

A HISTORY OF THE
SAZERAC
COCKTAIL



*The Official
Cocktail of
New Orleans*





The ingredients seem simple. Peychaud's Bitters.

Sazerac Rye Whiskey. Herbsaint. A sugar cube, and a twist of lemon. Yet, each ingredient reflects elements of the history and culture of New Orleans. Each tells a story. When combined, they form a perfect cocktail, the Sazerac. A drink that reflects the spirit of New Orleans, which, over centuries has evolved from the spirits of the diverse cultures and people who have become part of this city's unique history.

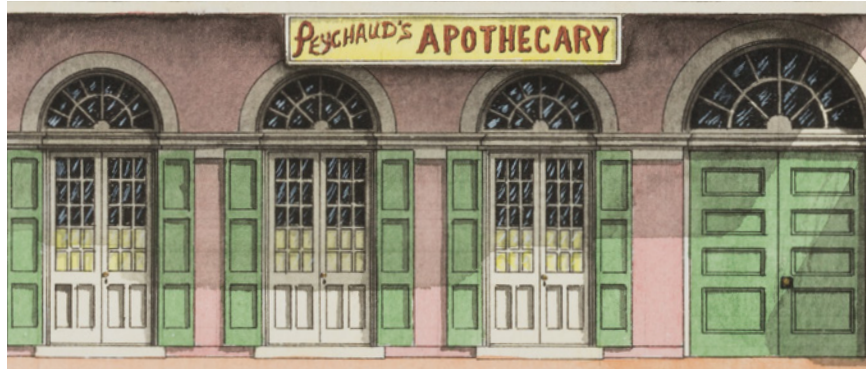
The Roosevelt New Orleans Hotel is located near the epicenter of the city's history and culture in the French Quarter. It is one of the Queen City's oldest hotels, and the home of its Sazerac Bar (opened here in 1949), a bar that maintains the traditions of the Sazerac.

Walk across Canal Street and you enter the French Quarter, where the Sazerac had its origins.

There Antoine Peychaud opened an apothecary, on Royal Street, and sold “Peychaud’s Aromatic Cocktail Bitters.” There, in the 1850s, the Sazerac Coffee House, located on Exchange Place, popularized the city’s local cocktail, the Sazerac, using Sazerac de Forge & Fils Cognac as a main ingredient, (providing the cocktail’s name). Later,



Map showing the extent of the territory of French Louisiana when sold in the Louisiana Purchase in 1803



French cognac was replaced by classic Kentucky rye whiskey. After Prohibition was repealed in 1933, J. Marion Legendre introduced his Legendre Absinthe. When the government outlawed use of the word “absinthe” on labels, he renamed this product Herbsaint, featuring an image of the Old Absinthe House on its label.

Let’s consider these Sazerac ingredients and how they relate to the culture of New Orleans.

PSYCHAUD’S BITTERS

Antoine Psychaud is said to have been born in San Domingue, Haiti, in 1803, the same year Thomas Jefferson completed the Louisiana Purchase from the French First Republic. For fifteen million dollars, Jefferson acquired the vast territory of Louisiana (nearly doubling the size of the United States), and secured the port city of New Orleans. Psychaud fled his native country due to a slave rebellion, and tradition tells us that he came to New Orleans bringing his family’s recipe for bitters (though this is debated by historians).

In 1834, Psychaud opened an apothecary at 123 Royal Street. Apothecaries then often had laboratories in their back rooms, where owners experimented and made diverse medicines. During the day, Psychaud treated his patients with a combination of alcoholic spirits and homespun medicines. His formulation of bitters proved popular because of their distinctive taste. After closing shop, he appears to have made more recreational concoctions.



SAZERAC COFFEE HOUSE

New Orleans became a part of the nation in 1803, after the Louisiana Purchase, and by that time the culture of the coffee house was already well established in the city. The coffee house evolved into an important place to gather, to discuss business and politics, or just to socialize. New Orleans became home to many different coffee houses during the antebellum era, and throughout the nineteenth century.

Alcohol was introduced into the culture of some coffee houses from an early date. By the 1840s the popularity of the cocktail began to slowly change the environment of some of those establishments. As awareness of Peychaud's pharmaceutical brandy cocktail spread in New Orleans, coffee houses began recreating Peychaud's elixir for their own customers. During this period, brandy was thought to have medicinal qualities, and was dispensed through a number of apothecaries.



Old Exchange Alley by George F. Mugnier circa 1870

The Sazerac cocktail made its mark in the heart of the French Quarter. Here, after it was opened by Aaron Bird in the 1850s, the famed Sazerac Coffee House popularized the newly-concocted drink. Like its signature cocktail, the coffee house reportedly took its name from the imported French brandy, “Sazerac de Forge & Fils.”

