

SHARK ATTACK!

YOU'RE GONNA NEED A BIGGER ASPIRIN

by Brett Martin



THE HURRICANE AND HAND GRENADE are more famous. The Jester, the Huge Ass Beer, even the Fish Bowl, sloshing with bright red liquid around sunburned necks—all appear more often in quickly regretted Instagrams. But for me, the greatest of all Bourbon Street drinks is one of the least known: the Shark Attack.

All those concoctions, of course, hold roughly the same position in cocktail circles that Bourbon Street itself does in relation to Approved New Orleans Culture: at best an embarrassing uncle you hope doesn't show up at your wedding, at worst something so vile and vulgar that you define your very identity in opposition to it.

If you read *Bourbon Street: A History* by Richard Campanella, though, the one thing that becomes clear is that the notion of Bourbon Street as not the "real" New Orleans is a false one. And I'd argue the same is true of Bourbon Street's drinks—that they are in fact as authentic and organic an expression of New Orleans culture as the Sazerac or the Ramos Gin Fizz—and should be just as celebrated, if not necessarily drunk as often.

None more so than the Shark Attack. There are explanations for the drink's lower profile: Unlike the Hand Grenade, it is not legally protected by trademark, which makes it much less potentially lucrative. Nor, like the Hurricane, is it sellable in souvenir powdered form that would allow you to take it home. In fact, you could say that the Shark Attack is more of an act of puppet theater than a drink. Like the Hand Grenade, it is served at a small chain of Bourbon Street bars called Tropical Isle, but it's kind of like the secret menu at In-N-Out Burger, insofar as anything that arrives with sirens, ringing bells, whistles, and screaming bartenders can be considered secret.

I moved to New Orleans in January 2011, and for the first six months I lived just off of the corner of St. Ann and Bourbon Streets, the very epicenter of raucous gay New Orleans. I have said many times that it was like going to sleep every night with your parents having a party in the next room, if your parents happened to be six-foot-tall drag queens singing Whitney Houston.

If you're living on Bourbon Street, it behooves you to decide very quickly that you will learn to love Bourbon Street. This is a matter of survival. By force of will, I grew to appreciate walking home at night, alone, through the crowds, letting them sort of slide across my vision and I would think, "All these people are having the time of their lives. Isn't this wonderful!"

The other important thing is that it was very cold. Coming from the northeast, I had brought one sweatshirt and a light jacket, not realizing a) that my 200-year-old house would have giant gaps in the windows and b) that New Orleans gets a cold, wet, miserable winter. The only time I have ever slept in a winter hat was that January in New Orleans. So, though it is against my nature and inclination, I wound up forced to spend a lot of my time in bars.

One night I was at Molly's-on-Toulouse, which is right across the street from the original Tropical Isle, and a woman came in who had just gotten off her shift. She was complaining about a memo she had received chastising the staff about their performance of the Shark Attack. This is

THE REST OF THE BARTENDERS ARE RINGING BELLS AND SETTING OFF SIRENS.

how she described that performance: When the customer orders a Shark Attack, you first fill a large plastic cup with vodka and a blue-tinted sour mix. On the top you float a small plastic crocodile.

Thus endeth Act One.

Next, you fill a plastic shark with grenadine syrup and you swim the shark "menacingly" toward the unsuspecting crocodile. (Apparently, the memo from the Tropical Isle higher-ups said that the staff was being insufficiently menacing.) Meanwhile, the rest of the bartenders are ringing bells, setting off sirens, and blowing whistles and screaming—and this is very specific—"Get out of the water. Get out of the water. A shark attack is about to occur!" Tropical Isle owner Earl Bernhardt apparently insists that the correct language is, "A Great White Shark Attack is About to Occur." I have never heard that. Either way, it is not the syntax I'd be inclined to use if a shark attack was about to occur, but the memo was very precise.

And finally, the denouement: The bartenders plunge the shark into the drink, turning it into a roiling bloodbath. And then you drink.

I'm pretty sure I made this poor woman at Molly's tell the story five times, each time with a drink. Evidence suggests that at some point everybody in Molly's went across the street together and saw the Shark Attack in action. The evidence being that, the next morning, feeling less than 100 percent, I put on my coat, felt something strange in the pocket, and opened it to find a plastic shark, its insides still sticky with grenadine residue. I called my girlfriend in New York, apologizing that I hadn't called the night before to say goodnight. "Oh, you did," she said, so meaningfully that I did not ask for more details.

