

# IT'S TIKI TIME

Once a kitsch memory of the past, the Tiki phase is experiencing a resurgence in popularity across the world. Think bright shirts, Hawaiian leis and lots and lots of rum. *Kevin Clark* explores this fantastic craze.



KEVIN CLARK AT LA MARIANA HONOLULU



VINTAGE TIKI MUGS



WE SALUTE YOU

## AMERICA'S PARADISE

Ernest Raymond Beaumont Gantt personifies the Great American Dream for me – the everyman who built an empire with nought but an original idea, elbow grease and a healthy dose of being in the right place at the right time. Gantt was by all accounts a world-weary drifter who survived the great depression and made his living during prohibition as a bootlegger on the west coast of the United States.

The day after prohibition ended he opened a bar in Los Angeles. No doubt this was a common occurrence as America slowly awoke from the arid 12-year long nightmare that was the Great Experiment. However, Gantt's venue was different. Having spent his youth travelling throughout the islands of the Caribbean and the Pacific, Gantt had amassed a collection of tribal carvings and tropical trinkets which he used to decorate his tiny little bar. Recognising how much easier (and cheaper!) it was to obtain rum from the neighbouring Caribbean nations than, say, a bourbon or rye whiskey from an American distillery struggling to ramp up production to meet post-prohibition demand, Gantt started to mix "exotics"

– extravagant drinks containing various Rums and fresh fruit juices.

This bar was called Don the Beachcomber's, and it was the first of its kind – a Tropical Bar. Something about Don the Beachcomber's appealed to the public imagination. Gantt hadn't just captured the zeitgeist; he invited it to come sit at the bar, make itself at home, and proceeded to ply it with exotic rum drinks.

Gantt's bar was a hit with the LA glitterati to the point where he was forced to open a second venue close to the original. The wild popularity that Gantt experienced with his escapist view of paradise can be explained by looking at the American psyche of the time. In the 1930s the United



WINNER OF THE APPLETON ESTATE TIKI COCKTAIL COMPETITION NSW FINAL, DAVID BEATTY

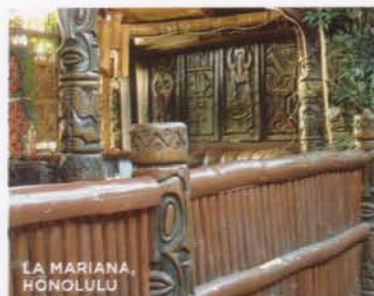
States had a lot of steam to let off. Two major events shaped the American need for escapism and a good stiff drink. The country had only just recovered from the unpleasantness of the Great Depression along with the self-imposed prohibition - Americans were ready for a party! Don the Beachcomber's was there for them.

As his enterprise grew, Gantt legally changed his name to Donn Beach and created a back-story to complete the illusion that Don the Beachcomber had brought the tropics to the mainland. Donn's motto was "If you can't get to paradise, I'll bring it to you". This was the beginning of a long-lived culture of what is now known as "Tiki" which stretches all the way back to the 1930s.

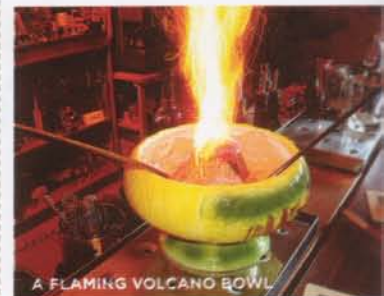
## DAYS OF RUM AND MONEY

When you talk about Tiki, there are two names that helped to make the movement as enormous as it eventually became. One was Donn Beach, the other was his closest rival Victor "Trader Vic" Bergeron. Trader Vic was one of the first entrepreneurs to recognise what a great idea Donn had stumbled upon and "appropriate" the concept for his own restaurant empire.

Where Donn Beach was an innovator with a knack for making imaginative drinks and imaginative venues, Trader Vic was a shrewd businessman. Vic's empire grew and prospered, while Donn Beach's various endeavours, while successful, didn't



LA MARIANA, HONOLULU



A FLAMING VOLCANO BOWL

have the longevity that Vic enjoyed. To this day Trader Vic restaurants exist around the world and the company continues to open new venues.