The Sazerac Coffee House was located at 13 Exchange Place, and had a second entrance on Royal Street, a busy French Quarter thoroughfare. Distinctive iron gates and balconies lined that street, reflecting the Quarter’s French Creole and Spanish architectural influences. It was located next door to the Merchants Exchange Coffee House, which was opened by Sewell Taylor around 1840. It is believed that Taylor, a prominent liquor distributor, was also a financial backer of the new Sazerac Coffee House.

The establishment had a number of owners, changing hands often over its years. In 1860, John B. Schiller became the owner of the Sazerac House. In 1865, just after the Civil War, Schiller hired Civil War veteran Thomas N. Handy to work there as a clerk. In 1878, after Handy was hit by financial troubles, he sold his liquor business to a former partner, Vincent Micas, who took over the operation of the Sazerac House.

During the 1880s, the Sazerac House featured ornate mirrors, a brass rail and a long mahogany bar. That bar was reportedly 125 feet long, and was manned by as many as twelve bartenders, who focused on the making of Sazerac cocktails. The site of the original Sazerac Coffee House can be located on Royal Street, where it has been commemorated with the word “Sazerac” in white tile letters.





The phylloxera aphid captured as per its reputation for consuming only the finest of grape stock. Punch c.1890

EPIDEMIC

During the antebellum era, trade flourished between the state of Kentucky and the Ohio River Valley area and the city of New Orleans. In early days, flatboats were a major form of transportation, but could only travel one way, floating downriver, carrying cargo to New Orleans, including growing quantities of Kentucky whiskey. After unloading, the boats were broken up and the wood was used to build houses, sidewalks and other projects. The Kentucky boatmen made their way back home, walking along the Natchez Trace (which ran from Natchez to Nashville), often repeating the same cycle of their downriver journey.

This changed during the years when steamboats dominated life on the Mississippi River. The steamboat era continued from around 1820 to 1870, and New Orleans became its great urban center.

Steamboats offered ease and luxury in river transportation, as well as commercial possibilities, along the Mississippi and Ohio River Valleys. Noted ships traveling the Mississippi River in those years included the J.W. White, the Sultana, the Belle of Memphis, the Silver Wave, the Natchez, and the Robert E. Lee.

During these years, whiskey from Kentucky became a more respected, and more popular beverage in New Orleans. The popularity of Kentucky whiskey advanced more rapidly when a major phylloxera epidemic devastated French vineyards during the 1870s, and wiped out the majority of grapevines in Europe in the late 19th century. One account estimated that by 1890 almost 2/3 of all European vineyards were infested or destroyed.

This directly impacted the availability of one of the traditional ingredients in the Sazerac cocktail. Brandy and cognac were in short supply, causing Sazerac cognac to fade from the bar and cocktail scene in the United States. In response to this, New Orleans bartenders began making the Sazerac cocktail with American rye whiskey to replace the brandy. And this change in the cocktail tradition has carried on to the present date.

The earliest incarnation of today's Buffalo Trace Distillery, located on the Kentucky River in Frankfort, Kentucky, was the source, it is said, for much of the 19th century rye whiskey sent to New Orleans for use in the Sazerac cocktail. Beginning in 1789, in fact, that distillery became one of the first to ship whiskey down the Mississippi River to New Orleans, and from there to points beyond. By 1857, that same Kentucky distillery was the first to incorporate steam power in producing bourbon and whiskey, much of it aged in Kentucky then shipped downriver, to New Orleans. Today's Sazerac Rye Whiskey is a tribute to those earlier ryes.





Advertisement for Absinthe Robette showing “la fée verte”

ABSINTHE

It is said that novelists turned to absinthe for inspiration, bohemians for dreaming, and cosmopolitans for glamor. Popularized in France in the mid-1800s, the mysterious drink soon crept into New Orleans culture.

The city embraced absinthe before it was banned. Reminders of the era of absinthe can be seen today at the Old Absinthe House in the French Quarter, located at 240 Bourbon Street.

Writer Oscar Wilde said, “After the first glass of absinthe you see things as you wish they were. After the second you see them as they are not. Finally, you see things as they really are, and that is the most horrible thing in the world.”

Seen as a dangerously potent spirit, absinthe was banned during the early 20th century in a range of countries, including Switzerland, Brazil, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy and The Netherlands. It was banned in America in 1912. In 1919, with ratification of the 18th Amendment, the United States banned the manufacture, transportation and sale of all intoxicating liquors, launching the era of Prohibition. In 1933, passage of the 21st Amendment repealed prohibition.

J. Marion Legendre was a New Orleans pharmacist who launched production of Legendre Absinthe in December of 1933, as the new rules regulating the liquor industry were being written. He had experimented with *pastis*, a version of absinthe without wormwood based on a French recipe that was passed to him during his service in France in World War I. When the government ruled that “absinthe” could not be used on labels, he renamed his product Herbsaint, after the packets of herbs, L’Herbe Saint, that he sold in his drug store. His label used an image of the Old Absinthe House on its label, but he identified it as “A Vieux Carre Café.” His product was successful for many years. He sold it to the Sazerac Company in 1949, where it is still produced.