AS I MENTIONED , the Shark Attack is not proprietary. In fact, there are other versions of it—or at least other drinks with the same or similar names. The Shark Bite, for instance, is the signature drink of the Holiday Inn SunSpree in Montego Bay, Jamaica, where it consists of orange, pineapple, and lime juices, rum, 7UP, and a little grenadine for the blood effect. It appears that the first drink called the Shark Attack in the New Orleans area was served at an establishment called Augie's DeLago, which operated on the lakefront from 1978 to 1987. Augie's was open twenty-four hours and had ten bars and two restaurants. In the summer, people used to tie their boats up three and four deep to get inside.

I talked to Jerlyn Courtney, whose family owned the place and who acted as general manager, and she said that their Shark Attack was a promotion from Malibu rum and consisted of Malibu and grenadine. When I asked if there were any bells and whistles or plastic sharks, she said, essentially, "No way. We didn't do any extras. We were just trying to sell drinks as fast as we could."

There is even another contemporary Shark Attack in New Orleans, served at a place called Lucy's Retired Surfers Bar & Restaurant. There, a very bored-looking bartender tossed a plastic mermaid in my glass before half-heartedly sending the grenadine-filled shark in after it. "Stupid mermaid," she muttered.

Sitting there, it occurred to me that the very thing that I first mocked about the Shark Attack at Tropical Isle was, in fact, the thing that made it genius: The script.

This is a drink in which the drink itself is all but irrelevant. It has no recipe. What it has is a story, an idea, a construct. In this it is merely an extreme version of what is true about any iconic cocktail: How else could

a Martini, say, be made with either gin or vodka—two totally different spirits—in a drink that only has two ingredients? If the specifics weren't less important than the idea of a "Martini," the way having a "Martini" makes you feel? How else could there be 500 kinds of Old Fashioned if what was most important wasn't the notion of the "Old Fashioned"?

That's why Tropical Isle takes the time to ring the bells and blow the whistles. Because without the performance, there is no drink.

There are cities in America that might make you feel foolish for this. For being hoodwinked by the story, dazzled by the show. New Orleans is not one of those cities. In fact, the thing that New Orleans may be best at is telling stories: stories you want to hear, stories that then—and this is the important part—become real, become authentic culture.

There is no place in the world in which there is a narrower gulf between the fake and the authentic, between the touristy and the insider, between the story and the substance. The whole city is founded on a narrative about New Orleans as a place apart, a kind of foreign city-state within American borders. In the telling, it became real. Some people come to New Orleans for a story about faded Southern grandeur. Some come for a story about an immaculately preserved African American street culture. And some come for the story that having the ultimate good time should involve lights, sirens, a zoologically dubious sea drama, and a twelve-cent plastic shark.

Away from Bourbon Street, the Shark Attack is a shitty vodka sour with a shot of grenadine. On Bourbon, it's the fulfillment of a promise—a promise that the story of New Orleans is real. And that it is here for you, waiting, for \$9 and a sugar hangover—by any standard, a small price to pay. 🍸

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PHOTO, PAGE 35 by Denny Culbert.

[POP] CORN FROM A JAR

MOONSHINE FROM THE FUNNY PAPERS TO FEDERAL PRISON

by Mark Essig

MARVIN "POPCORN" SUTTON, at the wheel of his Model A Ford, bumps along a gravel road in the Smoky Mountains until he spies the perfect streamside site. Then, using mud and rocks, solder and wheat paste, a copper pot and a galvanized metal trash can, he constructs a still. It's a jerry-rigged beauty, the type of contraption you'd see in old photos surrounded by the fedora-wearing lawmen who will soon bust it to pieces.

This particular still, though illegal, operated under a higher cultural license. Sutton, with help from his friend J.B. Rader, built it for the North Carolina filmmaker Neal Hutcheson, who edited his footage into a film called *The Last One*. That documentary, broadcast on PBS stations, earned Hutcheson an Emmy and turned Popcorn Sutton into a celebrity moonshiner, the man who preserved the ancient mountain tradition of squeezing liquor out of corn.

Sutton's work, however, reflected some modern influences. Late in the film, when the still springs a leak, Sutton patches it with a dab of wheat paste and a strip of cloth torn from a clean white undershirt. ("That paste—when the heat hits it, it gets harder than a minister's dick," he says.)

"Believe it or not," Sutton explains as he ties the cloth around a pipe, "I learned this trick right here off that Snuffy Smith shit in the newspaper."

"Comic strip," Rader says, laughing.

"Yeah," Sutton replies.

The authentic Appalachian moonshiner, in other words, had learned his trade, in part, from a comic-strip hillbilly.