

New Orleans Tales of the Cocktail

Written by Written by Karen Loftus

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If heading to The Big Easy this summer, stop in at NOLA's famous spirits fest. In no time you'll be seduced by the city and quickly under a spell. It's a Spirit-ual Thing.



New Orleans has long cast a spell on its visitors. It takes hold of you. Once in, you can't get out. Once out, you can't wait to get back in. It can't be explained, only experienced. It's a spiritual thing. Last summer was no different. This city was a buzz as it tipped a glass in honor of the Sixth annual Tales of the Cocktail, the biggest and best spirits fest in North America. Everyone who's any one in the spirits scene; brand ambassadors, superstar mixologists, well known columnists, TV hosts, your average yet no less committed drinking folk and all the brands, from boutique to the majors pour in to New Orleans (NOLA) from every corner of the globe for five days of imbibing, cocktail demos, seminars, tastings, parties, paired dinners and mixing competitions, topped off with an Oscar worthy awards show.

It's Hollywood on a highball. In place of cinema, there's spirits. Instead of movie stars, bar stars. There are no major film companies, but major brands and in place of indie films, boutique brands. It's the Sundance of the spirits scene. It's where you go to see and be seen and to consume as many cocktails, conversation, cards and culture as is humanly possible. After a sip the previous summer, this Sipster was counting the calendar days until she could get back to New Orleans to take in more Tales.

New Orleans has long been known for their signature culinary culture. Cocktails, believed by many to have originated in NOLA, are finally having their day in the entertainment spotlight alongside their culinary tablemate. We're used to having our wines paired with a plate. Cocktails too are finding their way to the table as well as the bar. But it's a true sophisticate that can balance a meal and a cocktail and perfectly pair the two, creating an inspired party for the palette and the table.

There's no better place to hone these cocktail skills than at Tales. You'll find the more you learn, the less you know. Whether you're a novice or a bar star, there's no better setting or scenario to add a few more tools or tricks to your bar kit.

Ann Tunnerman, the Redford of Tales and New Orleans resident along with husband Paul Tunnerman assemble a star-studded line up by day, where bar stars, (the Kidman, Clooney and Pitt of the spirits scene) conduct a series of seminars starting at 10:30 AM. Several seminars run concurrently taking place, mainly at Tales headquarters, Hotel Monteleone, in the heart of The Quarter. They run ambitiously back-to-back 'til 6:00 PM.

Alongside seminars are a series of sumptuous tastings, where brands show their spirited sides with ambassadors giving you hands on tricks and twists and glasses to go, a great way to quench midday thirst and hairs of the dog. It's a juggle, deciding which seminar to hit and miss. I played the field starting in one, finishing another, and topping off in the tasting rooms.

This year with thousands of sippers in attendance, Tales saw two to three times the attendance than the previous year consuming 6 thousand pounds of ice, 70 liters of cranberry juice, 28 liters of tomato, 30 quarts of egg whites, 56 cases of Lemons, 61 cases of Limes, 12 cases of Oranges, 23 pounds of cucumbers, 50 pounds of ginger root, 2340 jalapeno slices, 8085 mint leaves, 6 pounds of fresh basil and 12 quarts of heavy cream, to name but a few of the ingredients used in the five day window behind the bars.

Here's a word to the wise, plan now for this year's fest. Like Sundance, you've got to get in on the action while the indie vibe is alive, before brands, banners and business override the party. If heading in, here's a quick pic of what's in store, a wee window in to what The Hip Sipster got in to, all the sips and swizzles experienced at the intoxicating event.

The party started in a shared airport van, with San Fran's bar star, Manny Hinejo and the Chartreuse team who gave me a baby bottle to take with. I did a quick change at The Ritz Carlton's Maison Orleans, touted one of the world's best by Robb Report and Travel & Leisure. It was my third visit to The Ritz, my NOLA home away from home.

