



The world owes a great deal to New Orleans. It's the birthplace of jazz, the home of Mardi Gras, and the source of Creole cuisine.

But when you raise a glass to toast her, be thankful for that, too. The Crescent City is believed to have invented the cocktail, it definitely created Southern Comfort, and it helped make bourbon the fine drink it is today.

"Cocktail comes from the French word *coquetier*, a pharmaceutical cup like you'd serve an egg in," says Joe Gendusa, a guide on the Southern Comfort Cocktail Tour. "It's all because of Antoine Peychaud."

More on him in a minute. The daily Cocktail Tour takes visitors on a walking trip through the French Quarter, stopping in several bars, where guides explain each establishment's history and the cocktails for which it is famous. Although not obligatory, drinks can be purchased along the way.

The tour starts with the story of Peychaud, a Creole pharmacist who moved to New Orleans from the West Indies and set up shop in the French Quarter in the 1800s. He blended aromatic bitters, made from his family's recipe and still sold today as Peychaud's. After the store closed at night, he would invite his friends in to sip a blend of cognac and bitters from the little cups. "There was no name to the drink; they'd say 'Give me another *coquetier*,'" Gendusa explains. "The Americans said 'cock-tay', and that became cocktail."

While Peychaud was sipping cognac with his friends, workers on the river nearby were busy unloading casks of bourbon. While it can only be made in Kentucky by law, the whiskey—officially named "America's native spirit" by Congress in 1964—owes its unique characteristics to New Orleans.

When the Kentucky whiskey was sold locally in jugs in the 1700s, it was a harsh, clear liquid. But when distillers began exporting their product around 1804, it had to spend many months on the Mississippi before it arrived in New Orleans. They used old water barrels, which were heavily charred on the inside to keep the water sweet. By the time the spirit arrived in Louisiana, it had mellowed with age, and had taken on a rich caramel color from the blackened wood. To this day, bourbon must be aged in charred oak barrels, with no added coloring allowed. The barrels can only be used once for bourbon; most are then shipped to Scotland, where they're used for aging Scotch.

KING OF

Bourbon—a drink, a family, a street...and an essential ingredient in New Orleans life

BY JIL McINTOSH

Most people assume that Bourbon Street is named for the drink. Instead, it honors a relative of Louis XIV, of the royal house of Bourbon, the reigning monarch when "La Nouvelle-Orleans" was laid out in 1722.

The street lent its name to the original Bourbon House restaurant, opened in the early 1900s at Bourbon and St. Peter streets, and patronized by the likes of Tennessee Williams. It was so popular that its closure in 1964 made local headlines, and its patrons gave it a jazz funeral.

Restaurateur Dickie Brennan named his new Bourbon House restaurant for the old one, but the menu is all about the whiskey. Here it's treated with the same respect usually reserved for single-malt Scotch: there are 56 varieties offered by the glass, as well as the restaurant's signature drink, an addictive frozen bourbon milk punch.

"I don't think bourbon is being recognized as much as it deserves [to be], and that's part of the reason why we wanted to take that one thing and make it a specialty," Brennan says. "If you enjoy cognac, the single-batch bourbons balance off a meal in the same way."

For many New Orleans restaurants, bourbon is also an important ingredient in numerous dishes both sweet and savory. It's popular in desserts, where its natural sweetness lends itself to the Bourbon House's bread pudding sauce and custard cups, and in chef Emeril Lagasse's recipes, where it's used to spice up mashed sweet potatoes, a coffee-based barbecue sauce, and poached apples. At Café Adelaide, chef Kevin Vizard uses it to make a bourbon milk punch ice cream, which he then combines in a martini glass with house-made cookies and a chocolate swizzle stick for the restaurant's famous "Milk and Cookies" dessert.

Tory McPhail, chef at Commander's Palace, considers bourbon an important ingredient in savory dishes and salads as well. "For summer we make a watermelon salad with mint julep vinaigrette," he says. "We make the julep cocktail like you'd drink it, but with oil. We pickle watermelon rind, and put that on watermelon slices, and then put the julep vinaigrette over it."


