

by *Chris_Barnett*

Well over a thousand bars have their welcome mat out in post-Katrina New Orleans so you don't have to look hard to find a friendly place with a smiling face. There are the ancient saloons in the French Quarter, once owned or frequented by the 'gentleman pirate' Jean Laffite and his brother. Laffite's Blacksmith Shop, tucked inside a 1772 mud and stone building (941 Bourbon St.), is a dark, candle-lit cave with a piano man on the ivories. The original horseshoe shop was supposedly the brothers' front for selling their stolen swag a couple centuries ago.

Not far away is the Old Absinthe House (240 Bourbon St.) circa 1814 where Laffite and Army Maj. Gen. Andrew Jackson supposedly planned out the victory party for the Battle of New Orleans. The celebration must have been held because the U.S military forces defeated the British the following January and Jackson, the hero, was elected president.

Then there's Tujaques (823 Decatur) also in the Quarter, the town's first stand-up bar for two-fisted elbow bending, still going strong at 151 years old. And Napoleon House (500 Chartres), a few blocks away, the mansion of New Orleans' Mayor Nicholas Girod who offered it as a refuge to the exiled Bonaparte in 1821. Napoleon never moved in but his name was an attention grabber and the mayor purloined it for his pub.

Kerri McCaffety, anthropologist-author of "Obituary Cocktail: The Great Saloons of New Orleans" (www.vissidartebooks.com), who photographed the town's 60 oldest, most ornate bars for her book, favors the Napoleon House and its signature Pimm's Cup for her social drinking.

Not all New Orleanians like their libations with a history chaser but they do enjoy a heavy pour of nostalgia. That led me to Tommy's Cuisine in the Warehouse District (746 Tchoupitoulas; 504-581-1103; www.tommiscuisine.com), which dishes up "classic Cajun, Italian and French" food.

Tommy's has a short five-year history in this spot and a 40-year New Orleans heritage, courtesy of owner Tommy Andrade, the soft-spoken owner-host who is there most nights greeting his regulars and newcomers. His debut was a summer in '68 as an apprentice waiter in the Sazerac Bar of the Roosevelt Hotel, now the New Orleans Fairmont that has yet to reopen after the hurricane. "Here I was in the most elegant, beautiful bar in

this city named after the first cocktail in America," he recalls. "I stayed 20 years."

Outside, looking in the lace curtained, etched glass front window, it could pass for a cozy bistro on a side street in the Quarter or even Paris. The ceiling fans, exposed brick and sprays of fresh flowers add to a festive atmosphere.

Inside, it feels like a New York Italian restaurant with the usual wall of black-and-white photos of notable customers, the seductive scent of garlic floating in the air, and those well-seasoned waiters who take care of you like you own the joint.

The centerpiece of Tommy's is the 10-stool bar, right in the middle of the action, that runs the length of one room with glasses and wine bottles displayed overhead. Chief mixologist Jonathan Miller and his colleagues greet first timers as if they're blood relatives.

Solo travelers can drop in for a big cocktail and some easy conversation and if the spirits move them, order a shrimp remoulade, the crabmeat au gratin or anything on the menu. Miller will haul out good linens and silverware and you can dine on the plank.

Tommy also opened a wine bar right next door that is more like a wood-paneled living room with a warm glow than a tasting room. As he so delicately puts it, "we have couches, we're comfortable, romantic but we're no lover's lane." I counted 20 wines by the glass (and over 125 bottles) representing most of the world's winegrowing regions. Prices range from \$8 to \$15. The Cloudline pinot noir from Oregon's Willamette Valley is a long way from home at \$11 a glass.

Somehow, Tommy has made his bar and restaurant an attitude-free zone and that's refreshing in a spot this hot. Maybe it's because most of the waiters (and many of the cooks) have worked for Andrade for as long as 15 years and follow him, Pied Piper-like, wherever he goes. Maybe it's because there's live jazz piano and no cover charge.

Or maybe it's because of Tommy's nearly faithful recreation of the Sazerac, America's original cocktail. I say nearly because absinthe, once called "bottled madness," according to libations scholar Barnaby Conrad III, was an ingredient in the cocktail when it was invented in New Orleans by Antoine Amadee Pechaud in 1838. Absinthe, which can hit 140 proof, is now outlawed in America and much of the civilized world. As a substitute, herbsinthe is used to coat the glass at Tommy's, otherwise the Sazerac at \$8 takes no shortcuts.

The recipe? Swirl a chilled rocks glass with an ounce of herbsinthe to coat it and toss the liqueur. Add a sugar cube, three dashes each of Angostura and Peychaud bitters and muddle it. Add 1 1/2 ounces of Old Overholt rye whiskey, shake, strain and sip.

If your preferences lean more toward a stylish saints' and sinners' sanctuary, consider Loa, inside the hip International Hotel in the Central Business District (221 Camp St., 504-553-9550; www.ihhotel.com). With its copper bar and flickering candles - the bar's only source of light - a drink here seems a little more special, almost ritualistic but fun with no pretensions.

It's packed nightly with artists, musicians, writers, lawyers, brokers, bankers and just people looking for their next gig, contends bar manager Jake Burgess who just moved back home to New Orleans. "Loa is a place where people get together, chill out and rebuild a sense of normalcy in their lives."

Loa, in case you are wondering, is a benevolent spirit of the voodoo world and the candlelight is designed to entice large gatherings of loas to encircle the bar and rid it of its "disharmony." A little like feng shui for the tired and thirsty. Failing that, try the Loatini - mix fresh pineapple and orange juice with Stoli raspberry vodka, shake, pour, float some champagne and garnish with organic flowers, \$10 for a hefty pour.

Chris Barnett writes on business travel strategies that save time, money and hassles.

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Barnett On Business Travel: New Orleans' favorite bars have the welcome mat out by Chris_Barnett