

HISTORY BY THE JIGGER

AT JULEP, THE PAST IS
ON THE MENU

As told to Gravy by Alba Huerta



SOUTHERN, IN A JIFFY

I was born in Monterrey, Mexico. My family moved to Houston when I was six. My parents are only about twenty years older than me, so we all kind of grew up together. We were learning what it means to be Southern. One day I was grocery shopping with my mother, and we came across a display of Jiffy cornbread mix. The logo on the box was a beautiful shade of blue, and it was very affordable. My mom instantly loved it and made it every day. So cornbread became a staple at our Mexican table.

My first and only job was bartending. I loved it from the minute I started doing it fifteen years ago, and I never wanted to do anything else. I was trying to learn about classic cocktails and the history of drinking culture, which led me to become interested in Southern drinkways and ingredients. When we talk about the actual drinking culture in the South, there's little documentation, because for a long time it was taboo to talk about drinking beyond social clubs. I also like to read about the cultures and applications of Southern food, and how those can be paired with drink. I think it belongs somewhere in our current history to have these things be available to us: These are our cultures, these are our spirits, these are our ingredients and our produce. That's the reason this bar exists.

STOCKING THE BAR

Whiskey, Cognac, and rum are the foundational spirits of Southern drinking—although originally, wine and beer were more prevalent in the region than liquor. Cognac probably arrived in the South first. Much of it came through New Orleans, and a lot of that didn't make it out of New Orleans. Prior to whiskey becoming more palatable and refined, Cognac was the spirit of choice. Whiskey began to rule the South when phylloxera was killing grapes in Europe. And around that same time, whiskey became more palatable. Early on, a Sazerac, for example, was often made with Cognac, but later replaced with whiskey or rye. The antebellum julep, too, was made with Cognac.

Bourbon and rye whiskey are very young spirits in world-historical terms: The earliest production of these spirits only goes back about 300 years. Cognac and rum have been available for much longer. Because of Prohibition in the early twentieth century, there was such a lapse in the production of American spirits—namely whiskey. The truth of the

matter is that people are going to drink. So we see an influx of rum during Prohibition. In the present day, tequila is ascendant on Southern cocktail menus, largely because of our proximity to Mexico.

As I see it, there are Southern drinks, and then there are Southern *applications* of recipes that aren't necessarily native to the South. Historically, if a cocktail was created in a certain city—New York or New Orleans, for example—then it was made for that demographic.

In the nineteenth century, Jerry Thomas created his drinks for New York bars, and they were very boozy. A Southern regional cocktail bar exists to create cocktails for the people we are serving. Julep is in Houston, where it's high humidity most of the time, so my cocktails should be made for this weather.

ONE YEAR, FOUR MENUS

There are so many things to cover as far as what's Southern, and the different ideas people have about what is Southern and what is not. In talking about cocktails, I felt like we needed to have a more refined view of how we put together our menus and how they would translate better. The idea was to do a whole year of menus based on the development of the South and its drinkways.

The year began with our Rural South menu. Rural places charm me; I love visiting the more rural areas of Texas and getting to know the people in those places. So my part in telling that story is how elements of the rural South can affect, or be applied to, today's drinking culture. The flip, which has been around for a long time, is a type of cocktail made with an egg. Our Amethyst Flip is made with Cognac, sloe gin, egg, Champagne, nutmeg, and purple sweet potato—hence the name. Sweet potatoes have long been an important



Southern crop, so here we're applying a rural element to a classic cocktail. We've given it a name, a premise, a purpose—so now it's a Southern drink. Then there's the Snake-Bit Sprout: gin, pineapple, lime, and apple cider. We infuse the gin with chamomile, which was used as a home remedy for snake bites. And cider was and is brewed in this region with apples that aren't good to eat. So there you've got multiple folkways in one drink.

The next menu will be inspired by the South's port cities: how spirits were imported, where they landed, and what they were mixed with. The menu after that will play with the term "trading with the enemy." During the Civil War, soldiers from the North and South bathed in the same rivers, and those rivers became places where trade occurred. So we will take Northern cocktails and make them Southern, or vice versa. We see this as a chance to expand our minds and play with different recipes. For instance, we're planning a New Orleans Buck made with buckwheat ginger beer—a New England crop. In the last part of the year, the menu will explore drinking societies. I say "drinking societies" as a very general term—any organized group that would have had a gala or other special party, would have created its own cocktail to commemorate that event. We're following the trend of people's actual consumption during that time, because it will be the season of holiday parties.

DON'T BE A STRANGER

Houston doesn't have any zoning, so we are quite spread out. The first thing that I look at as far as creating a culture of regulars is that people are going to love a bar if they get good service: good hospitality, kind people serving them. If that is in place, guests will come back. What are the things that we do to ensure that they have everything they need, and that they feel special? Those are the basic human rights of any kind of bar. Everything that goes into putting our menus and our service together is about how we give our customers a great experience. The premise is always the same. We like to say that before we were making cocktails, we were making friends. You create people's love for a space that belongs to them. 🍷

PHOTOS by Amy C. Evans.

GRAVY



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SUMMER COCKTAILS

A QUARTERLY FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

