An Ignoble Experiment: Tampa's Restaurants During Prohibition

Andrew T. Huse

ike many citizens of Ybor City, Casimiro Hernandez was a newly arrived immigrant in 1904 in search of his fortune. The still-growing cigar town was one of sharp contrasts: a vital manufacturing enclave on the edge of Florida's backwoods, a distinctive Latin quarter beside a cracker city. While Hernandez resided in a boarding house, a small saloon across the street caught his eye. He watched the customers come and go, and after several months, determined to buy the business for himself. He convinced a friend to back him financially, purchased the saloon, renamed it the "Saloon Columbia," and offered liquor, wine and cigars to the thirsty bachelor immigrants of Ybor City. Hernandez later added sandwiches and snacks to the menu, but a neighboring restaurant called "La Fonda" furnished complete meals.¹

Although Ybor City had been an industrial town since the cigar factories arrived in the 1880s, it still retained the feel of the rough and tumble Florida frontier. The saloons welcomed patrons with swinging wooden doors. Life could be tough in Ybor City and the hardscrabble Spanish, Cuban and Italian immigrants were equally tough. The hard working Latins and crackers, many of them young, single men, could not subsist on coffee alone. When not working in agriculture, the cigar industry, on the shipping docks or as merchants, most of the men needed a strong drink to soothe their ills and pass the time.

The simple saloon filled the needs of the workers nicely. Hernandez opened his swinging doors to the sandy streets of Ybor City in 1905, and thirsty workers beat a steady path to the Saloon Columbia. Saloons served as part employment agency, part social club, and part counseling center to Tampa's working men. Most of the Latin men had left their families behind in the old country, and felt-free to pursue a little pleasure when not eking out a living. The Deep South states provided some of Tampa's hardest drinkers. Although segregated, many black and white residents separately engaged in the same pleasurable activities, namely drinking and gambling. Whether it was a cracker tavern in Port Tampa, an African-American jook joint on Central Avenue, or a Cuban bar like the Columbia, saloons had no trouble finding customers in Tampa, Florida's hardest-drinking city.

For many, the simple pleasures of the Columbia proved insufficient. Disreputable saloons offered gambling and prostitutes in addition to whiskey and conversation, and men of all ethnic groups sought out those forbidden fruits. As in other American cities, drunkenness bred criminality, brawls, murders, lost fortunes and social disease in Tampa. However small the actual number of revelers, a little mayhem went a long way in a frontier town. Tampa's God-fearing populace recoiled at the lawless sex and violence percolating in the city's saloons.

Above all, such seedy places were an affront to Southern womanhood. Footloose newcomers posed an especially fearful threat to the integrity of Tampa's women and families. Since most of Tampa's restaurants were little more than thinly-veiled saloons, it was understood that respectable women did not patronize them. Tampa's restaurants served as preserves for unfettered male enjoyment and interaction. Some fancier restaurants served dinner to couples, especially on special occasions, but only males joined the lunch-time crowd.

Latin women avoided the cafes during the day largely out of Old World tradition. Even respectable establishments remained
off limits to females. Tampa historian Tony Pizzo wrote, “The Columbia was a barroom or saloon catering to Latins and the cracker element [and] offer[ed] solace ... no women dared to enter.”

Ferdie Pacheco illustrates this fact further when discussing breakfast at the Columbia:

Most men had two breakfasts. One at home taken hurriedly, amid the domestic turmoil of wife and children, and the other at their leisure, at the Columbia, in the company of friends and associates, and in the warmth of continuous camaraderie.

For women who worked in the cigar industry, a cafetero (coffee vendor) delivered sandwiches, fruit and pastries to their work stations while the men dined in the restaurants. This culinary segregation of the sexes was not limited to Tampa’s Latin population. Traditions of the American South were no different, where men often sought out strong drink instead of good food when dining out.