After World War Two, American soldiers returned home with tales of tropical paradise in the South Pacific. The public appetite for islander culture was voracious, and the entirely fake culture of Tiki, which mashed together many facets of islander culture was there to satiate it. Donn and Vic weren't the only ones hanging on to this particularly eccentric tropical bandwagon. They say that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and many other smaller operators warmed to the idea of getting a slice of the Tiki pie – some of them outright stole successful drink recipes, names and ideas from Donn and Vic often poaching barstaff directly!

As Tiki became more successful its reach began to extend beyond the hospitality industry which had spawned it. Around the US, lounge musicians were tapping into this wave of pop

bars and resorts. Ceramic drinking mugs stamped with names of venues that had long since stopped trading became available and amateur sleuths such as Sven Kirsten, author of the seminal Tiki research works "The Book of Tiki" and "Tiki Modern" started to hunt down more evidence of just how big Tiki had once been. These enthusiasts discovered a rich landscape of long gone multi-million dollar restaurants and resorts throughout the US.

It certainly helped that some living "fossils" of the Tiki movement still exist to this day. While Trader Vic's company is the most visible survivor of the original Tiki set, there are some other notable exceptions which have slipped through the dark dormancy of the 70s, 80s and 90s.

### THE SURVIVORS

In the 1970s the vast majority of Tiki venues closed down. It was difficult for these creatures of the 40s and 50s to survive in a socio-political climate

*The Mai Kai in Fort Lauderdale, Florida is one of the world's must-see Tiki locations.*

culture – Les Baxter and Martin Denny defined a style of music called exotica which was basically just normal lounge music with more drums and bird calls. Hawaiian slide guitar and ukulele music wound up in the charts, whilst tan skinned maidens gyrated their hips in grass skirts. There were Tiki drive-ins, Tiki motels, Tiki bowling alleys and at least one dedicated Tiki theme-park.

### REDISCOVERING THE PAST

Until very recently, Tiki has been a vague memory in the collective consciousness tarnished by the tackiness that it was exposed to in the 1970s. To really understand the breadth of influence that the Tiki movement had at its height, one must turn to the people who rediscovered it in the early-to-mid 1990s.

A rag-tag group of retro-culture enthusiasts calling themselves "Urban Archaeologists" came to notice the vast amount of ephemera filling thrift shops in the US which made mention of various tropical inspired restaurants,

which looked down on the culturally insensitive attitude towards indigenous cultures that is part and parcel of the Tiki aesthetic. Many of these bars struggled to stay above water and many were washed away never to be seen again. Those venues that managed to survive the tide of progress are only now beginning to reap the benefits of their tenacity as they become landmarks of a forgotten time, more than half a century past.

Of the world's must-see Tiki locations, The Mai Kai in Fort Lauderdale Florida probably rates highest. The Mai Kai is one of the dinosaurs of Tiki – it was opened in mid 1950s and has become a holy pilgrimage for the legions of Tiki-philes that travel the width and breadth of the US looking for that perfect faux-Polynesian experience. The Mai Kai is a palace of a restaurant – it has a high-roofed Polynesian A-frame architecture which was typical of the style, and has been serving food and drink by its indoor waterfall throughout its existence. Waitresses at the Mai

### APPLETON ESTATE TIKI COCKTAIL COMPETITION

Eastern seaboard bartenders went Tiki-mad this spring with the Appleton Estate Tiki Cocktail Competition. Hundreds of entries were received, and three Tiki-mad state finals were held in Queensland, NSW and Victoria. There was fruit, fire and plenty of rum leading to one of the craziest, zaniest cocktail comps this year.

