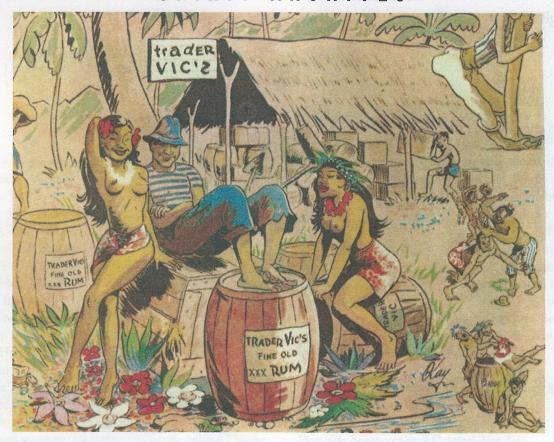
SPIRIT ARCHIVES



A FAUX VACATION TO THE TROPICS

CELEBRATING 61 YEARS OF THE MAI TAI

mong the fine restaurants that I have experienced, one stands out in my mind as having had a particularly exciting dining environment. It appeared to be a primeval tribal village that had

been dropped in the middle of a tropical jungle; surrounded by palm trees, anchors, fish nets, high-backed rattan chairs, bamboo lamp spears, and antique wooden outriggers hanging from the ceiling. It was Trader Vic's. This magical Polynesian island décor was housed in a place that could not have been more incongruous with a tropical lifestyle, the lower level of the fabled Plaza Hotel. I was not prepared for the Plaza's strange

subterranean world in which rum kegs, scorpion bowls, Samoan fog cutter vases, colorful depictions of half-naked Polynesian women, and hot buttered rum skulls conspired to create the impression that the diner was entering a forbidden land where intrigue lurked behind every tiki-ladened corner.

According to Polynesian lore, Tiki's ward off evil spirits. These same scowling faces adorned Trader Vic's Kava bowls, replicas of ceremonial earthen ware (filled with a potent spirit) used when entertaining special guests in the men's Long House on Tahiti

and other Polynesian islands. For most of us, the Tiki face has come to be closely identified with the ubiquitous tall green glasses that are the hallmark of Polynesian restaurants. At Trader Vic's, they were filled to the brim with rum and garnished with a cherry and a slice of pineapple skewered on a colorful swizzle stick, bearing the head of the brown mythical creature known as a "Menehune" the South Pacific's answer to the mischievous Leprechaun. The

now famous Mai Tai was just starting to take off, but would soon become the most popular Tiki cocktail of all time.

In order to give this drink its rightful place in history, the Trader Vic's organization celebrated the 60th anniversary of the



TRADER VIC'S

Mai Tai last year. As the story goes, Bergeron created the magical elixir back in 1944 at his first Trader Vic's restaurant in Oakland, Calif. Vic and his bartenders had just concocted a new rum-based libation that they had not yet tasted, when two of Vic's friends from Tahiti, Eastham (Ham) and Carrie Guild, arrived at the restaurant unexpectedly. Vic gave them a taste of the drink and Ham promptly proclaimed in the Tahitian dialect "Mai Tai roa ae" translated as: "Out of this world, the best."

The name stuck. Recently, I made a pilgrimage to Trader Vic's Beverly Hills to learn more about the Mai Tai from Chai Rojana, general manager. He knows the secrets behind "Trader Vic's Original Mai Tai" and spoke openly about the drink and its original formulation. As times have changed and cocktails evolve, the recipe listed below is not the precise one in use today. Brands of rum and other ingredients have changed, but this is the original Mai Tai as created by Bergeron and given to me by Richter, president of Trader Vic's:

2 oz. 17-Year-Old J Wray Nephew Jamaican Rum

1/2 oz. Garnier Orgeat Syrup

1/2 oz. DeKuyper Orange Curacao

1/4 oz. Rock Candy Syrup

Juice of 1 fresh lime (3/4 oz. of lime juice)

Shake well with shaved or crushed ice. Pour in 15 oz. double old-fashioned glasses. Garnish with sprig of mint and half of the spent lime shell. (As the drink evolved, a Menehune spear skewered with a cherry and pineapple came to be added to all Mai Tai's served at Trader Vic's.)

Over the years, the Mai Tai has been closely linked to Trader Vic's, but there is some controversy about who actually developed the popular libation. In the book HAWAI' I, Tropical Rum Drinks & Cuisine, authors Arnold Bitner and Phoebe Beach claim that the Mai Tai was invented by Donn Beach, a.k.a. Don The Beachcomber, the brilliant innovative restaurateur who created his Polynesian Tiki bar, "Don's Beachcomber," just off Hollywood Boulevard in 1933.

Apparently arguments raged for years about the origin of the drink, including occasional face-to-face discussions between

Bergeron and Beach. It is true that Bergeron was greatly influenced by "Don's Beachcomber" bar and freely admitted this in 1947 when he wrote the following tribute: "There is one other person I would like to mention who has done much to bring back the fine art of eating and drinking in our country. I salute Don the Beachcomber of

Hollywood, the originator of such outstanding drinks as the Zombie and Missionary's Downfall."

The only similarities between Vic and Don's Mai Tai is that they both contain rum. Here is Don's version:

Don The Beachcomber's Original Mai Tai:

1 1/2 oz. Meyers's Plantation Rum

1 oz. Cuban Rum

3/4 oz. Fresh Lime Juice

1 oz. Fresh Grapefruit Juice

1/4 oz. Falernum

1/2 oz. Cointreau

2 dashes Angostura bitters

1 dash Pernod

Shell of squeezed lime

1 cup cracked ice (size of a dime)

When I recreated the above recipe and tasted it, I found it far too complicated and diffuse for my taste. There are simply too many competing flavors. The Trader Vic's Mai Tai is brilliant in its relative simplicity and balance, containing ingredients that blend seamlessly to create a most pleasurable drinking experience. The debate about the origin of the drink may continue, but one fact is undeniable. The Mai Tai that the American public has come to know and love, the version that is most imitated (but never duplicated) throughout the world today, is the one created by Bergeron at Trader Vic's.

It has been 70 years since Victor J. Bergeron started the first Trader Vic's, disproving the old adage that "a good restaurant only lasts as long as its lease." Even though he is no longer with us, Bergeron family members and savvy executives who once worked with him are assuring that Vic's genius and his legacy continue.