

The Mystery of the Vieux Carré

(Spec work)

By Grant Simms

I can remember the look of apprehension on my coworkers face when she asked me, “Do you know what a Koo Karee is?”. I had no idea, unfortunately. Yet, as any good bartender does when he’s required to make a drink he’s never heard of, I quickly went to Google to find the recipe. I thought maybe it was some kind of obscure party shot I’d never heard of. It sounded like a drink that needed to be layered.

My search led to nothing of course since there is no such thing as a Koo Karee. I therefore took it upon myself to personally go investigate just what exactly this customer ordered. I came to find out that what he really said was, Voo Caree (his pronunciation). I can’t blame my coworker for the mix up. English wasn’t her first language, and French pronunciation is very easy to mishear, and mispronounce. The true name of the drink was Vieux Carré. The recipe was fairly intricate. It called for 6 ingredients: rye, cognac, sweet vermouth, Bénédictine, Peychaud's bitters, and Angostura bitters. I mixed it up, and since I felt bad about all the confusion, I went to personally drop off the cocktail. As I did, I mentioned that I’d never heard of the drink before. The customer was shocked. He couldn’t believe I’d never heard of such a, as he put it, “incredible drink”. Even our restaurant sommelier expressed that he couldn’t believe I didn’t know about it saying “It’s one of the classics”.

Frankly, I didn’t know what they were talking about. None of my other coworkers knew what it was. It was the first time I’d had anybody order such a thing. Liquor.com doesn’t even mention the drink on its list of “24 Classic Cocktails You Should Know How to Make”. Despite that, they were right. The Vieux Carré is a classic cocktail, and also, very

famous. Difford ranks it at number 10 of the most searched recipes on its website. For context, the Old Fashioned and Sazerac which I've made more times than I can count are at number 30 and 34. On some cocktail websites the Vieux Carré is front and center, and on others it isn't even mentioned. How is this possible?

Well, it's likely due to a variety of factors. As a bartender myself I can tell you the drink has a variety of characteristics that make it quite unapproachable. Any cocktail with 6 ingredients, especially one without sugar or fruit juice is going to scare off a fair amount of casual drinkers. Furthermore, not every bar (especially not in Canada) is going to carry both Bénédictine and Peychaud's bitters. If they do, the place in question is likely going to be expensive. It makes drinking a Vieux Carré difficult, and being that it is far more complex than an Old Fashioned or a Manhattan, it means the Vieux Carré likely gets passed over by many people when they do go to that expensive restaurant, and are thinking of getting a classic cocktail.

However, despite all that, the Vieux Carré remains incredibly popular. This likely means that although the amount of people who know about a Vieux Carré may be far fewer than that of an Old Fashioned, or a Sazerac, the amount of people who are true fans of the drink are far higher. There are many things that make ordering a Vieux Carré for the first time a difficult choice, but if the man I served was to be believed, once you do try it, there's no going without it. So, if you're like me, and have never heard of the Vieux Carré, and you're looking to be a little adventurous the next time you're out for dinner, I recommend giving the Vieux Carré a try. After all, a cocktail that's been around since the 1930s deserves a leap of faith.