Queensland kicked the competition off, with the final on the rooftop at the new Limes Boutique Hotel in Fortitude Valley. **Lauren Borger** of Coconut Grove Bar and Bistro took out first place in her very first cocktail competition with her "Mother's Milk of Jamaica", a decadent blend of Appleton Estate, Jamaican spiced coconut crème, lychee and jackfruit. Second place went to Daniel Gregory of Byblos and Martin Lange of Sling Lounge took third.

Next up was Victoria, where the guys at Golden Monkey transformed Hardware Lane into a Tiki-haven with a bamboo fence, flaming torches and a bamboo Tiki bar surrounded by four 10-foot lit Tiki statues. The comp was won by **Jason Chan**, of Seamstress and Sweatshop fame, who impressed the judges with his "Captain Spence's Pirate Grog Juice", garnished with honeycomb sand. Sean Baxter of Manchuria was a close second and Andy Griffiths of Cookie came in third.

Finally, it was NSW's turn with inner-city venue Rambutan getting into the Tiki-spirit by decorating the venue with Tiki statues and Hawaiian leis and serving up plenty of Tiki-style cocktails. The Beresford's **David Beatty** took out the top honours with his cocktail, "How Blackula Got His Groove Back", a fruity blend of Appleton Estate Reserve, white grapefruit juice, orange juice and passionfruit and coconut syrups.

Second place went to Nick Van Tiel from Tha Colada Club and third went to Ryan Gardam from Rambutan.

Along with cash prizes, winners received a bottle of a special blend of Appleton Estate Rum personally selected for the competition by Master Blender Joy Spence.



QUEENSLAND WINNERS: DANIEL GREGORY, LAUREN BORGER AND MARTIN LANGE



NSW FINALISTS



VICTORIAN WINNERS: SEAN BAXTER, JASON CHAN AND ANDY GRIFFITHS



ALL TIKIED OUT IN MELBOURNE



Kai still wear sarongs and bikinis as they serve flaming bowls of "Mystery Drink" concocted by the bartenders and accompanied by the ring of a gong.

The second on the list of Tiki must-see venues is the intimate Tiki-Ti bar in Los Angeles. Tiki-Ti was opened by one of Donn Beach's most trusted and long serving bartenders, the late, great Ray Buhen. Buhen was one of Don the Beachcomber's first bartenders. As Tiki bars took off, Buhen moved from venue to venue working in all the ritziest Tiki bars in Los Angeles - the Seven Seas (near Grauman's Chinese Theatre) The Luau in Beverley Hills, and The Palms in Anaheim eventually opening the Tiki-Ti in an old violin shop in Los Angeles. Buhen worked the bar there for more than 30 years, eventually passing the baton to his offspring before dying just before his 90th birthday in 1999.

The Tiki-Ti is now tended by Ray's son Michael, and his two grandsons Mike and Mark. There has been a Buhen behind the tiny Tiki bar since 1961. With several decades of experience working in all the hottest Tiki bars in Los Angeles, Ray Buhen's legacy, the Tiki-Ti, is carrying the flame of the best drinks from that era into the 21st Century. It is said that Tiki-Ti is the closest you will get to the drinks invented by Don the Beachcomber the way he would have made them.

The third on my list of significant Tiki survivors is the humble La Mariana Sailing Club in Honolulu, Hawaii. The La Mariana was opened in the 1950s to service a community of sail-boat owners in a small marina not far from

Honolulu. The owner Annette Nahinu (who sadly passed away this year at age 96) had the foresight (and good taste) to collect relics of Hawaii's Tiki venues as they began closing down throughout the decades. As a result, La Mariana is filled to the brim with some absolutely stunning pieces of décor and furniture - visiting La Mariana is like visiting a living and breathing Tiki Museum.

## TIKI RISING

Since the early 2000s, an international Tiki revivalist movement has sprung up - led by a community of dedicated Tiki-philes whose aim is to return a lot of the fun that personified the Tiki movement of yore. In many ways, the modern era echoes the hey-day of Tiki - the strain of modern living and the shadow of war hanging over the world have sparked a desire for Tiki's unique sense of escapism.