Even the sassy waitress had no place in old Ybor City, because men dominated both sides of the counter. No self-respecting man wanted his wife to work in a restaurant. Victor Licata, who owned the Seabreeze in its early years, gladly accepted the help of his wife and daughter to prepare his popular and labor-intensive deviled crabs, but he would not hear of them setting foot in his restaurant, not even in the kitchen. Instead, they prepared the savory crab rolls at home.

This kind of separation applied to all classes of society, although some mixing occurred, primarily at formal dinners and dances. Upper-class establishments catered especially to men as well. A good example is the Tampa Bay Hotel, among the finest resorts in Florida at the turn of the last century. While married couples actually dined together at dinner, many other activities were strictly segregated. The grand dining room held extravagant, formal and lengthy feasts for its guests. After dining, the men went to the bar to enjoy a drink and cigar, while the women conversed in their sitting.
room. No man ever so fit to visit the ladies' sitting room. A lady did not dare to venture into the men's bar, but could order drinks sent to her room. Only one woman ever ventured into the bar. Unfortunately, the woman's name, and the reaction of the men, was not recorded.6

If many women opposed the saloon's activities, it was not a resentment stemming from their exclusion from them. Like the anti-slavery abolitionists before them, prohibitionists found inspiration and motivation from Christianity. The majority of prohibitionists were women disgusted by the hardship caused by male drinking at home. Domestic violence, unfaithful husbands, and wages lost to gambling and booze alarmed temperate men and women alike. The growing prohibition movement raised women's political awareness, and they received the right to vote with the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution on August 26, 1920. That the 18th Amendment prohibiting alcohol went into effect on January 16th of the same year was no coincidence. Although women were unable to vote for prohibition, they spearheaded the movement that fostered it.

TOWARD A DRY TAMPA

Aurelio Piñero and his young son, Armando, saw the police cars pull up to the back door of El Pasaje in 1932. Father and son watched a flurry of activity from a high window in the Cuban Club. Several officers dashed into the hotel and raided its elegant restaurant on the second floor. El Pasaje boasted some of the finest food in Tampa. The service, silverware and crystal glasses were second to none. For decades, wealthy and influential Floridians ate at El Pasaje. Despite its reputation as a haven for the elite, the restaurant's management told doormen, maitre d' and waiters to watch for the police. Management had tucked El Pasaje's stash of illegal liquor in secret compartments in the walls, hidden by an elaborate system of panels and pulleys.

As Piñero and his son could see, El Pasaje's status as a fine dining establishment did not spare it from police surveillance. The secret liquor compartments were not enough protection, either. Tampa police, often corrupt but tired of being made fools of, found $100,000 worth of liquor hidden from sight. Today, the same cache would be worth millions.7

Before long, the police began tossing dozens of cases of liquor from the second-story window. Agents stood on the brick street below with clubs, smashing every bottle-or so they thought. Piñero looked for an opportunity to recoup some of his huge losses. Just as the police sped away, he and his son searched through the shattered whiskey cases with sticks. To Piñero's delight, they found five unbroken bottles of Canadian Club. A few days later, he sold the bottles for a whopping $125—an equivalent of ten weeks' wages for Piñero.8

Why would a fine restaurant be raided by police? What threat did wine—and foods prepared with it—pose to society? What harm came from patrons quietly sipping cocktails out of demitasse cups? El Pasaje was not an obvious blight on the community, so what was all the fuss about? Even the most ardent prohibitionists did not smash El Pasaje's stores of liquor, so why would the police?

How could something like prohibition happen in free-wheeling Tampa, never mind the entire United States?

On January 22, 1908, Carrie Nation, the hatchet-wielding prohibitionist, visited Tampa. Of the prohibition's activists, Nation was among the most famous—and the most radical. It was not every day that an elderly woman with a hatchet burst into crowded saloons and busted up barrels of liquor while customers and barkeeps watched. She had been galvanized into action decades earlier by the death of her hard-drinking husband. During her three-month stay in Tampa, Nation railed against the immorality of saloons and drunkards in numerous impromptu speeches. By the
time of her visit, she had rallied the support of activists all over the country. Teetotalers all over the U.S. pushed for legislation that made the sale of alcohol illegal. Florida had a long history of conflict over alcohol, and Tampa and its restaurants would soon experience the economic consequences of prohibition.

