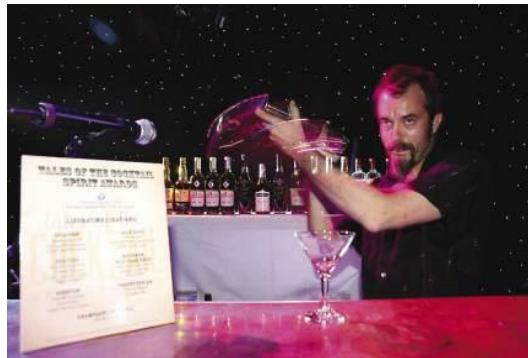


## Kit, creoles and the cocktail nuts



*Cocktails at dawn, strange smells and the death of the Apple-tini – it was another vintage year for the Tales of the Cocktail festival in New Orleans, says Drinkboy's Robert Hess*



Of all the cities in America, you would be hard pressed to find anywhere with a longer and richer history of drinking than New Orleans, located in the southern edge of Louisiana. So, no surprise then that it is here where you will encounter one of the most important cocktail gatherings in the US, if not the world.

Now in its sixth year, Tales of the Cocktail was founded by Ann Tuennerman to help raise the awareness of all that New Orleans has to offer, while at the same time providing a venue in which like-minded individuals – both trade and enthusiasts – could gather and share their interest in quality cocktails and mixology. Most recently Tuennerman also spearheaded an effort focused on that quintessential New Orleans cocktail the Sazerac, with the end result being that New Orleans is now the first city in the US to have its own officially designated cocktail.

Taking place over five days, Tales of the Cocktail is packed with a huge variety of events, panels and seminars – this year, topics ranged from Jerry Thomas, sangrias and molecular mixology, through to environmentally friendly cocktails, absinthe and the history of bar snacks.



There were also tastings featuring everything from rare whiskies to morning cocktails, and competitions included the Ultimate Bloody Mary Championships, with a winning drink that featured paddlefish caviar.

An entire book could be written to cover all that goes on at Tales, but instead I'll have to content myself with giving you just a glimpse of some of the events that I took part in this year. Hopefully this will give you some insight as to why it is such a special event.

## **Evolution of a classic**

The thorny subject of gin classifications turned out to be a key talking point at Juniperloozza – A Journey Deep into the Heart of Mother's Ruin, a panel discussion featuring Ryan Magarian (noted cocktail consultant and designer of Aviation gin), Desmond Payne (Beefeater's master distiller), Simon Ford (brand ambassador for Plymouth gin) and Phillip Duff (brand ambassador for Bols). Each panelist provided a unique and entertaining perspective of their particular gin, with lots of fascinating historical detail along the way.



Magarian made a good point that the category's evolution continues to this day, with many of the newer north American gins departing significantly from the classic London Dry style. He lobbied persuasively for a new designation known as 'New Western Gin' which not only would properly celebrate this new style, but also prevent the 'London Dry' designation from becoming fractured and confused.

It was an argument that, in the end, Beefeater's Payne agreed had a number of clear and obvious merits.

## **Picking up the scent**

Next up was The Scented Trail: Techniques on How to Develop Aroma in your Cocktails, a session artfully led by Audrey Saunders and Tony Conigliaro. As well as demonstrating how aromas could alter or enhance the potential flavours in a drink, they showed how, in some cases, these aromas could also alter the basic experience itself, triggering perceptions, memories and emotions.

Saunders has always been a strong proponent of cocktail garnishes which do more than simply decorate a glass, feeling they should also play a valuable role in the full sensory enjoyment of a drink.

Another oft-neglected subject that got an airing at Tales was morning cocktails. Morning sessions were often a tad weak in attendance, especially if there were many late parties the night before, but Morning Glory Cocktails drew a very good crowd.



Originally, cocktails were, after all, seen as a morning drink, and so we thought it was only appropriate to provide some background details (see box opposite) as well as serve several drinks to the audience.

No mimosas here, instead Dale DeGroff served up a traditional Irish Coffee, David Wondrich served up a Morning Glory cocktail and Lu Brow prepared a brandy milk punch. As an extra treat, DeGroff then demonstrated the proper method for preparing a flaming Blue Blazer.

