Western Words

[In this feature, Peter Tamony, noted authority on American folk speech, will discuss under the caption, "Western Words," various terms, phrases, and sayings that reflect the folklore and cultural history of the West.—THE EDITORS.]

MARTINI COCKTAIL

HARD DRINKING was not an old Spanish custom, as pseudo-nostalgic Californians denominated many modes in the state's blossoming 1920's, but prominent in the heritage of the Anglo-Saxon newcomers. In Puritan New England if a prohibitionist had appeared he would have been thought a crackpot. Those who got drunk habitually were set in the stock also, but the gallonage of liquors consumed at meeting-house raisings and the ordination of ministers is astonishing. Excessive drinking was virtually a universal habit in pre-Revolutionary New York; throughout the colonies the abstainer was looked upon with suspicion and disliked. In the early nineteenth century clergymen staggered home from pastoral calls; funerals were characterized by service of rum, gin, and brandy long before such consumption was orally transferred exclusively to the Irish wake. While a book decrying the use of liquor was printed in Philadelphia in 1774, even temperance lecturers visited taverns with their hosts for a fillip after their talks. A tax of nine cents a gallon stirred up the Whisky Rebellion of 1791.[1] This is the heritage that made the Wild West wild, and brought on Prohibition, proclaimed "a great social and economic experiment, noble in motive" by Herbert Hoover.

And it was in this tradition that the alcoholic career of San Francisco and San Franciscans got its off-and-running start. Early in 1849, aboard the *Annie Smith* from New York, a man who was to become the Escoffier of barmen arrived, to be hired as first assistant to the principal bartender of the El Dorado. This was Jerry Thomas, whose *How To Mix Drinks, or The Bon Vivant's Companion* (New York: 1862) was to give dignity and national status to his trade and ameliorate it to a folk art. In his lavish introduction to the 1928 edition of that work, Herbert Asbury[2] credits Jerry Thomas with originating the *Tom and Jerry,* the *Blue Blazer,* and inferentially the *Martinez Cocktail.* However, the *Dictionary of Americanisms* (Chicago: 1951) cites an 1845 example of *Tom and Jerry,* and the *Martinez* is credited to Thomas by those who do not follow Asbury's writing carefully. Jerry

[1] W. E. Woodward, *The Way Our People Lived* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1944), pp. 61–62, 107–108, 110, 193.

[2] Jerry Thomas, *The Bon Vivant's Companion, or How to Mix Drinks.* Edited, with an Introduction by Herbert Asbury (New York: 1928). Herein termed Asbury. With additional detail, Asbury's Introduction may be found in "Professor Jerry Thomas," *American Mercury,* XII:48 (Dec., 1927), 421–430.

Thomas' contribution to American customs and culture was the upgrading and formalization of service with his four-thousand-dollar set of bar tools, his advocacy of the cocktail and mixed drinks, and his virtuoso ability to cater to his clients with improvisations such as the *Blue Blazer,* a corpus-shaking draught carrying glory to the concoctor and consumer alike.

To set the background properly of the most popular of modern drinks, the *Martini,* an outline of the development of the cocktail is important. Long thought to be American, the cocktail is claimed to have been first formulated in diversities such as Yonkers, New Orleans, and San Francisco. In the *American Language, Supplement I* (1945), H. L. Mencken devotes four pages to accounts of the origin of the word. Actually, Americans reintroduced mixed drinks to England and the continent, an American bar being found by Jerry Thomas near the Bank of England in 1859 (Asbury, p. xlvii). As is generally the case with such namings, the word "cocktail" developed over a long period of time, has multiple associations, its sound and stable stem being in the preparation of stimulants and feeds for fighting cocks in England and the American South. B. E. Gent (i.e., gentleman), *A New Dictionary of the Canting Crew* (1698) records: "Cockale, pleasant drink, said to be provocative." In high-rise canyons today it is the principal weapon of the sweet-talker. As democratic word-making evolved picturesque names for beverages that sluiced the American gullet and scene as the West opened, such emanations were thought to be characteristically American. Actually, fantastic German names for drinks are found in *De Generibus Ebriosorum etc.,* 1515 (*Slang and Its Analogues* [1896], s.v. knock-down). Historically, the cocktail may be considered a spin-off of the alchemist-philosopher's search for the elixir of life, which deluded De Soto, sought in branch water.

As to the *Martini,* there are two traditions. They may be termed the San Francisco story and the Martinez (California) story. The San Francisco story is re-created and detailed by Robert O'Brien and others.[3] While principal bartender at the Occidental Hotel bar in 1862, Jerry Thomas prepared an eye-opener for a shivering patron who was going on "a cold trip to a town across the bay" and who required something for warmth. In an inventive and inquiring mood, Professor Thomas obliged, idly asking, "Where are you going?" "To Martinez," replied the patron. "Very well, here is a new drink I have invented for your trip," said Thomas, "We will call it the *Martinez.*" There are oral variants of this story. One is that the patron was so warmed and pleased he was still in the Occidental imbibing copies at nightfall.