If she had visited Tampa ten years later, Nation would have been satisfied to learn that prohibition began in Florida before most of the rest of the country. The fight to ban alcohol began in the late 1800s among Christian groups. In 1915, after years of struggle and debate, the Florida Senate passed Bill 222, or the Davis Regulation Act, which only allowed alcohol to be sold in secure containers and ordered all saloons closed from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. Paradoxically, this forced determined drinkers to frequent saloons during the day, drink at home in front of family, or drink on the street.9

Nevertheless, the Davis Act had the desired effect. Out of Tampa's 75 saloons, more than 50 closed on October 1, 1915, the day Bill 222 became law.10 While the Tampa's drinking public may have been aghast to find only one-third of their saloons still in business, St. Petersburg retained only two.11 Despite the new law, drinking in Hillsborough County and six other Florida counties was still legal. Hardworking, hard-drinking Tampa would not easily loosen its grip on the bottle.

The day the restrictions went into effect, the Tampa Daily Times reported,

Business in most of the Tampa saloons was better than usual all evening. In some[,] grotesque conviviality was indulged in and many discordant voices joined in singing 'Auld Lang Syne.' Today Tampans must drink at home, in their private offices or on the streets. They can no longer linger over the brass and mahogany and depend upon it for support.12

For those who wondered how flexible law enforcement would be over the issue,
Sheriff W.C. Spencer announced,

I am going to enforce the Davis Law to the letter. I do not intend to recognize newly formed clubs which are established especially for the profit derived from the use of lockers or sale of alcoholics, or are operating a buffet merely as an incidental feature of its social or fraternal purposes.  

Yet Sheriff Spencer was just one in a procession of law enforcement officials unable – or unwilling – to enforce prohibition laws. The Davis Act was a failure, and foreshadowed why prohibition would fail in Tampa. In 1919, a Tribune editorial mused, “Soon there was hardly a place where liquor was sold that did not sell it openly and above board by the drink or by the gallon. The terms of the act were despised and condemned, and officials in some cities winked openly at violations.” New and established clubs served alcohol to their members throughout the era. Some social clubs planned on storing large reserves of liquor for members so it would be available at any time, with no money exchanged and no law violated.

Between 1915 and 1918, Florida’s remaining wet counties voted to become dry and close their saloons. In 1918, Hillsborough County was one of the only wet counties in the state, though local government discouraged the operating of saloons through painfully high licensing fees. The money required to overcome these obstacles divided Tampa’s saloons into three categories: expensive establishments like the Tampa Bay Hotel, El Pasajé and the Balbontin Saloon that attracted well-to-do businessmen and politicians; working-class places like the White Swan for the common man; or “blind tigers,” unlicensed establishments teeming with bad liquor, gambling and prostitution. 

In November 1918, Florida’s citizens voted to enact prohibition, and even Hillsborough County went dry on January 1, 1919. Soldiers returning from World War I could not legally celebrate with a drink. The Tribune mulled over the consequences as prohibition went into effect.

This morning the fight is over; the prohibitionists are going about seeking other worlds to conquer, and Florida is so dry that a man will have to get the colic and a prescription from a doctor to get a little ‘medicine’ from the drug store. If you want a drink today the nearest place...is Baltimore; and it’s a darned costly trip there with federal railroad fares and porter tips to be added.

Tampa must have been a sullen town, indeed. All saloons shut down, package houses auctioned off their stocks, and thirsty drinkers wandered about, wondering who might have a bottle of whiskey left. Unluckily for them, demand for whiskey was so high that Spanish cider would have to do. Tampa’s newspapers captured the feeling of loss and dejection shared by drinkers.