An evening event that has been part of Tales of the Cocktail since the beginning is the Spirited Dinners, which see mixologists team up with some of the city's best restaurants to create food and cocktail matching menus.

I've been involved in preparing one of these cocktail pairings each year at Tales of the Cocktail, and look forward to it as one of the highlights of the week. This year I did the cocktail menu for Brennan's, a longtime favourite restaurant of many New Orleans locals. Assisting me with the pairing was my good friend, absinthe expert Gwydion Stone.

For the first (soup) course it was necessary to find a drink which worked with the slightly sweet and slightly spicy character that both of them presented. This proved fairly difficult, and I ended up making several batches of the seafood gumbo before settling on a match with the Mauri cocktail by Paul Harrington (1oz Absolut Peppar Vodka, 1oz Partida silver tequila, 1/4oz cocktail onion juice, 1/8oz lime juice, stirred with ice, strained into cocktail glass and garnished with a cocktail onion), which worked very well.

### **The thorny subject of a gin classification turned out to be the key talking point at Juniperlooza**

For the other courses the cocktails were a little easier to bring together. One specific goal that we had was to use Domain de Canton, a new ginger liqueur that has just come onto the market, and that was the overall sponsor of the Spirited Dinners. For Tournedos Chanteclair and Trout Nancy I created the Silver Dragon (2oz Plymouth gin, 1oz Noilly Prat dry vermouth, 1/4oz Domain de Canton ginger liqueur, stirred with ice and strained into a cocktail glass), while I paired the Bananas Foster with Gwydion's White Lotus Cocktail (1oz Domain de Canton ginger liqueur, 2oz Noilly Pratt dry vermouth, 2-3 dashes Marteau Absinthe, stirred with ice, strained into chilled cocktail glass and floated with white edible flowers such as jasmine).

### **And the winner is...**

The big evening event on Saturday was the Tales of the Cocktail Spirit Awards, now in its second year. Nominees were from all around the world, and likewise the winners reflected the global attention that cocktails, and the bartenders, have achieved.

Some of the notable winners were Nick Strangeway (Mixologist/Bartender of the Year); Milk and Honey, NYC (Best Classic Cocktail Bar); Le Lion, Hamburg (World's Best Cocktail Bar); Ruby, Copenhagen (Best New Cocktail Bar) and 1806, Melbourne, which clinched 'Best Drinks Selection'

(see page 46 of this issue for our feature on Australia's best bars). Dale de Groff, meanwhile, was awarded the Helen David Lifetime Achievement Award.

For those of you familiar with Plymouth Gin's Simon Ford, you will realise that he is a fount of creative ways to get some attention. Following the ceremony, he and Audrey Saunders planned a Bartenders' Breakfast, with its late-night/early-morning timing being more fitting for those who work until the wee hours of the morning.

### **Attendees were greeted with a coffin which held the final remains of the 'Apple-tini'**

However, there were several blocks to traverse between Harrah's Theatre, where the awards were being presented, to Café Giovanni where the breakfast was planned. Ford fortunately had the solution – the Death of the Apple-tini. Upon exiting the theatre, attendees were greeted with a coffin which held the final remains of the 'Apple-tini', and a fully decked-out funeral procession for one of the 'Jazz Funerals' that New Orleans is so famous for. From here, they followed a police escort to safely navigate the streets of New Orleans until they reached the breakfast reception.

The final event of Tales of the Cocktail was the Grand Soirée d'Absinthe. With absinthe now once again available in the US, this event was hosted by the Wormwood Society at Muriel's Jackson Square to help introduce attendees to the various products on, or coming to, the market. For many this would be their first try of this often misunderstood beverage.

There was also an event on the Monday following Tales of the Cocktail. The Museum of the American Cocktail held its ribbon-cutting ceremony in its new location at the Riverwalk Mall. After over a year in preparation, the museum finally returned to New Orleans after a brief side-trip to Las Vegas.

Tales of the Cocktail has turned into a much-anticipated event. What started out as a way to draw attention to New Orleans and its relationship to the cocktail, has turned into a cornerstone of the resurgence of the classic cocktail. Planning for next year is already underway, and I for one already have 8–12 July 2009 blocked off on my calendar.

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