Origin Of Cocktail
Cloudy and Uncertain

“Cocktail” is a word nearly everyone associates with a dimly lit rendezvous, intimate conversation framed in soft music and romance. Where did this name for a drink originate?

“The identity of the person who first tied together the two words—'cock' and 'tail'—to describe an iced delight remains cloudy,” says Ken Pearson, a student of semantics. “I attribute it to a New Orleans apothecary, others to Dutch housekeepers, the English, Kentucky hill folk or to either of two Colonial barmaids.”

Pearson, an executive of a wine company (Dubonnet), offered the background of each of the supposed beginnings:

Antoine Peychaud was an apothecary who had come to New Orleans from his native Santo Domingo and opened a pharmacy which became the “Cocktail Tail Tavern.”

He frequently served them brandy toddy mixed by a secret formula. Used Egg Cup

Instead of serving the toddy in a brandy glass, he used a double-ended egg cup, called a coquetier (from coque—a shell). This was pronounced “Ko-kay-tyay” and its name was eventually transferred to the drink.

Guests who did not speak French called it “cock-tay” which later became “cocktail.”

“The theory concerning the Dutch women stemmed from their use of rooster tail feathers as dusters to scatter the accumulation in the dining room,” Pearson said. “This would naturally raise a lot of the dust into the air and the men would respond by mixing a throat dust — which they called ‘cocktail’.”

English tradition has it that during the 17th century a popular drink was called “cocker.” It was made by flavoring a keg of new ale with a red rooster that had been pounded a pulp and steeped in strong white wine. The bird, some raisin and cloves were bound in a canvas bag and dumped into the keg for a week or so to give “cock-ale” its unique flavor.

Kentucky Version

The Kentucky version came from the period when cock-fighting was a popular sport. Following the fights, fans gathered to discuss the day’s events. With each social drink the story teller’s tales of the feats of his favorite fighting bird became more formidable and thus these sessions became known as times to enjoy “cock tales.”

“The flavor of romance was added by two barmaids,” Pearson said. “A book, 'The Squire's Recipes,' printed in 1748, tells about Mistress Peggy Van Eyck of the Cock’s Tail Tavern in Yonkers. She mixed a powerful concoction for her fiance, Mist -


day after day during the Revolutionary War. One day a few Americans raided a British commissary and, among other things, carried off several fowls. They were presented to Betsy for roasting. She also decorated each bottle and jar in her tavern with the birds' tail feathers. Later, during the dinner she had prepared, one of the guests called for a glass of the cocktails.”

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