The regular customers could not pass by the old place [saloon] without stopping to take a look and pass the compliments of the season with such others of the clan [of drinkers] who still retained a controlling interest in a full sized thirst but who were compelled to satisfy their

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_Prohibition was the rearguard action of a still dominant, overwhelmingly rural, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant establishment, aware that its privileges and natural right to rule were being increasingly threatened by the massive arrival of largely despised (and feared) beer-swilling, wine-drinking new American immigrants._

- Edward Behr

_Every lesson we learned from prohibition it is this: there is no crime so evil and harmful as an unjust law._

- Raymond Schuessler
inward aridness by merely sniffing at the drafts which from time to time wafted through the portals of package houses minus the packages.

Only the sign on the showcase - “Fixtures for Sale” - added to the gloom of the establishment. All over town it was the same, these establishments looking much like a doomed man who was trying to do all he could to make the best of his last day.19

A year after Florida went dry, the nation followed suit. On January 1, 1920, prohibition became federal law. Once the prohibitionists had their way, the tough questions were left to the government. How would the ban be enforced? What kind of unforeseen consequences would result? Would the law solve social problems or create them? Is legislating morality democratic or even feasible?

The answers would prove discouraging. The social costs of the “Noble Experiment” were enormous. “Dry” America became an international laughing-stock. The law criminalized large portions of the populace who were previously law-abiding, especially those immigrants who enjoyed wine with their meals. The flood of minor cases strained courtrooms across the country to their limits. Popular entertainment soon mocked law enforcement with images of bumbling, corrupt and overzealous policemen. All the while, smugglers and moonshine producers filled the void that was once the providence of legitimate businesses. Organized crime made millions, paid no taxes, and became a national force of corruption in our society and in our politics. The parallels with today’s vast “War on Drugs” are obvious, except the economic and social costs of today’s “noble experiment” by far exceed those of the past. If Carrie Nation could have seen the chaos wrought by her Holy Crusade against saloons, she may well have put down her axe and gone home to her cabin in the Ozarks.

That was probably the wildest period of time in this country’s history. There was more damn booze consumed and the whole Florida boom developed at that time. Florida was just going crazy. It had to be one hell of a time to live here in Florida.

- H.L. “Punky” Crowder

Wet Tampa: The Rise of the Underworld

It could be argued that prohibition put the roar in the “Roaring Twenties.” It would have been a rather quaint decade if it were not for the convergence of prohibition with a variety of other factors. The U.S. was ready to celebrate its victory in the Great War. Motion pictures amused the population with slapstick humor and tantalized them with glamorous stars. General disregard for prohibition laws glorified gangsters and made folk heroes of violent criminals. Jazz burst on to the national music scene, reflecting the heady excitement of the times. Economic prosperity and speculation made scores of investors rich overnight. The Florida Land Boom made real estate agents, construction firms, and developers giddy with real and projected profits. Prohibitionists and suffragettes ushered in a new wave of women’s liberation. “Flappers,” the young rebellious ladies of the 1920s, enjoyed their new freedoms by dancing the Charleston, smoking cigarettes, and drinking bathtub gin. Their prohibitionist elders were not pleased.

Prohibition criminalized the drinking public, straining the legal system with arrests and court cases. Regular drinkers were not only denied liquor, but would be severely punished if found drunk in public. The day prohibition went into effect, a sailor named John Branch stood before a judge for public drunkenness. “You will be turned over to the state next time you get drunk,” the judge told the sailor. If caught drunk again, Branch would be charged with a misdemeanor, fined up to $500, and sentenced to six months in jail. The third offense would be treated as a felony, with a maximum fine of $3,000 or three years in prison. To get a rough idea of today’s costs for getting tipsy, multiply the fines by ten or more.20

Immigrants whose families drank wine with their meals were suddenly treated like criminals for continuing a long cultural and
culinary tradition. Some theorized that prohibition was meant to shelter America's urban population from the evils of immigration - German beer gardens, Irish pubs and Italian bootleggers. Mr. B.M. Balbontin, a Spanish immigrant, liquor wholesaler, and owner of numerous saloons in Tampa, recalled the implications of prohibition for immigrants like himself.