I all but ran to Hotel Monteleone knowing I already missed a few hours of the fest. Next year leave on Tuesday. First official sip was the Bloggers Reception sponsored by Rio Mar, restaurant, which served insane small plates paired with Cabana Cachaca, the new Latin spirit gaining lots of heat behind the bar and at culinary table across the country..

It was easily 6,000 degrees in NOLA. So, I ran to The Ritz and changed before the evening's festivities. The opening party sponsored by Beekeepers Gin was chock a block at The Palace Café on Canal. Bar star Audrey Saunders of New York's famed Pegu Club seamlessly served champagne punch and cool Gin Gin Mules! Manny was in the house as was Thirsty Traveler's Kevin Brauch, who's adorable!

The crowd migrated to Arnaud's, a jewel in The Quarter, where Rhem Clement Rum hosted Save The Daiquiri Party. Behind the bar was San Fran's adorable Duggan of Cantina and New York's Gardner, who I met two years ago at 42 Below's Cocktail World Cup in New Zealand. He's a talented one, filled with mischief.

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Friday I made an innocent, yet brilliant mistake by showing up at Bourbons, Blues and Bluegrass lunch at Dickie Brennan's Bourbon House hosted by New York's Allen Katz. It was a highlight, an intimate event where Katz made connections between spirits and song. He likened the syncopation of music to the syncopation experienced if one stuck their forearm in to Buffalo Trace's Whiskey still. Katz had all of us, inclusive of Dickie and crew, on our feet in between courses with Buffalo Trace and Sazerac Rye whiskey in hand, singing the blues. Between that and the corn & crab soup, glazed pork confit and the maple ice cream with chocolate dipped bacon, it was a bit of southern bliss!

You know it's top tier if the Godfather (think DeNiro, even better Brando) of the American cocktail culture Dale De Groff is in attendance. I sat with NOLA's own liquid luminary Chris McMillan and his wife. They together with the De Groff's are founders of The American Cocktail Museum, which opened its doors in NOLA that weekend.

I missed Simon of Difford's Guidebook's seminar on Great Bars of the World and What Makes them Great and Juniperlooz. Yet, managed to catch Audrey Saunders and UK's Tony Conigliaro's The Scented Trail, Techniques on How to Develop Aroma in your Cocktails, which was excellent. I slipped in to Rhem Clements Tasting Room for a tippie before hitting Charlotte Voisey's (Julia Robert's of the spirits scene) seminar, British Invasion of the American Cocktail hour. She's a super star performer and we all scored teacup cocktail cups to go. Thanks Hendrick's Gin. We sped to the fest's highlight, the 5:30 Cocktail hour where we were wildly over served with every brand and bar star pouring. It was a great way to taste the waters, complete with cocktail recipe cards.

All evenings were complete with spirits dinners happening in the city's best restos from Auguste to Commander's Palace where various brands hosted evenings with ambassadors behind the bar. I was privy to Bombay Sapphire's dinner at The Ritz's Melange Restaurant, a true blue supper club.

With the Ritz's own local Goddess Char (Schroeder) at my side and Nawlins own jazzy, Jeremy Davenport crooning in the background, my evening was pure perfection prior to any pour or plate. It just got better with the sesame seared tuna paired with a Sapphire Martini with truffle oil and braised Kobe short rib with ruby grapefruit & basil cocktail. Mmmmmmm...

Desmond Payne's Ruby Jubilee at Muriel's was dessert while the Sonemma herbal vodka suite was my late night aperitif. I popped by St. Germaine's suite first, behind actor Chris MacDonald, but it was crazy crowded. I got to Sonemma's suite early enough to carve out a small spot, by the bar where I took up with any one with an accent.

Amsterdam's own Fabulous Shaker Boys were behind the bar and The Brit Brigade, the leaders in the cocktail culture, was in full force, with brand ambassadors boozing with the best of them. Aussies, a close second, behind the Brits, were out in a pack. I had the weekend's best laugh with a crazy Aussie ambassador as we casually came upon the word pillage in conversation.

