

From 'Window Hawking' to Go-Cups *The History—and Geography—of Public Drinking in New Orleans*

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The annual "Tales of the Cocktail" gathering -- a convention for mixed-drink enthusiasts and beverage industry folks, held this week in downtown New Orleans -- finds a fitting home here for good reason: historical testimonies abound regarding New Orleans' bibulous nature.

"This place is one of the worst I ever witnessed," wrote an outraged newcomer in 1817, citing the city's gambling and drinking. A visitor in 1834 rued that "cafés and barrooms were open" on the Sabbath, and that "rum and gin, Monongahela [rye whiskey], and Tom and Jerry [sweetened hot rum] here live in palaces [with] whole army of bottles [lining] the shelves in close array...." Another man reported in 1847 "the profit is on the liquor," as evidenced by "the immense patronage these establishments enjoy[; they] are coining money [and] monopolize the corners of every square...." Wrote French geographer Elisée Réclus six years later, "The city's more than 2,500 taverns are always filled with drinkers...especially during election time.... If [a political candidate] doesn't know how to drink a cocktail with style, he will lose popularity and be branded a traitor."

A close read of these and other historical accounts indicates that most alcohol consumption took place in private spaces--or more accurately, private spaces within the public domain, such as saloons, taverns, exchanges, concert saloons, grog shops, billiards halls or "coffee houses." Drinking in the public space appears to have been socially disapproved, and in later years illegal, except during Carnival and other special times.

This contrasts strikingly with current circumstances, in which the sight of people drinking alcohol freely in the streets consistently startles first-time visitors. In fact, this is mostly a phenomenon of the past 40-odd years, and it is traceable to a transformative moment in the recent history of Bourbon Street.

Prior to the 1960s, swanky nightclubs with over-the-top burlesque acts dominated the commercial end of Bourbon Street. Patrons, including well-dressed local couples on dates, went to Bourbon to go inside these stylized places to dine, drink or see a show, not to walk up and down the street itself. The action was indoors.

This changed after Jim Garrison became district attorney in 1962. Bourbon Street vice had long been a rallying cry for reformers; Garrison knew it played well among voters, and shined light on it during his campaign. He calculated that burlesque clubs were costly operations with big staffs, and could only turn a handsome profit if they ran illicit money-making schemes on the side. Knock out those schemes, he figured, the clubs would close and Bourbon Street would be "cleaned up."

Garrison's vice raids over the next two years achieved all of the above--and then some. Old-line burlesque nightclubs padlocked their doors left and right, and those that survived had to scale down now that they were no longer subsidized by extra-legal income streams. Many became tawdry strip joints or dive bars, and it didn't

help that patronage in this era was steadily shifting away from middle-class couples with cash in their pockets, and toward trekking hippies on shoestring budgets. Barkers tried to cajole pedestrians into coming indoors, but had little success. Bourbon Street was in trouble.

Some time in 1967, one unremembered enterprise came up with a better idea. Instead of convincing people outside to buy drinks inside, why not sell inside drinks to people outside? "Window hawking," it was called, and gradually, bars, clubs and restaurants on Bourbon opened tiny outlets in interstitial spaces such as windows, carriageways and unused doorways, from which they sold beer, drinks, hot dogs, corn dogs and snacks directly to pedestrians. Window hawking led to "drink-carrying" and littering, not to mention widespread ambulatory inebriation in the public space.

Everyone seemed to come out ahead with window hawking -- except, that is, for neighborhood residents' quality of life. On the supply side, it enabled owners to tap into the outdoor money stream with a minimum of capital improvements. It put less emphasis on décor, facilities, bathrooms, air conditioning, heating and other costly overhead. It reduced the need for labor, particularly live entertainment.



Times-Picayune, 1969



States-Item, 1969

On the demand side, window hawking allowed tourists to stroll noncommittally outdoors, amid all the eye-candy and people-watching, while imbibing for a fraction of the cost had they gone indoors. Young people particularly loved buying booze from windows because the hawkers rarely asked for proof of age, knowing their purchases would be all but untraceable.

Gift and novelty shops benefited as well because drink-toting pedestrians were more inclined to meander into their shops and buy souvenirs than were clubbers. The tipsier the pedestrians were, the more likely they'd make a dumb purchase. Retailers threw open their doors, hung T-shirts outside, flooded their shelf space with light, cranked up music to win the attention of passersby, and blasted frigid air into the hot summer night or warmth into the winter chill, all to blur the line between indoor and outdoor space.

Food, debris, Dixie cups, crushed pop-top cans and broken beer bottles littered the street, attracting vermin and creating a public health hazard. Many of the flashpoints between modern-day Bourbon Street and its residential neighbors today are traceable to the late 1960s to mid-1970s and to this shift in the geography of drinking.

Bourbon's problem came to public attention during Mardi Gras 1969. Afterwards, Mayor Victor Schiro formed a committee of prominent club owners to discuss an ordinance on window hawking,

which, he said, "demoralizes our city and cheapens the charm of Bourbon Street." Passed by the City Council, it banned "anyone to sell food or beverages from a window, door or other aperture facing the street or other public way within the Vieux Carre," and was later modified to prohibit all sales within six feet of the street.

Two years later, the nightly pedestrian mall policy went into effect. More pedestrians upped the economic ante for bartenders to hawk through windows, and they did -- by finding loopholes in the ordinance or evading code enforcement, which was erratic anyway. When, for example, one well-known entertainer tried opening an outlet in the doorway of her club, police busted her capriciously. She responded by promptly filing suit. The case fell into the Civil District Court docket of Judge S. Sanford Levy, who in May 1981 ruled the ordinance unconstitutional on account of its vague wording.

Levy asked, "Does the ordinance prohibit the display of jewelry from windows? Does the ordinance disallow a cashier to exchange a crystal chandelier for money within six feet of the doorway of antique shop on Royal Street?"

The ruling cleared the way for the open legal sale of alcohol through apertures for consumption in the street, forever changing Bourbon Street by shifting the action from indoors to outdoors.

Later ordinances mandated plastic go-cups, to prevent injuries from broken glass, and restricted open containers only to the streets of the French Quarter. But because of enforcement disparities -- police often looked the other way when Quarter tourists toted beers into adjacent neighborhoods but confronted locals when they did the same elsewhere -- the ordinance was changed in 2001 to allow alcohol consumption in the public space (with certain exceptions) so long as drinks were not in "opened glass or opened metal containers."

Decried by some, cheered by others, New Orleans' unusually liberal and relatively recent public drinking customs, for better or worse, keep alive this city's centuries-old reputation for indulgence -- the likes of which were excoriated in one 1850 exposé, which denounced "grog shops... on three of every four corners...from street to street, every door leading into a drinking house[:] three-fourths of the men...are confirmed drunkards, [taking] up to 25 to 30 [drinks] a day, and yet these are all high-minded, sober and respectable gentlemen, full of Southern chivalry[!]"

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