98% of the beer plants in the United States belonged to Germans. 95% of the refineries belonged to Jews. 90% of the importers were Spaniards, Italians, French and German. More than 90% of the retailers in liquor belonged to the nationalities expressed above, all foreigners. 

By legislating their livelihoods out of existence, prohibition negated the political influence of immigrants. Balbontin also found it suspicious that the U.S. voted on prohibition “during a time when there were more than three million soldiers out of the country.” As in earlier wars, the poor had filled the ranks of the military. Balbontin also denounced “The clergy of the different denominations ... [who] are ignorants, who meddle in political and civil business....” However, Balbontin spared the clergy of his beloved Catholic church of such scorn, “who have never meddled in anything.”

In his charming Nochebuena Cookbook, Ferdie Pacheco recalls the story of “Giuseppe’s Nochebuena Ark.” Whether the story is true or apocryphal makes little difference-either way, it gives us a glimpse at how immigrants viewed law enforcement during the prohibition era.

Giuseppe came from a long line of shipbuilders in Messina, Sicily and arrived in Ybor City just after the turn of the last century. He worked a small farm there with his family, earning a comfortable living by producing wine and cheese. Giuseppe would probably have passed quietly from the scene if Federal agents had not confiscated his wine-making equipment after prohibition took effect. Limited production of beer and wine was legal, but Giuseppe’s equipment would have allowed him to supply much of Ybor City with wine.

Pacheco wrote, “Well,” said Giuseppe, working himself up into a full Sicilian lather, ‘How is a man to eat his pasta without Chianti? How is a man to digest his food?”

The Federal agent added insult to injury by suggesting Giuseppe drink Coca-Cola with his pasta.

The episode sent Giuseppe into a whirlwind of secret activity. Before long, it became apparent to everyone in Ybor City that Giuseppe was building a large boat-an ark, inspired by the biblical Noah. Every day for a year, his family and neighbors heard the sounds of his hidden labors inside.

Tampa’s policemen were eager to make headlines with a successful bust, and a tip from one of Guiseppe’s neighbors aroused their interest. Nochebuena, or Christmas Eve, was a lively night in Ybor City. The police waited until then to raid the ark, as Giuseppe’s operation would surely be busy. When the police scaled the ark with ladders and clambered in, they found about a hundred Sicilian peasants at long holiday tables waiting for dinner. At the captain’s table sat Don Giuseppe with his proud family.

Giuseppe stood and raised his glass for a toast. He pronounced, “To America, where even the police snitch on each other!” The Sicilians all laughed, and then the old man toasted Nochebuena, Jesus Christ, and America. “And lastly,” he said, “to Coca-Cola, which in the absence of our beloved Chianti, will have to do.” Giuseppe’s guests passed wine glasses out to the policemen, all filled with Coke.

Thereafter, the police left Giuseppe and his ark alone, and the Italians had their Chianti. If things had gone differently, Giuseppe and his friends would have been hauled off to jail, their lives disrupted and their property confiscated. At what price sobriety? Little public good would have come from sending Giuseppe to prison.

