

Cocktail Evangelists

July 23rd, 2007

From the Toronto Star

New Orleans conference hopes that cocktails ape the recent renaissance of wine, beer and coffee

Jul 22, 2007 04:30 AM

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

New Orleans—"Having a cocktail just to get drunk is just like having sex just to get pregnant."

So says Robert Hess, a self-described cocktail evangelist from Seattle, who's spending most of this week in New Orleans trying to advance this point of view at Tales of the Cocktail, a five-day conference and festival held annually in New Orleans, and ending today.

Skeptical folks might write off Tales of the Cocktail as merely an excuse for a lot of drinking. But they'd be wrong. It's an excuse for a lot of serious drinking.

More than a hundred of the world's most knowledgeable and influential mixologists and cocktail historians have converged on the city's steamy French Quarter for the fifth instalment of the event

These experts have been holding dozens of seminars and panel discussions on everything from reconstructing pre-Prohibition concoctions to global trends, the history of distillation and the importance of ice.

"When people hear New Orleans and five-day cocktail conference, their minds take them to Bourbon Street," says founder Ann Rogers. "But I think of it as a culinary and cocktail festival celebrating local dining and drinking traditions. It's also history – with a twist."

Rogers started celebrating the city's rich cocktail history in 2002, when she launched the Southern Comfort Cocktail Tour – a popular stroll through the French Quarter with pit stops in bars where famous cocktails like the Pimm's Cup, Hurricane, Grasshopper and Sazerac were invented.

Then, in 2003, she branched out to create the conference, which is now a world-renowned event.

To outsiders, the Hurricane may be the most famous cocktail on that list but, to those in the know, the Sazerac is the most interesting. Invented in the 1830s by Antoine

Peychaud, a French Quarter pharmacist, the brandy-bitters-absinthe concoction was reportedly served in egg cups – coquetiers. The story goes that after a few rounds, the word got bastardized into the modern word “cocktail.”

Well, it’s a nice, enduring story – one that led to the idea of New Orleans as the birthplace of the cocktail. Unfortunately, it’s simply not true.

“There’s nothing in the research that points to the cocktail being invented in any particular location,” explains Hess, who is leading a number of panels and events this weekend.

“All we know is that the cocktail probably originated someplace along the populated areas of America.”

In fact, over the past five years, several separate research efforts have put the kibosh on all theories linking the Big Easy to the origins of either the word “cocktail” or the first cocktails themselves.

Semantics aside, though, the story speaks to a larger truth about this city. New Orleans has birthed a lot of cocktails and, of course, still more have been enjoyed in this decadent town.

Which makes it the perfect place for this happy gathering, which is expected to have drawn about 12,000 attendees over the five days.

“New Orleans may not be the cocktail’s birthplace, but it sure as heck had its training wheels taken off here,” says Hess.

The cocktail seminars take place primarily at the legendary Hotel Monteleone, where such literary drinkers as Truman Capote, William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams and, yes, Ernest Hemingway all stayed.

Some events, however, have guests straying out into French Quarter institutions like Napoleon House, Galatoire’s, Antoine’s and the New Orleans Pharmacy Museum, where the current exhibit is Aqua Vitale: The Spirited History of Alcohol as Medicine.

In addition to guests devoted to unearthing the hidden history of alcohol, there are at least as many people here to represent the other half of the equation in the cocktail world – modern trends in mixed drinks.

Hot Manhattan bar chefs like James Meehan, Sasha Petraske and Audrey Saunders, for instance, are here to discuss the use of aromatics, botanicals and high-quality ingredients like home-made or premium bitters and fruit purées in cocktails.

These bar chefs taking mixology to the next level are at least partially responsible for the resurgence of interest in the cocktail.

“Coming from Seattle, I’ve watched coffee, beer and wine all go from being nothing to becoming something important” says Hess. “In my mind, the next liquid product to get this makeover would naturally be cocktails and, to many of us, making a cocktail is just as elaborate and creative a process as cooking.”

Inquiring minds will want to know: do people attending this gathering ever get drunk?

Well, we’re sure it’s an unpleasant side effect and certainly not the point of having a cocktail but, well, you know, accidents do happen.

Oops!

<http://www.thestar.com/living/Food/article/238535>