

QUIET DRINK | NEW ORLEANS

## A City's Heart and Attendant Spirits

The cocktail may not have been born in the city, but it was certainly raised there.

By DAN SALTZSTEIN

All stories about New Orleans drinking lore must now begin with the same disclaimer: Cocktails were invented there. Except they weren't.

For years, many considered the city the birthplace of the cocktail. The tale is immortalized by Stanley Clisby Arthur in his lively 1937 book, "Famous New Orleans Drinks & How to Mix 'Em": In the first half of the 19th century, Antoine Amédée Peychaud began to mix his spicy, neon-red bitters — which still bear his name — with spirits. "Peychaud had a unique way of serving his spiced drink of brandy," Arthur wrote: He poured it into a coquetier, a double-ended egg cup. Coquetier (pronounced ko-kay-TAY) became "cock-tay," then cocktail. "Presently, all New Orleans was drinking brandy-cocktails," Arthur wrote. "In such fashion did the inconspicuous little crockery coquetier or egg-cup become the christening font of the cocktail."

It's a fun story — but it's not the real origin of the cocktail. (The indefatigable historian David Wondrich has traced the word a few decades further back, probably to upstate New York, or possibly England, depending on how you define a cocktail.)

No matter. If New Orleans wasn't the birthplace of the cocktail, it is certainly its spiritual center — where it is most passionately celebrated and where some of its most wondrous and varied iterations were invented: the Sazerac, the Ramos gin fizz, the Vieux Carré. "The quality of mixed drinks as served in New Orleans has always appealed to the sophisticated taste," Arthur wrote, "but the drinks and their histories are forever linked with the past of this pleasure-loving city."

Over a few winter evenings in New Orleans, I sought out some of those classic versions at decades-old bars and more recent additions, where bartenders are reinvigorating the cocktail scene amid a broader post-Katrina revival.

The links to the past that Arthur described are evident everywhere. At Compère Lapin, a restaurant and bar in the Warehouse District and the newest spot I visited on my crawl, I chatted with the charming and gregarious bartender Abigail Gullo. She made me, upon request, a De La Louisiane, one of the city's lesser-known in-

ventions — a rye-based drink punched up with Peychaud's bitters and absinthe.

I asked Ms. Gullo why Compère Lapin doesn't have classic drinks on its menu. "Because we can make them," she said, and everyone knows it. "And then if they have a Sazerac, what do they have next? I can guide them."

A few days before, I had started myself off with one of those classics. Having finished a book in Louis Armstrong Park midafternoon, I called a friend to make plans. "You know, you're across the street from Bar Tonique," he said. "And don't worry about day drinking. No one in this town is going to give you a weird look for drinking in the afternoon."

So I headed across North Rampart Street to Tonique, a boxy spot that opened in 2008, with a three-sided bar, a few off-white banquettes and plenty of exposed brick. Colorful, handwritten slates outlined the ordering options: a collection of classic cocktails, with some originals mixed in, all at astoundingly reasonable prices (at least to this New Yorker's eyes) of \$5 to \$10 (including happy hour specials) for almost all mixed drinks.

Despite its modest size, the place had a pleasant airiness — there were only four other drinkers (I was the only one without tattoos, including the bartender). I ordered a Corpse Reviver No. 2, a tangy absinthe-tinged gin cocktail that dates to at least 1930. I was not the first to enjoy one in daylight: The name refers to its use as a hang-over treatment.

That evening, I met friends at Napoleon House, a French Quarter favorite that has functioned as a restaurant since 1914. It's long on charm — heavily distressed walls; portraits of the Impastato family, who owned the restaurant until it was bought by the New Orleans dining impresario Ralph Brennan last year; dramatic swells of classical piano on the soundtrack — and short on drink choices. The list features fewer than a dozen options, though one is clearly the focus: the Pimm's Cup, which gets its own section, with variations and the option of a souvenir glass for an extra \$12.25.

