

Sips: Get a Craft Cocktail History at the Mai-Kai in Fort Lauderdale

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By Jim Hayward, guest columnist

Hayward

A craft cocktail movement is shaking up the bar and restaurant scenes in cities such as New York, San Francisco and Portland, Ore. Fresh and local ingredients, in-house mixes and syrups, and flamboyantly garnished concoctions are taking center stage.

Sadly, that scene is hit and miss in South Florida. But wait: Cocktails that meet all those criteria – and more – have been perfected and lovingly served for 55 years at



the family owned and operated [Mai-Kai restaurant](#) in Fort Lauderdale.

Unfairly dismissed as a tourist trap by some, this iconic Polynesian palace is widely considered to have perhaps the best tropical drink menu anywhere in the world, surpassing even the trendiest new tiki lounges in London and L.A.

Mai-Kai a research haven

Mixologists from all of the aforementioned cities make pilgrimages to the Mai-Kai to taste cocktails that seem frozen in time, most of them still prepared exactly as they were in the 1950s. The kitschy, yet authentic South Seas decor only adds to the enjoyment as you sip perfection from a pineapple.

But what completes the allure for me are the stories. Almost every cocktail has a story, and the Mai-Kai has around 50 great ones. One of our favorites is the Mai Tai.

Mai Tai defines a tropical, tiki drink



Mai Tai

The Mai Tai has been recognized for more than 50 years as *the* definitive tropical drink. You'll get some arguments from Zombie fans like myself, but there's no denying that the Mai Tai is one of the world's most popular and distinctive cocktails, period.

Much has been written about how to make an "authentic" Mai Tai, as created by [Trader Vic](#), circa 1944. Tropical



drink historian [Jeff “Beachbum” Berry](#) has a very concise [history lesson and recipe](#) on his blog. As Mr. Berry points out, the argument over who really invented the drink persists to this day.

Around 1937, a budding Oakland, Calif., restaurateur named Victor Bergeron ventured south to Hollywood to see for himself what all the hoopla was surrounding a small tropical-themed bar called Don the Beachcomber. According to legend, Bergeron was inspired to adopt the same Polynesian theme and shortly thereafter changed the name of his restaurant from Hinky Dink’s to Trader Vic’s.

The rest is history, and [Trader Vic’s](#) remains the standard-bearer for Polynesian restaurants worldwide with more than 25 locations. The Don the Beachcomber chain disappeared by the 1980s, but the brand was recently revived with a [Huntington Beach, Calif., location](#).

Originally a Q.B. Cooler?

One of the drinks on [Donn Beach’s](#) menu in 1937 was the Q.B. Cooler, named for the Quiet Birdmen, a drinking fraternity of aviators founded by seven World War I pilots in 1921. Donn changed his Q.B. Cooler recipe over the years, but as Beachbum Berry revealed in his 2007 book, *Sippin’ Safari*, the original version tastes remarkably similar to what Trader Vic later introduced to the world as the Mai Tai.

As Berry theorized in the book and later demonstrated during a symposium at the 2009 Hukilau event at The Mai-Kai, it’s likely that Bergeron created the Mai Tai by copying the flavor profile of the Q.B. Cooler. What’s remarkable is that the Mai Tai contains quite different ingredients. The two drinks have only rum and lime juice in common. But it’s undeniable that the tastes are incredibly similar.

The Mai-Kai tie-in

Bergeron eventually won a court battle that established him as the originator of the famous cocktail. But I subscribe to Beachbum Berry’s theory that Trader Vic created the Mai Tai based on the Q.B. Cooler. Also on early Don the Beachcomber menus was a drink called the Mai Tai Swizzle, but it was retired around 1937. Could Vic have lifted the name from one drink and the flavor profile from another in creating his Mai Tai?

Perhaps, but what does this all have to do with The Mai-Kai? The restaurant’s founders, Bob and Jack Thornton, were also fans of Don the Beachcomber. And they hired away one of Donn’s longtime mixologists, Mariano Licudine, from his Chicago restaurant.

Licudine created The Mai-Kai’s cocktail menu using his vast knowledge of the secret Donn Beach recipes, most of which remain a mystery to this day. He slightly altered ingredients and changed the names of the drinks. Thus, Donn’s influential Q.B. Cooler became the K.O Cooler. If you’re looking for the taste of an authentic Trader Vic’s Mai Tai, I’d recommend you order The Mai-Kai’s K.O. Cooler (or the lesser known Bora Bora).

The Mai Tai served at The Mai-Kai is one of many variations created in the wake of the success of the original drink. You’ll find some good examples from mid-century Tiki restaurants in [Beachbum Berry’s cocktail guides](#), such as the Bali Hai Mai Tai, Damon’s Mai Tai, Kon-Tiki Mai Tai and Surf Room Mai Tai. You’ll find bad examples at hundreds of bars across the country.

Mystery as to when it made the menu

We’ve seen 1957, 1958 and 1959 Mai-Kai cocktail menus, and none contains the Mai Tai. It was most likely added in the 1960s due to customer demand as the drink’s popularity reached its zenith. But it seems more like an original creation by Licudine than a spinoff of the Donn the Beachcomber

or Trader Vic classics. It's more sweet than sour, with a familiar Mai-Kai rum profile, a distinct pineapple flavor, and a hint of falernum.

Regardless of its origin, the Mai-Kai's Mai Tai is one of the iconic tiki bar's most popular drinks and has become a classic in its own right.

You can follow my journey through 52 Mai-Kai cocktails on my blog, [The Atomic Grog](#). We're posting weekly reviews, photos and lots of recipes you can try at home (including the Q.B. Cooler).

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Jim "Hurricane" Hayward, a longtime South Florida journalist with a penchant for Polynesian Pop, recently launched [TheAtomicGrog.com](#) to cover the Tiki/retro revival, including South Florida events, music, art, cocktails and culture.