I put him to the social test of spreading the word, virtually unused in the English language. What better place than an international event where bar stars can take it back, serving it alongside a cool cocktail? I supported his valiant efforts as he chatted up mates with awkward conversational connectors like, "Have you pillaged lately?" or "Nothing like a pillage to finish off a party." He all but cleared the crowded room.

Friday we hit Brennan's early morning media breakfast hosted by Uluvka vodka's Mark Holmes and ambassador Colin Appiah, complete with well-needed Bloody Mary's. I sat next to the obviously over served Thirsty Traveler who was up early or never to bed, on Mancow's 5 AM radio show with one of NOLA's finest, famed chef Paul Prudhomme and San Fran's Manny.

The day was a buzz of activity as I hit the tail end of A Very Bitter History of Bitter Spirits seminar and slipped in to Sazerac Rye's whiskey tasting before the Shochu – The Other Japanese Alcohol seminar, which proved to be a perfectly smooth spirit. Another journo and I popped in to Antoine's for lunch, one of the sweetest spots in the city. The old world gem, recently seen in Brad's Benjamin Button's is, like most Creole homes, surprise inside. The restaurant goes on and on to several museum quality rooms riddled with celeb (Garland), Presidential (Roosevelt) and papal (John Paul) history. After oysters, we were back for Grape Expectations, a grapa seminar hosted by Vegas' Francesco, who has poured for the likes of Cali's own film folk Arnold & Spielberg.

I stopped by Pernod's tasting room, one of the best of the fest, with a crepe maker on site, champagne and a bevy of beverages. Going with the festival flow, Moet & Hennessey's Jeffrey Pogash caught me on my way out, inviting me to dinner at Cochon, a coveted reservation in town and recent James Beard recipient.

Jeffrey, his son Jonathon and the Ten Cane Rum crew and I had several small plates with our perfectly chilled Ten Cane Mojitos. It was a more casual atmosphere than expected, but no less decadent. The group split with some hitting the Bloody Mary Comp at House of Blues, while I hit The W Hotel's Gran Marnier and Navan Vanilla Liqueur's Bar Chef Challenge created and hosted by Dale De Groff and co hosted by Thirsty Traveler. Miami's John Lermayer of The Delano, who pours for Jen's man Mayer, Lenny Kravitz and Eva Longoria took top prize.

I had a low-key nightcap at The International House where I ran in to, UK based; yet very Italian Peter Dorelli and Salvatore Calabrese, both up

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for lifetime achievement awards alongside De Groff. 42 Below's Liquid Professor Jacob was a welcome surprise. He flew in from Kiwi country last minute.

I crawled over the finish line with Saturday's Spice and Ice, Green Seasonal Bar seminars and St. Germaine's tasting. My final and one of the finest, was super smart and sexy Steve Olsen's seminar Rediscover the Traditions of Vodka. Yes, may I have another?

Many went to Harrah's early on Saturday for a street party before the award's ceremony. I hit Bourbon St. where not one, but several middle-aged women, not Girls Gone Wild, were pulling their dresses up over their heads for all to see. I'm told a swinger's fest was in town. I guess so. I popped in to Arnaud's ambient bar for a few signature cocktails and a wicked dinner hosted by local diva, Arnaud's own Lisa Sins who took us on a luscious tour of Germaine Caze Nave Wells, Mardi Gras Museum onsite. Wild! That night the fest finished off with Dale De Groff winning the lifetime achievement award.

Sunday, I bid adieu to NOLA at Chartreuse's tasting, hosted by my first and final friends at the fest. Apparently Chartreuse, which is best enjoyed straight, has medicinal qualities, a spirit created and held under lock and key by monks. I took a well-needed dose and a quiet moment to allow for and to enjoy the spirit-ual effects of Chartreuse and the fest. Ommmmm. For more info, visit www.talesofthecocktail.com.