We tried the original (a simple mix of gin-based Pimm's, lemonade, a little lemon-lime soda and a cucumber slice) and the ginger version (with mint syrup and ginger — too sweet for my taste), along with a Sazerac and, later, a bourbon milk punch. We asked for a Vieux Carré, a drink named for the very neighborhood we were in, but the bartender did not know the recipe.

Our next stop was Cane & Table, a short walk away on the eastern end of the Quar-

ter. The bar, which opened in 2013, describes itself as “proto-tiki”; cocktails are drawn not from the 20th-century movement that brought us the mai tai and the scorpion, but from its spiritual predecessor out of the Caribbean, an area with complicated and important ties to New Orleans.

Half of the menu ties drinks directly to their source, including the Labat’s Planter’s Punch, with three kinds of rum, lime and Caribbean spices (the menu dates it to 1694; Labat was a French-born clergyman, writer and botanist), and the boozy and sultry United Fruit, with gin, Bénédictine and Spanish vermouth (1935, from the “Bar La Florida” cocktail book). Even better, though, was a Cane & Table original, the sprightly Silver Tongue, which seamlessly combined bourbon, ginger, arrack and cream sherry.

It was a busy evening at the bar, which was celebrating a Cuban-themed night. Customers seemed right out of central casting for a hip-and-young spot: bearded 20-somethings in jaunty hats and scarves shared tables and bar space with bearded 20-somethings in full drag. Everyone seemed to be having a great time, and it wasn’t difficult to imagine we were in ’30s-era Havana.

The next night, I visited Compère Lapin, where Ms. Gullo’s floral-patterned dress stood out amid the bar and restaurant’s brick, dark wood and white and black floor tile. (The cocktail program is by Ricky Gomez, an alum of the popular New Orleans bar Cure.) Over dinner, I sampled two original concoctions: the Mayor Rock, a challenging mix of mezcal, apple brandy, agave syrup and bitters (a friend accurately compared its scent to that of a Band-Aid, which somehow didn’t bother me); and the 17th Hour, a dry and herbaceous blend of barrel-aged gin, pear brandy, aromatized wine and bitters, served in a glass pinned with a sprig of rosemary.

After dinner, we headed to the Roosevelt Hotel. Inside its gleaming brass and marble interior is the Sazerac Bar, which migrated around town until it landed at the hotel (formerly the Fairmont) in 1930. It suffered damage during Hurricane Katrina and was closed until 2009, its gorgeous curvilinear Art Deco interior restored.

We ordered a Ramos gin fizz, legendarily a favorite of Gov. Huey P. Long, and, of course, a Sazerac, and parked ourselves in a banquet under one of the Deco murals by Paul Ninas. The Sazerac was satisfying, though the bar still uses Herbsaint, an absinthe stand-in (I prefer the real deal).

The gin fizz, which Arthur said was introduced to the city in 1888 by Henry C. Ramos of Baton Rouge, is a tall, frothy number of gin, sugar, lemon and lime juice, cream, egg white, club soda and, most notably to the nose, floral orange flower water. I’ve heard

it described as an adult milkshake, which isn’t far off.

The vibe was mellow: jazz played in the background as about a dozen customers milled around the bar and banquettes. But we were fading and soon called it a night.

I began my final night of imbibing at Barrel Proof, which opened in 2014 in the Lower Garden District. It was packed with a young and rowdy crowd, possibly prepping their livers for Krewe du Vieux, the first parade of the season, the next night. The spacious interior does, in fact, feel a bit like the inside of a barrel, with its slatted wood ceiling, flanked by a stained corrugated metal wall on one side and dozens of bottles lining a long bar on the other.