Various artists have emerged to embrace the Tiki aesthetic such as Shag, Tom Thordarson and Bosko. Tiki mugs were rescued from thrift store purgatory by Tiki Farm, who manufacture reproductions of original 20th century Tiki mugs as well as producing new Tiki mugs in association with modern artists.

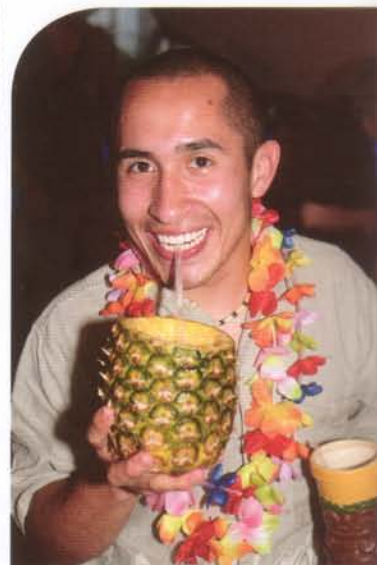
For bartenders, the work of people like Jeff "Beachbum" Berry has been invaluable. Because of the rampant intellectual property theft that characterised the early Tiki bars, many recipes were kept top secret by the bar owners and bartenders. Beachbum Berry has diligently hunted down authentic recipes and forgotten ingredients by interviewing bartenders of the period and studying old notebooks and recipe books to produce his books "Grog Log", "Intoxica" and "Sippin' Safari".

The work that Berry and other modern bartenders have put into rediscovering the joy of a well-made Tiki cocktail has begun to pay off. The best of these drinks are complex, balanced and refreshing when made properly, and restore faith in the quality of cocktails after prohibition.

These drinks are again being served in the best cocktail bars in the world, with some dedicated modern Tiki bars being opened all the time. The trend has particularly taken off in London, which boasts two of the most well known modern Tiki bars - the eclectic Trailer Happiness, and the palatial Mahiki. One of the first serious dedicated modern Tiki bars to open in the home of Tiki bars is Forbidden Island in Alameda, California run by the equally serious and dedicated Martin Cate.

Even Australia is starting to get involved - many bars now boast a few Tiki drinks, and we have the flashy and colourful Hula Bula Bar in Perth as well as Tiki Lounge and Bar in Richmond, Melbourne - the humble little Tiki bar where I am fortunate enough to ply my trade.

It is great to see that the colourful and slightly tongue-in-cheek Tiki movement is retaking the world one Mai Tai at a time, and bartenders are reclaiming their rightful place as ambassadors for what is ultimately good, harmless fun. And really, when it comes down to it, everyone could use a bit more fun in their lives. **b&c**



PINEAPPLE AND RUM GO HAND-IN-HAND

## ZOMBIE

This recipe is from research done by Jeff "Beachbum" Berry in his excellent book "Sippin' Safari" and is believed to be the closest to the original:

### Ingredients:

20-25ml Lime juice  
15ml "Don's Mix" (2 parts grapefruit juice, 1 part cinnamon sugar syrup)  
15ml Falernum  
15ml Jamaican rum  
45ml Gold Puerto Rican rum  
30ml 151-proof Demerara rum  
Dash Angostura bitters  
6 drops Hersaint or Pernod  
1 tsp. Grenadine  
3/4 cup crushed ice

**Method:** Pour all ingredients into blender, adding ice last. Blend for about five seconds (don't be shy). Pour into glass.

**Garnish:** Mint sprig

## TRADER VIC'S MAI TAI

From Trader Vic's Bartender's Guide:

### Ingredients:

1 lime (about 30ml)  
15ml Orange Curacao (use a good brand like Marie Brizard or Monin)  
5-10ml Rock candy syrup (basically sugar syrup)  
5-10ml Orgeat syrup  
30ml Dark Jamaica rum (Myers's is good)  
30ml Martinique rum (Clément works well)

**Method:** Squeeze lime with all other ingredients into a shaker and shake with crushed ice. Pour everything into a double old-fashioned glass.

**Garnish:** Spent lime shell and fresh mint