Storming The Sazerac Bar, The Roosevelt Hotel, New Orleans c.1950

THE MODERN SAZERAC

After passage of the 18th Amendment in 1919, New Orleans responded by trying to classify liquor as food. The plan failed. Nevertheless, New Orleans resisted Prohibition. Hidden shops and bars called speakeasies flourished. Rum-runners used the busy port to transport liquor from the Caribbean. Prohibition took its toll, though, permanently closing the Sazerac House. Prohibition ended in 1933, and New Orleans' cravings for cocktails had never been stronger, as speakeasies evolved into nightclubs.

In 1933, the Sazerac Company opened a new Sazerac Bar on Carondelet Street, which featured a replica bar from the original Sazerac House on Royal Street. The new bar promoted itself as the only joint mixing the "real" cocktail. Newspaper headlines celebrated the famous cocktail "linked with this city's name." The Sazerac was cemented as the drink of New Orleans.

In 1949, the Sazerac Bar on Carondelet Street closed, and a new Sazerac Bar opened in the Roosevelt New Orleans Hotel. On September 30, 1949, when the new bar opened, for the first time, women were welcomed at the bar on a regular basis, not just during Mardi Gras. Though not officially linked to the Sazerac Company (which was purchased by Stephen Goldring and Malcolm Woldenberg in 1949), the Sazerac Bar became the official location in New Orleans for serving a bar-made Sazerac. The bar remains open today with the original mid-century finishes, Paul Ninas murals and classic cocktail recipe on the menu.

NEW ORLEANS INSPIRED SPIRITS



SAZERAC DE FORGE: Like Bernard Sazerac de Forge, whose brandies were enjoyed all over the world from the 17th to the 19th centuries, we are bringing fine cognac to the 21st century. **HERBSAINT:** Our Herbsaint is still made with Legendre's original 1930s recipe and the liqueur's unique anise flavor is a key ingredient in our official Sazerac cocktail recipe. **HENRY RAMOS GIN:** Our Henry Ramos Gin honors the creations and libations of Henry C. Ramos, whose Imperial Cabinet Saloon and Stag Saloon became hubs for cocktail culture in New Orleans due to his Ramos Gin Fizz. **SOUTHERN COMFORT:** Neat, on the rocks, or in a classic cocktail, Southern Comfort, fits in anywhere. **SAZERAC RYE:** The one and only New Orleans original, Sazerac Rye symbolizes the culture and history of the Big Easy. **PEYCHAUD'S:** Antoine Amédée Peychaud owned an apothecary in the French Quarter where he made his famous bitters. Peychaud's is an essential ingredient in the official Sazerac cocktail and an indispensable staple in any sophisticated bar. **PRALINES & CREAM:** The rich, creamy, delicious taste of Pralines has been enjoyed by generations in the U.S. South who cherish their confectionary traditions and love the irresistibly sweet and indulgent flavor. **PEYCHAUD'S APERITIVO:** Delightful and refreshing, Peychaud's Aperitivo is best served over ice. **LEGENDRE OJEN:** Ojen is an 84-proof anise liqueur, inspired by a Spanish spirit produced in the 1900s that gained popularity in New Orleans as a Carnival time favorite. **JUNG & WULFF:** In the 1800s, Caribbean rums made from native sugarcane in Trinidad, Guyana and Barbados were shipped in casks to the Port of New Orleans to quench the thirst of the growing American spirits market.

OFFICIAL SAZERAC RECIPE



INGREDIENTS:

1.5 oz Sazerac Rye Whiskey
1 sugar cube
3 dashes Peychaud's Bitters
.25 oz Herbsaint
Lemon twist

PREPARATION: Pack an Old-Fashioned glass with ice. In a second Old-Fashioned glass, place a sugar cube and add three dashes of Peychaud's Bitters to it. Crush the sugar cube. Add 1.5 oz Sazerac Rye Whiskey to the glass with the Peychaud's Bitters and sugar. Add ice and stir. Empty the ice from the first glass and coat the glass with .25 oz Herbsaint. Discard the remaining Herbsaint. Strain the whiskey / bitters / sugar mixture from the glass into the Herbsaint coated glass and garnish with a lemon peel.

On October 2, 2019, a new Sazerac House opened at the corner of Canal Street and Magazine Street, located in a 48,000-square-foot building, dating to the 1860s. It features exhibitions, historic displays and educational experiences related to the history of the Sazerac, and the cocktail culture of New Orleans. Notably, it is located just 350 yards from the original Sazerac Coffeehouse.



101 Magazine St • New Orleans, LA
Reserve your complimentary tour today!
sazerachouse.com • 504.910.0100