There are over 250 whiskeys, available in one- or two-ounce pours; I sampled a Hibiki 12 year, from Japan, and a Bowman Brothers Small Batch bourbon, from Virginia. And from the tiny cocktail list, I chose a frothy, almost purple-hued drink called the Felix Leiter — an apparent reference to a scene in “Live and Let Die,” in which Leiter, James Bond’s C.I.A. counterpart, is drinking with our hero in New Orleans and orders two Sazeracs. (“This is New Orleans. Relax!”) The menu listed the ingredients as “whiskey, cinnamon, lies”; I was too pleased with the mystery to inquire further.

I headed back to the French Quarter and the French 75 Bar at Arnaud’s restaurant, a warm and eclectically decorated staple. The restaurant is about a century old; the bar, long a gentlemen-only club, opened to the public (and both sexes) in 1979 and got its current name in 2003. I grabbed an empty seat at the bar, behind which Chris Hannah, the head bartender, was wearing his usual white tux jacket and deadpan expression. I felt obliged to order the bar’s namesake cocktail, a combination of Cognac (lesser versions use gin), simple syrup, lemon and Champagne that dates to at least the 1920s.

Seeing my glass empty, Mr. Hannah asked if I was in from out of town and what I liked to drink. New York, whiskey. “You want a Brooklyn?” he asked, referencing a classic rye-based cocktail that you rarely see, largely because it includes Amer Picon, a French digestif not available in the United States. “You have the Amer?” I asked. He nodded (like other ambitious mixologists, Mr. Hannah makes his own replica), then added: “Or a Creole,” which substitutes Bénédictine for the Brooklyn’s maraschino liqueur. “A Brooklyn if you’re homesick. But a Creole since you’re in New Orleans.”

Less homesick than enjoying the moment, I went with the Creole. Delicious — and potent. I soon headed out past the scrums of drunken imbibers in the Quarter. It was a shockingly cold night, but I felt warmed by the drinks, and also by some genuine New Orleans hospitality.

## IF YOU GO

### OLD

**French 75 Bar** at Arnaud’s, 813 Bienville Street; 504-523-5433; arnaudsrestaurant.com/bars/french-75.  
**Napoleon House**, 500 Chartres Street; 504-524-9752; napoleonhouse.com.  
**Sazerac Bar**, Roosevelt Hotel, 130 Roosevelt Way; 504-648-1200; therooseveltneworleans.com.

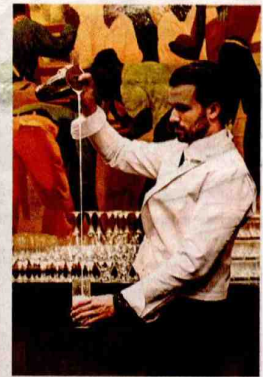
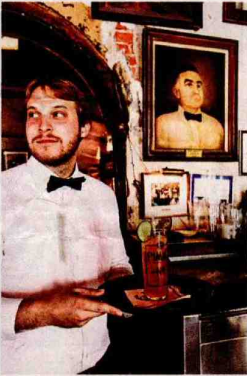
### NEW

**Bar Tonique**, 820 North Rampart Street; 504-324-6045; bartonique.com.  
**Barrel Proof**, 1201 Magazine Street; 504-299-1888; barrelproofnola.com.  
**Cane & Table**, 1113 Decatur Street; 504-581-1112; caneandtablenola.com.  
**Compère Lapin**, 504 Tchoupitoulas Street; 504-599-2119; compereelapin.com.



PHOTOGRAPH BY SARA ESSER BRADLEY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

From left, Abigail Gullo prepares a De La Louisiane cocktail at Compère Lapin, and the bar's Mayor Rock. Below right, the bar at Cane & Table. Below left, making a Felix Leiter cocktail at Barrel Proof.



Clockwise from above, Matthew Steinorth prepares a Ramos gin fizz at the Sazerac Bar; French 75 Bar, right, and its signature drink, left; a server at Napoleon House holds a Pimm's Cup; Mark Schettler, the bar manager at Bar Tonique, and, above, the Corpse Reviver No. 2 at Bar Tonique.