



South Carolina football fans cheer on the Gamecocks at Mason Jar in New York City, October 2023.

OFFSIDES FOWL

USC fans roost at NYC bar.

BY HANNA RASKIN

Photos by José A. Alvarado Jr.

TWO MEN WALKED INTO A BAR IN MIDTOWN Manhattan, and this was most certainly not a joke. The University of South Carolina had a 3:30 P.M. date with the University of Georgia, college football's defending national champion, and oddsmakers said the Gamecocks were supposed to lose by twenty-seven points.

In the fall of 2022, Daniel Watts and Ethan Lustig were on campus for the perennially lopsided matchup, tailgating with their fraternity. But since they'd graduated and moved to New York City for jobs—Lustig's in real estate; Watts' on the PGA of America's sales team—they decided to watch the 2023 game at Mason Jar on E. 30th St., arriving almost ninety minutes before kickoff for bar seats.

Lustig ordered a screwdriver to harmonize with his “morning mentality,” and as the bartender mixed it, he explained their stools would soon be whisked away to accommodate the crush of Gamecock fans.

“You haven't been here for a game?” he asked the pair, understandably correlating their subtly striped USC polo shirts with regular attendance at the second-most important venue in the Gamecock universe, after Williams-Brice Stadium. “It's a....”

Only one-third of that assessment is printable. But it's 100 percent accurate.

Watts grinned.

“Good!” he said. “Like Columbia! Everybody's happy!”

To put it more precisely, everybody is in the giddy, stand-close, shout-loud, USC-can't-lose mood brought on by screwdrivers, pitchers of Miller Lite, and rounds of High Noon hard seltzer. In Columbia, gameday starts on Friday afternoon and winds down just before dusk on Sunday, an epic bacchanal compressed into a maniacal viewing party at Mason Jar. Since USC football fans began congregating at Mason Jar in 2010, the gathering has become so popular that owner Brendan Gardner, mindful of the fire marshal, declined to say how many people he serves in his bi-level bar and restaurant on football Saturdays.

“Two-fifty,” he told me when I asked for an estimate. “That's not true.”

On the paper of its printed menu, Mason Jar is what Gardner calls “Carolina-forward,” with pork in the eggrolls and bourbon-infused syrup on the chicken and waffles. But most Gamecock fans order wings and soft German pretzels:

Mason Jar's indisputable Southern status comes from drink, not food. Summoning a far-off region in a restaurant setting is a tricky proposition, complicated by ingredient availability and line cooks' training. A bar, though, is a blank canvas for the people who populate it, as Mason Jar and its big brand-swilling patrons demonstrate.

The swirl of tristate density and SEC exuberance on display at 43 E. 30th St. represents the Columbia experience so realistically that Gardner's business partner, Ed Martinson, suspects their bar has become a USC recruiting tool. According to the school's admissions data, 13 percent of its first-year class hails from New York or New Jersey.

“I see all these USC flags in Queens, and I think we had a little bit to do with it,” Martinson said.

BRENT BOUKNIGHT, a Columbia native, refused to fly to New York for a conference this weekend without first locating a USC bar there. For him, it's hard to imagine arbitrarily taking on a team late in life. Team loyalties in SEC states run deeper than religious affiliations and political party preferences: Because USC didn't have a certain engineering program when he finished high school, Bouknight enrolled at Georgia Tech rather than give his money to Clemson.

But in the New York metro area, there isn't much room for football fields, let alone a storied program. Martinson went to Manhattan College in the Bronx and casually rooted for Villanova's basketball team, so he was surprised when a couple of USC alums approached him about Mason Jar serving as their home base. He initially nixed their idea of hanging Gamecock banners over the bar, but he shrugged and said they were welcome to watch the games at his new restaurant, which hardly did any business on Saturday afternoons.

“We didn't know what to expect,” Gardner said, remembering how they'd hoped the deal could yield fifty customers. “They packed the place.”

Soon thereafter, the banners went up. At the suggestion of the New York City Gamecocks club president, Gardner loaded “The Fighting Gamecocks Lead the Way” into the house sound system and ordered cases of Firefly sweet tea vodka—then a two-year-old South Carolina novelty. By season's end, the vibe was fixed.