[3] Robert O'Brien, *This Is San Francisco* (New York: Whittlesey House-McGraw-Hill, 1948), pp. 143–144; Harold J. Grossman, *Grossman's Guide to Wines, Spirits, and Beers* (fourth ed.; New York: Scribner's, 1964), p. 307; and San Francisco *Examiner,* Oct. 18, 1965, 36/1–3; San Francisco *Chronicle,* Oct. 18, 1965, 15/1–3. Beefeater Gin broadside advertisement; text by Peter Stanford of Beefeater's. Details, also, preferences of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill.

A good, long account of the Martinez origin of the drink appears in the Oakland *Tribune,* August 22, 1965 ("Knave," p. 19-CM). About 1870 a miner, en route to San Francisco on horseback, stopped at Richelieu's bar in Martinez for a bottle of whisky, laying a tobacco sack of nuggets on the bar near the weigh-in scale. As whisky was vended from the barrel into the customer's container in those days, the miner had to pay for the whisky and a bottle with a nugget of gold. For his gold the miner did not feel he was getting full value, and on request was served a mixed drink, which included a green olive. Smacking his lips, the miner inquired, "What is this?" "That," replied Julio Richelieu, "is a Martinez cocktail." Richelieu was a young Frenchman who came to Martinez in Contra Costa County via New Orleans. He established and operated barrooms there and in San Francisco, his last place of business being near Lotta's Fountain at Market and Kearny Streets. In this establishment on the famed Cocktail Route, with gourmet specials of lavish Free Lunch as saloon attractions, the *Martinez* was the specialty of the house. This was probably about 1880; as Evelyn Wells writes, relative to the whisky-based *Sazerac* of the 1850's, "The gin cocktail was new." [4] Verbal tradition in Martinez still insists, "Why don't they say it right—*Martinez cocktail?*"

The San Francisco story relies on Asbury's sketch of the life of Jerry Thomas, but is based on inattentive reading. Asbury specifically states the first edition of Thomas' book (1862) lists ten cocktails and names them (p. xxxvi). The *Martinez* is not in this group. In the last edition (1887), twenty-four recipes are printed, including the *Martinez.* The New York Public Library verifies that the *Martinez* is not in the 1862 edition, but does not have later editions.

Jerry Thomas' prime role in the furtherance of the cocktail as an American potable has been noted. Leaving the West for the second time, he returned to New York in 1865 never more to roam, establishing on Broadway an emporium that became one of the most celebrated saloons in the history of the city. In the post-Civil War period America burgeoned, city society and town customs formalizing. It was in this era that the recipe for the *Martinez* reached New York, to be included by others in the 1887 printing of Thomas' book, which according to Asbury was blue-pencilled and scissored, its title being democratized to *Bartender's Guide* in place of the golden-age *Bon Vivant's Companion.*

The 1887 recipe for the *Martinez* specifies one wineglass of vermouth among the ingredients; in the preparation it directs two dashes of gum syrup if the guest prefers the drink very sweet. Prescribing the preparation

[4] Evelyn Wells, *Champagne Days of San Francisco* (New York: Doubleday, 1947), p. 57. Chapter Four, "The Cocktail Route," is an undocumented story of San Francisco downtown drinking places, *circa* 1870's to 1906.

of the *Martini Cocktail* in 1891, W. T. Boothby writes: "This popular appetizer is made without any sweetening of any description, as the Old Tom Cordial gin and the Italian vermouth of which it is composed are both sweet enough." [5] In the twentieth century the drier French vermouth was substituted for Italian, extremists under stress of World War II tensions approaching a sixteen-to-one ratio, fanatics directing barmen to whisper "vermouth" over the iced glass, not too loudly, or to glance in the direction of the vermouth. In San Francisco, wine interests promoted the "Lower Montgomery Street Olive or Onion Society" to research and determine the perfect *Martini* and to maintain the city's position as Martini capital of the world.[6]

The acaudation of *Martinez* is the result of a complex of processes. Aside from the natural linguistic clipping of words, after three or four an effort is required to enunciate the *z*, and when ordering a round for a group the word is impossible to pluralize. However, the important factor may have been visual. For over a century the vermouth bottle, classically figured and labeled in Italianate color by Martini, Sola & Co., and its successors, Martini & Rossi, has decorated barrooms. Industrial production of Italian vermouth began shortly after 1825, the product of Martini, Sola being exported in 1834.[7] Into this century Italian production of vermouth was sweet, while that of France was dry. Following the trend of the Martini to dryness, Martini & Rossi bottle vermouth *sec* also, their product today being probably the best known of apertifs in the drinking world, just as, since Repeal, the *Martini* has been the most popular of cocktails.

PETER TAMONY

San Francisco

[5] William T. Boothby, *Cocktail Boothby's American Bartender* (San Francisco: 1891), Recipe 27 (not paged). Copy in Library of the California Historical Society, San Francisco.

[6] San Francisco *Examiner,* Oct. 7, 1953, 12/3–6; San Francisco *Call-Bulletin,* Sept. 20, 1953, 12/3–4; *Wall Street Journal,* May 8, 1958, 5/6–7; and San Francisco *Chronicle,* June 1, 1958, TW 6/3–5.

[7] Oberto Spinola, *The Martini Museum of the History of Wine-Making* (Turin, Italy: Martini & Rossi, n.d.), p. 36.