The last convention in New Orleans was six or seven weeks ago, a gathering of 20,000 librarians from across the country who were in town to help re-open as many libraries as they could. A noble cause to be sure, but as it turned out they performed a much more meaningful task, they reinvigorated the city and gave the locals a feeling of normalcy they had not experienced since pre-Katrina days. There isn’t another large convention until November.

When I checked into the legendary Monteleone Hotel, headquarters for Tales of the Cocktail, each of my old friends from Raoul at the bell desk to Marvin at the bar had stories of loss. And in most cases, it was the total loss of their homes and all their worldly possessions and they carried on with good humor. Under similar circumstances, I am not sure that I could. The New Orleans natives are a special breed. The population of the city has fallen from 450,000 to half that number; sadly many of those may never return, and the special mix of cultures will be forever altered.

When I arrived in New Orleans International Airport for Tales of the Cocktail 2006, I was stunned to find an empty airport with only six or seven planes besides ours scattered at random gates. It was midday and the terminal was all but deserted with many of the retail stores closed. There was simply no reason to open.

The SPONSORS
Tales of the Cocktail is four years old this year, and Brown Forman’s Southern Comfort brand pulled out as the sole sponsor in lieu of using their budget to support and sponsor the New Orleans Jazz Festival. Ann Rogers, the founder of Tales, sought multiple sponsors, among them Pernod Ricard who sponsored the spirited dinners program, local liquor distributors, Fee Brothers Bitters company and other local New Orleans businesses. Ann also, for the first time, charged admission for the many seminars. And to everyone’s astonishment, the seminars were completely sold out with waiting lines for tickets. The list of sponsors is too long to list in full, but among them were Borders Books, Food and Wine Magazine, and the Hotel Monteleone.
A SEMINAR HIGHLIGHT: ABSINTHE

The seminars were better than ever. Ted Breaux, the world famous absinthe expert, took us on a journey through the history of absinthe that ended with his personal journey to set up production in France and produce a world-class absinthe. Ted bought the same copper stills that Pernod Fils used in the 19th century to produce their absinthe and set up production at Combrin Distillery in Saumur in the Loire Valley. We tasted Ted’s Verte Suisse, a painstaking reproduction arrived at after a chemical analysis of unopened bottles of the famous C.F. Berger 1830’s Swiss absinthe. We also tasted one from a Swiss producer and friend of Ted’s, a Swiss white absinthe. Ted explained that since absinthe sales are still prohibited in many countries, the white is less obvious on a back bar. Ted’s Verte Suisse exhibited bright flavors of anise and licorice which were more subdued in the Blanche. The Blanche was warmer with earthy notes and touches of butter and toffee. Ted passed around samples of the botanicals he uses explaining that the intensity of the wormwood and other botanicals is the difference between a great absinthe and a mediocre one.

Recipes

Cocktail highlights from the seminars included Chad Solomon’s and Christie Pope’s Bensonhurst, prepared at their seminar A Taste of New York-Past and Present:

Chad trades bartending duties between Milk & Honey and Audrey Saun der’s year-old Pegu Club in New York City. Chad, along with his partner in work and in life, Christy Pope, a bartender at Milk & Honey, are two years into their cocktail documentary and close to a deal for serious involvement by a major cable network.

bensonhurst

2 oz. Sazerac Rye
1 oz. Noilly Prat dry vermouth
2 tsps. maraschino liqueur
1 tsp. Cynar

Stir all ingredients with cracked ice and strain into a chilled cocktail glass.

Another notable cocktail was a scratch Hurricane recipe presented by Phil Greene during his Classic New Orleans Cocktails seminar with Chris McMillian:

hurricane

1 oz. light rum
1 oz. dark rum
3/4 oz. Galliano
1 oz. fresh lime juice
1 oz. passion fruit syrup
1 1/2 oz. pineapple juice
1 1/2 orange juice

Dash Fee Brothers Aromatic bitters

Shake all the ingredients well with ice and strain into a chilled hurricane glass. Garnish with tropical fruits.

I presented a tequila seminar and tasting, South of the Border Down Mexico Way, and introduced one new tequila libation:

cocktail japon

1 1/2 oz. 100% Blue Agave plata tequila
3/4 oz. sake
1/2 oz. good French crème de cassis
1/4 oz. agave syrup
1 1/2 oz. fresh grapefruit juice
1/2 oz. fresh lime juice
2 pieces English cucumber

Shake all the ingredients with the exception of one of the cucumber pieces well with ice. Strain into a chilled cocktail glass and garnish with the other cucumber piece.

The only downside of the event was that those of us who were presenters were unable to attend many of the seminars because of scheduling. My big disappointments were missing Books and Beignets: Talking about Writing and Drinking with author Ted Haigh, aka Dr. Cocktail; author and columnist David Wondrich; and freelance magazine writer St. John Frizell, among other “mixographers”, as they were described with a made-up but appropriate word in the program. Tony Abou-Ganim’s seminar Tools of the Trade also escaped my attention because of a scheduling conflict.

The event will grow in years to come to be one of the unique attractions, one of many, that brings all of us home to New Orleans year after year.