As a club member in 2012 told a writer from *Free Times*, Columbia's alt-weekly, “People are from South Carolina and you can see it in their

mannerisms, the way they dress from the Gap. It's great."

Through reported stories like that one, headlined "New York Bar Makes Gamecock Fans Welcome," and tailgate chatter sparked by souvenir t-shirts, Mason Jar seeped into Gamecock lore. While Martinson can't prove it, he says he's confident that "if you're a USC fan and you come to New York, you come to Mason Jar," even if it's the middle of July.

When those fans show up, bartenders pull down Gamecock game helmets from ledges of honor above the bar and help stage selfies. USC alumni can be sure their social media followers will know what Mason Jar stands for.

And it's not just South Carolinians, current and former, making the pilgrimage to New York City. Every year, in recognition of their service, USC's Gamecock Club hosts Martinson and Gardner at a game in Columbia. "They roll out the red carpet," Gardner said.

JAKE KENNEDY LEARNED about Mason Jar from his buddy's beer koozie.

The two-time USC alumnus, who received his BA in 2001 and JD in 2004, Kennedy made a mental note to check out the bar for an away game. When USC plays at home, the Pawleys Island, South Carolina, resident is in the stands.

Kennedy wasn't the only season ticket holder at Mason Jar for the showdown against Georgia. With discount carriers offering ridiculously cheap airfares from South Carolina (I paid \$46 for my Charleston–Newark roundtrip ticket), the bar is becoming a top game day choice for faithful Gamecocks who won't venture into enemy territory. "Oh no, I don't go to Athens," Kennedy scoffed when I suggested it.

Bouknight could have driven his RV, tricked out for tailgating, to the University of Georgia. But a small encampment of visitors wouldn't have the all-USC atmosphere of Mason Jar, which functions like a Columbia, South Carolina, embassy a few blocks from Koreatown.

Nowadays, Mason Jar doesn't just cue up a fight song before the game starts. A DJ stationed on the balcony stirs the crowd with songs that get faster and louder as kickoff approaches. The

main bar area was already thronged with young women in crop tops and young men in Gamecock jerseys when "Let's Get It Started" blared. By the time the song segued to "Welcome to the Jungle," empty beer buckets were clanging on coat hooks.

"There's nothing like South Carolina football," said Eileen Dzugay of Saddlebrook, New Jersey, who'd never heard of it before her daughter Daphne became a Gamecock. "Nothing compares. It's off the charts."

Dzugay was at Mason Jar with her husband and another New Jersey couple with a kid at USC. Although none of the four could pinpoint the mystique that brought them to the bar, their attempts to describe it landed in the vicinity of "boozy jollity."

Of course, the South's relationship with alcohol isn't as simple as caricatures of bootleggers would suggest, but its drinking culture is strikingly distinct in its emphasis on tradition, honor, and masculinity. All those vexed values—which have historically been twisted into pretexts for racism and violence against women—come up in the context of football, one of the wettest of Southern spectator sports.

Because USC wears garnet and Georgia wears red, the latter color wouldn't have been in evidence at Mason Jar for the Bulldogs game, except that red is also the color of the two-ounce plastic cups that the bar uses for shots. Throughout the first half, Gamecock fans had plenty of shot-taking occasions, like when South Carolina quarterback Spencer Rattler connected with wide receiver Antwane "Juice" Wells for a seventeen-yard touchdown, or Georgia quarterback Carson Beck was sacked midfield.

USC went into the locker room with an eleven-point lead. Mason Jar patrons went wild.

After the half, USC didn't score again. The Gamecocks beat the odds but lost the game, 24–14. Watts looked as though he might cry when I passed him on my way out, crossing a floor sticky with hard seltzer spilled in tipsy excitement and tipsier frustration. Still, he greeted me with the kind of South Carolina mannerism that his fellow alums found so comforting a decade ago, and northerners find so compelling today.

Blery and somewhat blurry, he said, "I hope you had a good time." 🍷

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Mason Jar regularly fills to capacity with South Carolina fans on college football Saturdays.