

# MIXOLOGY

## THE MINT JULEP, A NOLA CLASSIC

BY HARRIET RILEY





**T**he hot, humid days of summer call for a drink that refreshes and renews. For most in the South, the traditional Mint Julep has been that balm at the end of a long scorching day. Cocktail expert Neal Bodenheimer includes the Mint Julep in his new book, co-authored with writer Emily Timberlake, called *Cure: New Orleans Drinks and How to Mix 'Em*. A New Orleans native and Managing Partner of CureCo.—the acclaimed group behind award-winning cocktail bar Cure, as well as New Orleans bars and restaurants Cane & Table and VALS—Bodenheimer makes the claim that the Mint Julep is a quintessential New Orleans drink.

Although the Mint Julep has long been associated with Kentucky bourbon and Derby Day, the drink can be made with other spirits and is consumed every day in New Orleans, Bodenheimer says. His research shows that for most of its history, the julep was not made with whiskey, but first rum and later brandy. In medieval England, Bodenheimer explains, the julep was a medicinal concoction of herbs, sweetener, and a bit of booze. By the time the drink made its way to Virginia in the 1700s, the Mint Julep was a cocktail made with rum.

Self-proclaimed New Orleans cocktail historian Stanley Clisby Arthur, in his 1937 bartenders' handbook, included a recipe for the San Domingo Julep. Made with rum, loaf sugar, and mint, Arthur calls it “the original mint julep that came to Louisiana way back in 1793 by plantation owners and aristocrats fleeing the slave rebellion in Haiti.” Bodenheimer notes that Arthur had no evidence to back up this information. Yet and still, this pronouncement caused New Orleans to officially claim the julep as its own.

History buff Bodenheimer details that by the early 1800s Americans had developed a taste for imported French brandy, but few had the means to pay for it; so, Cognac became the “fashionable choice for juleps” in New Orleans at that time.

Bodenheimer describes what makes a mint julep a julep. He says that while the mint is important, the factor that distinguishes the Mint Julep is the ice.

“When you see that frosted glass with the dome of crushed ice peeking over the top, an abundant bouquet of fresh mint drilling down through its surface, you know the drink could be only one thing,” says Bodenheimer.

Early 19th Century Americans probably lost their minds when they saw that mound of clear, cold ice being served in their drink. Because, as Bodenheimer points out, ice was a luxury in those days, especially in subtropical New Orleans with temperatures between 90 and 100 degrees. Bar clientele probably just wanted the drink with the most ice, and that certainly describes the julep. While Bodenheimer's recipe for the Mint Julep calls for bourbon, rum or brandy would work just as well. But, he says, the

“only nonnegotiable in my mind is that you must fill your glass with an overabundance of ice.”

As you sip your icy-cold julep from a straw, Bodenheimer paints a picture: “Close your eyes and imagine a world without air-conditioning, without refrigeration—a hot, sticky world where people rarely bathed, and the smell of summer was enough to knock you dead. Stick your nose in the bouquet of mint, maybe graze that heaping mound of ice. Inhale. Is this not the best drink you've ever had?”

Without further ado, here's Neal Bodenheimer's recipe and technique for a quintessential New Orleans Mint Julep. +

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*Excerpt below from the new book Cure: New Orleans Drinks and How to Mix 'Em by Neal Bodenheimer and Emily Timberlake, Published by Abrams.*

The spec below is very traditional and very basic. So, technique is important here. Despite what you may have been told, you should not “muddle” the mint. If you pulverize it, you'll extract bitter and unpleasant flavors from the chlorophyll. Instead, gently press the mint with the back of your bar spoon against the glass. Do not “slap” the bouquet you'll use for garnish. Just gently brush it against the back of your hand; that's enough to activate the aromas. Add the ice in stages and agitate (swizzle or stir) at each step. Purists may scoff, but I like to add a dash or two of Angostura to my Mint Juleps. Pretty much everything tastes better with bitters.

#### MINT JULEP

2¼ ounces (67.5 ml) Buffalo Trace bourbon  
½ ounce (15 ml) Demerara Syrup [diluted, 1:2 ratio of  
hot water to Demerara sugar, cooled]  
12 mint leaves, plus 1 bouquet for garnish

Combine all the ingredients except the garnish in a julep cup and stir to combine, making sure to gently press the mint leaves against the sides of the cup with your bar spoon. Fill the glass halfway with crushed ice, then stir to agitate and dilute the whiskey. The proof of the whiskey should melt the ice pretty quickly, which is what you want—this drink needs dilution. Add more crushed ice to fill the cup again, then stir again to agitate. Refill the cup with more ice, stir one last time, then add enough crushed ice so it mounds over the edge of the julep cup, which should be frosted over by now. Brush the tops of the mint bouquet against the back of your hand to activate the aromas, then place the bouquet in the drink to garnish it. Serve with a straw.