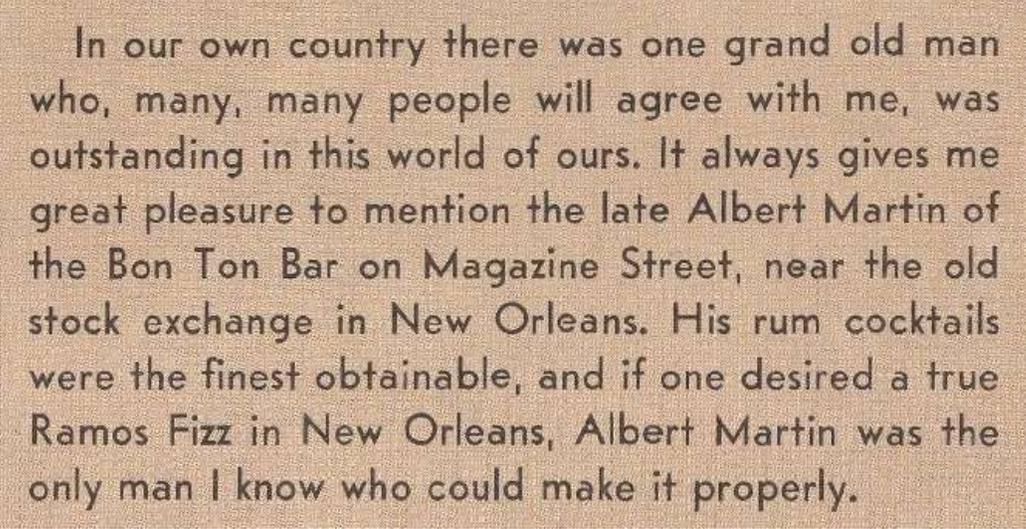
A few words must be said about the origin of the Sazerac Bar, over which Aristide Martin presided for so many years. Around 1850, Sewell T. Taylor sold his establishment, the Merchants Exchange, to become an importer of spirits, one of which was a cognac named *Sazerac-de-Forge et Fils*. Aaron Bird became the new proprietor and renamed the business the Sazerac Coffee House, such a wonderful New Orleans euphemism for a place that served alcoholic beverages. The building was located at 16 Royal Street and extended over to 13 Exchange Alley, the back entrance to the business. Legend has it that the original version of the "Sazerac Cocktail" was served there with

Sazerac Brandy and allegedly with bitters prepared by the local apothecary, Antoine Amédée Peychaud. John B. Schiller became proprietor of the Sazerac Coffee House in 1860. Businessmen and planters whose deals were completed at "Monkey Wrench Corner", the corner of Canal and Exchange Place, would wend their way half a block up the alley to the Sazerac Coffee House and sneak in its back door for the prototype of that historic absinthe-laced cocktail, or so the story goes. Thomas H. Handy, who was hired as a shop clerk, became proprietor of the Sazerac Bar around 1870 and aggressively marketed both his drinking establishment and its eponymous cocktail across the nation.

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The oldest known mention of "Sazerac Cocktail" was in an ATO fraternity magazine, dated March of 1899. Alpha Tau Omega had held their annual convention in New Orleans the November before, at which "a good deal was heard" about the "mysterious article," namely a "Sazerac Cocktail". By 1900, ads could be seen in New Orleans and in other cities' newspapers promoting the popular new cocktails.

Albert Martin continued to stack up silver loving cups for his "cocktail-mixing ability", according to the New Orleans *Item*, which reported Albert being honored in 1940 by William Hickerson, president of the New Orleans Board of Trade.



In our own country there was one grand old man who, many, many people will agree with me, was outstanding in this world of ours. It always gives me great pleasure to mention the late Albert Martin of the Bon Ton Bar on Magazine Street, near the old stock exchange in New Orleans. His rum cocktails were the finest obtainable, and if one desired a true Ramos Fizz in New Orleans, Albert Martin was the only man I know who could make it properly.

Excerpt from Trader Vic's menu

Another popular cocktail invented by Albert Martin is the "Rum Ramsey", which is still available and quite popular at the Bon Ton, located in the Natchez Building at 401 Magazine. It is also a favorite drink of Proteus Dukes on horseback along their parade route. Albert Martin's expertise as a mixologist is lauded in bars and restaurants as far away as Perth, Australia, in large part due to the credit given him by "Trader Vic" Bergeron, who believed in giving credit where credit was due. He was well aware that he learned from the masters.

"After years of diligent research, I learned the secrets of the great bartenders."

"It's true. Years ago, I set out to discover the secrets of concocting really great drinks. The kind that would compliment really great food, like we serve.

"Along the way, I got to know some of the master bartenders. Albert Martin in New Orleans. Constantino Raplo in Havana. Don the Beachcomber in Hollywood.

"Everything they taught me, I put to use at Trader Vic's. And in devising some of my original drinks, like the Mai Tai.

"So now, you don't have to search to find the best drinks in the world. Because I already have."





TRADER VIC'S
In The Berison at SW Broadway and Oak -- 228-9611

WESTERN INTERNATIONAL HOTELS
Partners in travel with United Airlines

Trader Vic ad paying homage to "Albert Martin in New Orleans"

It cannot be overemphasized the important role Albert Martin played in the creation of the mid-century "Tiki Bar" concept that is experiencing a recent renaissance around the world today.

Sadly, the marvellous mixologist drowned August 3, 1943, at age 66, in a tragic boating accident at Nine-Mile Bayou in St. Tammany Parish.

He lost his footing and fell into the water while stepping from one boat to another. His body was found about ten miles away from the spot where the accident occurred. Albert was survived by his wife, a daughter, a son, three sisters, two brothers and three grandchildren.

He was also survived by his cousin and master-bartender, Aristide J. Martin, who died November 1954 at age 74.

With over a century of bartending years between them, Albert and Aristide Martin will be remembered as two of the greatest mixologists the Crescent City has ever known.



Old Exchange Alley circa 1870, photo by George F. Mugnier

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Two Masterful Mixologists"
Ned Hémard
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