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KC's cocktail culture births Paris of the Plains festival

Bartenders will show off their skills around town in a weeklong event that attracts industry heavyweights.

BY ANNE BROCKHOFF
Special to The Star

Jazz, booze, glitz — Kansas City had it all during those heady years between the two world wars. Count Basie was making a name for himself, the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art had just opened and the Kansas City Monarchs were playing.

And of course there were parties. Rich and poor alike danced and drank at the city's "hundreds of clubs, theaters, dives and ballrooms, many offering round-the-clock entertainment," according to a University of Missouri-Kansas City online exhibit about life in Kansas City between 1920 and 1940. Sure, Prohibition made drinking illegal, but local political bosses had a flexible attitude about alcohol and the criminals who supplied it. The party was in full swing, prompting Omaha World-Herald journalist Edward Morrow to write, "If you want to see some sin, forget about Paris and go to Kansas City."

The name Paris of the Plains stuck. Back then, civic leaders weren't too proud of it. But today it evokes Kansas City's complex and culturally rich heritage, says John



RICH SUGG/The Kansas City Star

Simonson, author of "Paris of the Plains" (The History Press, 2010).

"That period has become the best-known slice of Kansas City's history," Simonson says. "It's got sex and violence, political intrigue, heroes and villains. It's a pretty Hollywood-ready story."

All of which makes it the perfect moniker for the Paris of the Plains Cocktail Festival.

The event is in its first year, but it isn't exactly new. PopFest grew out of the Greater Kansas City Bartending Competition, which was created in 2007 by Ryan Maybee, co-owner of the Rieger Hotel Grill & Exchange and Manifesto, and Doug Frost, a master of wine, master sommelier and contributor to The Kansas City Star.

"We're really looking forward to highlighting all of Kansas City, its history and where it's come since then," says Maybee, who teamed up with Frost and Brandon Cummins, a cocktail enthusiast and freelance digital image-maker, to create PopFest.

Tales of the Cocktail in New Orleans was the first to celebrate the culture-cocktail connection, and the 10-year-old festival is now the biggest of its kind. PopFest is among the growing ranks of similar events, including the Manhattan Cocktail Classic in New York and Portland Cocktail Week in Portland, Ore.

Drinks alone don't cut it when it comes to such events, though, says Lindsey Johnson, founder of digital marketing company Lush Life Productions and co-founder of Portland's festival. Integrating Kansas City's music, culture and culinary community is important.

"Paris of the Plains is about Kansas City first, and cocktails second," Johnson says. "Ryan, Brandon and Doug have gotten this right."

As have Kansas City's bartenders. Over the past six years, local bartenders have built a close-knit professional community, a successful bartending competition and the foundation for a Kansas City chapter of the U.S. Bartenders' Guild.

Local drink slingers have put their own spin on trends by wood-smoking spirits, making shrubs, aging Manhattans in a barrel and the like, and bottling carbonated cocktails in-house. And they've increasingly garnered media

PopFest is organized by (from left) wine expert Doug Frost; bartender Ryan Maybee, owner of Manifesto and the bar at the Rieger Hotel Grill & Exchange; and Brandon Cummins, a cocktail enthusiast and freelance digital image-maker.

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Highlights

- **Bitters Dinner:** Four-course dinner with paired cocktails at the Rieger Hotel & Exchange on Thursday night.
- **Wine-tails Dinner:** Doug Frost weighs in on a new twist in cocktails at the American Restaurant on Saturday night.
- **PopFest Bartending Competition:** A dozen bartenders from Kansas City, Colorado, Pennsylvania, Oklahoma and Illinois compete at the Uptown Theater on Sunday night.
- **Washington Cup:** A gala celebration on Monday night featuring American-made spirits and liqueurs with a blind tasting.

For more details on the events plus recipes, go to popfestkc.com.

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attention for it all.

BBC Travel, USA Today, Yahoo Travel, Reuters and Imbibe magazine have tipped Kansas City as a cocktail destination, even as bartenders here were busy generating their own headlines.

Jenn Tosatto, Rieger's bar manager, was picked as a finalist in the 2011 Auchentoshan Switch Scotch whisky competition. Then she made the final round of the 2012 Diageo World Class U.S. Finale in New York.

Maybee competed against 15 finalists from around the world in Angostura's Global Cocktail Challenge, and a drink created by the Farmhouse's Arturo Vera-Felicie won the chairman's trophy in the 2011 Ultimate Cocktail Challenge's signature cocktail category.

None of it surprises Angus Winchester, global brand ambassador for Tanqueray.

"You get some of the most interesting work in places that aren't under the same scrutiny as London, Paris, New York and Tokyo," Winchester says. "There's room to be more creative, more inventive and closer to people."

PopFest's organizers certainly plan to prove that point in the next five days. Dinners will feature tequila at Mestizo, Angostura bitters at the Rieger, agave-based spirits at Crayola Café and winetails (wine-based cocktails) at the American Restaurant.

Snuff Jazz, an avant-garde jazz group, will play at Grünauer while Mark Lowrey and the New Jazz Order will offer a Count Basie tribute at the barely opened Kill Devil Club.

PopFest's seminars include industry heavyweights like writer Steve Olson and Ron Cooper, founder of Del Maguey Single Village Mezcal, who will host a session on tequila and mezcal. David Wondrich, the author of "Imbibe" (Penguin Group, 2007) and "Punch!" (Penguin Group, 2010) will cover Irish whiskey and its role in classic punch.

Paul Pacult, founder of the Spirits Journal, will lead a Scotch whisky tasting. Gin's the topic of a panel including Tanqueray's Winchester; Chris Patino, the manager of trade education for Pernod Ricard USA; and Jim Ryan, brand ambassador for Hendrick's Gin.

Doug Frost and chocolatier Christopher Elbow will delve into what makes cocktails and chocolate a perfect match, while Ryan Maybee and Ryan Conklin of Euclid Hall Bar & Kitchen in Denver will discuss beer cocktails, or beertails. And Simonson will explore Kansas City's storied and sometimes seedy drinks history.

For just plain fun, there's the Midwest Mohawk Melee featuring the mohawked Tosatto and Matt Seiter, bar manager of Sanctuaria in St. Louis. And Dale DeGross, author of "The Craft of the Cocktail" (Clarkson Potter, 2002), will share 40 years' worth of bartending tales during his "Night on the Town" event.

Tosatto, Vera-Felicie and 10 more pros from six cities will take the stage at the Uptown Theater to compete for the Paris of the Plains bartending competition title.

And of course there's a gala, but this one is a bit different. Not only will it feature cocktails by some of the competition's top bartenders, but guests can also vote in the final phase of the Washington Cup, a competition devised exclusively for American-made spirits. Proceeds of the gala will benefit KCPT, Kansas City's public television station.

It's an ambitious schedule, but one organizers hope will burnish Kansas City's reputation as a growing cocktail powerhouse that still values heritage, hospitality and fun.

“Kansas City’s put itself out there to be a beacon for the Midwest,” Lush Life’s Johnson says. “They’ve put the welcome mat out.”

Anne Brockhoff is an award-winning spirits columnist and regular contributor to FYI | Food. She blogs at fooddrinklife.wordpress.com.

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