

- Sazerac de Antoine -

\$9

This is the quintessential New Orleans cocktail. There are those who say this is the first cocktail, period. There's a lot of dispute over this, but it's certainly the first to appear in New Orleans, which has been acknowledged by many as the home of the cocktail.

This is an absolutely exquisite cocktail. As you sip it, you come across layer after layer of flavor -- the warmth and glowing burn of the rye, effused with the flavors of spice and honey, the bite of the bitters balanced with the sweetness of the sugar, with the subtle yet complex flavor of the anise underneath and the perfume of the lemon oil from the twist feel like a symphony inside your mouth. This is also a drink that warms up well, revealing even more flavors. Sip it very slowly. Savor it. Take your time with it.

It is said that this drink was invented by Antoine Amadie Peychaud, a Creole apothecary who moved to New Orleans from the West Indies and set up shop in the French Quarter in the early 1800s. He dispensed a proprietary mix of aromatic bitters from an old family recipe, to relieve the ails of his clients (Peychaud's Bitters are still made in New Orleans and sold today, and are an essential component of any truly complete bar), and around the 1830s he became famous for a toddy he made for his friends. It consisted of French brandy mixed with his secret blend of bitters, a splash of water and a bit of sugar. According to legend he served his drink in the large end of an egg cup that was called a *coquetier* in French, and some say that the Americanized pronunciation of this as "cocktail" gave this type of drink its name (unlikely as that may be).

Before long, the demand for this drink led to its being served in bars throughout the city (euphemistically called "coffee houses" in those days). One of these, a large bar on Exchange Alley owned by a gentleman named Sewell Taylor, was named the Sazerac Coffeehouse. In 1853, Mr. Taylor declared that the drink would be made in his bar only with particular brand of Cognac called **Sazerac-du-Forge et fils** for which Mr. Taylor was the sole importer and for which his bar was named. Apparently the bar was big enough to accommodate 12 bartenders, all mixing "Sazeracs" for their patrons, and people began to refer to the drink with the name of the coffeehouse where it was most popular. It is believed that during this period one of the bartenders at the Sazerac came up with the idea of adding a few drops of absinthe to coat the glass, and with this flavor enhancement, a true classic was born.

Around 1870, a gentleman by the name of Thomas Handy took over as proprietor of the Sazerac House, and the primary ingredient was changed from cognac to rye whiskey due to popular American tastes as well as to the difficulty of obtaining cognac at the time. Eventually the now-banned absinthe has been replaced by the locally-produced pastis called Herbsaint, although if you can't find it you may substitute Pernod, any other good pastis or even a good French-style absinthe if you live in an area where it's available. The drink has been enjoyed this way for over 130 years, and over 150 if you include the original version made with Cognac.