McPhail also uses the spirit to flambé crab cakes, glaze quail, and mix with Creole mustard to dress po' boy sandwiches. "I like a really 'round' flavor, which bourbon has," he says. "It's smoky, with a touch of bitter from the alcohol. It has a natural depth, more than in other liquors. If you crack a bottle of good bourbon, you know what you're working with. It has a nose like fine wine."

McPhail has no difficulty finding quality bourbon, but bartenders in years gone by weren't always so fortunate. Despite its barrel aging, the spirit often arrived in New Orleans in poor condition. Local bars would salvage their losses by flavoring it to create a palatable drink.

That's what M. W. Heron did in 1874. A St. Louis, Missouri native, he'd worked the paddleboats as a bartender until he was smitten by the French Quarter and decided to stay. He was working at a pub when his employer received a bad barrel of bourbon. Heron flavored it with fruit, sugar, and vanilla. The most popular blend of the day was named White Tie and Tails, so Heron dubbed his Cuffs and Buttons. The new drink quickly overtook the older brand in sales. But when outsiders didn't get the reference, he changed the name to Southern Comfort.

Today it's popular enough that Southern Comfort is erecting a museum at 308 Decatur St., scheduled to open next year. The interactive exhibit will follow the drink's history and its ties to New Orleans, contain two galleries for the works of local artists, and feature a "mixology" room where visitors can learn about mixing cocktails and cooking with "Comfort."

Like its Kentucky cousin, bourbon, Southern Comfort is not just a drink; it's an important cooking ingredient, and an essential part of New Orleans.

"We use Southern Comfort in a sauce for spicy shrimp, and in a syrup for ice cream," McPhail says. "I roast tomatoes or cook collards and finish them with a good amount of Southern Comfort. We use a lot of French brandy, but I think we need to bring the flavors home to New Orleans and its good Southern food. Nothing does that better than bourbon. It's big and bold, and that's what New Orleans is all about." 

DRINK & LEARN

The 2-1/2 hour **Southern Comfort Cocktail Tour** departs daily at 4 pm from the Gray Line Lighthouse at Toulouse St. and the Mississippi River. It is a walking tour; drinks can be purchased along the route. Adults \$24; must be 21 or older. Group bookings available. Reservations: 569-1401, 800-535-7786, www.graylinenew-orleans.com, or at the lighthouse.

A display on loan from the Museum of the American Cocktail is located on the upper floor of the **New Orleans Pharmacy Museum** (514 Chartres St., 565-8027) through September (Tu-Sa, 10 am-5 pm). Pharmacy Museum admission (\$5 adults, \$4 students and seniors, children under 5 free) covers both.

JOE SAYS...

Southern Comfort Cocktail Tour guide Joe Gendusa suggests trying these specialties:

» **Carousel Bar** (in the Monteleone Hotel, 214 Royal St., 523-3341): "The **Vieux Carré** cocktail served here was created for Tennessee Williams; he lived in the hotel and drank at the bar. It's a very strong cocktail, made with cognac, rye whiskey, vermouth, and Benedictine."

» **Tujague's** (823 Decatur St., 525-8676): "It was the first stand-up bar in New Orleans. The owners created the **Grasshopper** in the 1920s for a contest in New York. It won second place. It's world-famous, but no one can remember what won first."

» **Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop** (941 Bourbon St., 523-0066): "It was built about 1725 and is the city's oldest bar. Get an **Obituary Cocktail**, invented here sometime before 1912—a gin martini with a shot of Pernod."

» **Café Lafitte in Exile** (901 Bourbon St., 522-8397): "It's America's oldest gay bar, but everyone is welcome here. Have a **Bloody Mary**. The place is very spicy and the drink is very spicy, so it all goes together."

» **Napoleon House** (500 Chartres St., 524-9752): "Have a British drink, the **Pimm's Cup**. It's so relaxing, with the classical music, and a toasted muffuletta and a Pimm's Cup for lunch."

» **Pat O'Brien's** (718 St. Peter St., 525-4823): "A **Hurricane**, of course. If you've never had a Hurricane at Pat O's, you've never really had a drink in New Orleans."

THE SPIRITS

