

COCKTAILS IN THE BIG EASY

A festival of spirits celebrates libations like no other



Ann Tuennerman, founder of Tales of the Cocktail

COURTESY OF ANN TUENNERMAN

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

As founder of Tales of the Cocktail, a spirited festival held in New Orleans each July, Ann Tuennerman hosts a tradition that brings together the cocktail industry's top movers and shakers, as well as enthusiasts from around the world.

QA Why cocktails? I'm very passionate about the city of New Orleans, and have an entrepreneurial spirit. I've always worked in special events and promotions. When people think of New Orleans, they think of dining and drinking, but we didn't have anything to celebrate that, so I started a walking tour of New Orleans' bars and restaurants that showcased famous cocktails and people. To celebrate the one-year anniversary of that tour, I created Tales of the Cocktail. I really like the hospitality industry and just became versed in it, taking classes, learning as much as I can about the cocktail world. I really enjoy it. I think people in the bar industry are really nice and are great about sharing information.

BEHIND THE BAR

How has Tales of the Cocktail evolved?
It started in 2003, to celebrate the anniversary of the cocktail tour—which takes place every day, but from a PR perspective, the goal is to keep it top-of-mind. Somehow I convinced 10 top mixologists to come to town, and we had two events and about 200 people. People said, "This has been great, we need to do it again." It continued to grow through input. For example, the folks at Hotel Monteleone said that to get people to come for a weekend, we needed to fill out the weekend with events, and so the third year we added events on Friday and Saturday. You know, most wine events have some of the same components, like a grand tasting and vintner dinners—we don't have such expectations and have just grown organically. We change the content of the seminars every year and add new events. It's exciting to see it grow out of people's love and passion for the event.

I started to work on the nonprofit in 2005, but Hurricane Katrina delayed finishing it up. It's about preserving New Orleans' dining and drinking history, plus contributing to the hospitality industry. Over the years we've done different projects. The first year I put together a complimentary tour of cemeteries that focused on the dining and drinking families buried there. Last year, we had a photo exhibit called "Behind the Bar," showcasing photos from around the country. In 2009, we're starting a scholarship program for professionals to experience cocktail culture in another city—it's about spreading the education process. We really strive to have a global audience at Tales of the Cocktail because sharing knowledge is really fun.

You worked to "save the sazerac." Why?
The sazerac is now the official cocktail of New Orleans, and New Orleans is now the only city that has an official cocktail. It was a lot of work; I thought it would be easy. I sent a letter to the Senator of my area and asked him to introduce a bill—there was criticism because people said we had more important things to worry about. It took about six months and a lot of back and forth in the House and Senate. The sazerac is history in a glass, and it needs to be preserved. People come to New Orleans for an authentic, genuine experience. They want to have beignets, po' boys. The sazerac goes back to the 1830s, and truly has historic legitimacy; every ingredient in it folds into New Orleans' culture. The Hurricane is popular, but it didn't come around until the '40s, so it's relatively new. In my research, I really didn't see any other cocktail that would compete with the sazerac, and it's important to preserve it.

What do you predict will be the big cocktail trends of 2009?
I definitely think fresh ingredients will see continued momentum. There will be continued interest in brown spirits, and in strong flavors like ginger. And I think there will still be an interest in classics; for example, gin is making a big comeback right now. **SP**
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