As it turned out, few Tampans served jail time due to the enforcement of prohibition laws. Defiance of federal and state prohibition laws made Tampa one of the wettest spots in the country. One of the reasons prohibition failed so badly is illustrated by the brief career of Tampa Police Chief Frank M. Williams. A veteran of World War I and a performer in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, the flamboyant Williams was appointed police chief in February 1922. He sported a large handlebar mustache and top credentials as a federal prohibition agent. Williams conducted multiple raids on speakeasies and gambling halls over the next year and a half, but in the election of 1923, voters and
political opponents denounced Williams as being soft on bootleggers and gamblers. He lost his position as a result. A Tribune editorial stated at the time:

It was brought out in the campaign that there had been more open violation of the law during the past year than at any other time in the history of Tampa. It was shown that liquor selling was being permitted in all parts of the city, as well as other offenses.24

Obtaining simple whiskey and rum was not a problem. Inland, backwoods moonshiners sold their “alky cooked liquor,” while nocturnal smugglers in small boats ran rum into the city from various points in the Caribbean. Locals brewed beer and wine for themselves and resale.25 But a distribution network that could supply alcohol to a city as thirsty as Tampa needed muscle and organization, and that’s where the underworld came in.

Before prohibition, organized crime was limited to ethnic gangs in the inner cities. There were no dashing gangsters in fine clothes and expensive cars, and most Americans looked down upon criminals. Prohibition became the catalyst in the creation of a nationwide network of organized crime. It also elevated criminals to folk heroes, replacing cowboys as the noble American individualist.

Most Italian-Americans in Tampa and across America belonged to poor, working-class families. As relative latecomers to Ybor City’s cigar industry, they were often stuck in low-paying jobs. Despite hard, honest work, many Italians seemed to make little progress in finding better opportunities. The illegal liquor trade during prohibition gave some of the more daring ones a way out. Prohibition became a profitable godsend to the mafia and other organized crime groups.

Some went farther than Giuseppe and his ark, expanding into other illegal activities. The same disregard of the law that made illegal liquor acceptable encouraged a widespread acceptance of Bolita, a seemingly innocent yet illegal Cuban lottery. Few could have predicted how Bolita gambling would shape Tampa’s history. While gangs competed for “territory,” or markets for liquor, Bolita revenue became the ultimate prize. Especially after prohibition was dead and gone, gang wars raged over control of the numbers racket. The Italians ultimately came out on top of the Bolita game, and the illegal revenues decided local and state elections for decades. Organized crime in Tampa gave the city a bad reputation nationwide. The most famous exposure of Tampa’s corruption was brought by congressional hearings held in Tampa in 1950. The U.S. Senate Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce, known as the Kefauver Committee – from the name of its chairman, Tennessee Senator Estes Kefauver, brought state and national attention to Tampa’s gambling and organized crime.

While prohibition and then gambling criminalized many Tampans, it forced others underground – literally. Adela Gonzmart and Leo Stalnaker Jr. both recalled several tunnels running under Ybor City’s streets and buildings. Stalnaker said, “I think not only bootleggers, but the gamblers were using it, too.”26 One tunnel ran from the Las Novedades restaurant to the basement of the post office building across the street. According to some sources, a gambling parlor had been set up in the basement of the post office, the building later occupied by the Blue Ribbon grocery. The tunnel was discovered when the Blue Ribbon owner renovated the basement in 1994.27

**THE MAD DASH: TAMPA’S SPEAKEASIES**

Florida’s increasingly restrictive liquor laws caused the migration of some previously
legitimate businessmen into businesses often with shadier intentions. The Saloon Columbia was just one Tampa business that was feeling the effect of the laws. Casimiro Hernandez had expanded the Columbia’s fare to include some food, but the business still relied heavily on alcohol. Clearly by 1920 and the enactment of prohibition laws, it was time to leave the saloon business behind. Hernandez finally turned to his restaurateur neighbor, Manuel Garcia of “La Fonda,” and proposed a merger. Garcia was having some financial difficulties of his own and readily agreed. Thus, the Columbia acquired the second of what would become many dining rooms.

Most saloon owners did not have the means or luck that Casimiro had. Tampa’s saloon owners had to find new businesses overnight. Prohibition set off a collective mad dash on the part of tavern owners to re-open their establishments as restaurants. Like many others, saloon owner John Nelson re-opened his business as a restaurant shortly after prohibition went into effect. Another business named “The Tavern” was registered as a restaurant in 1925, but one is left to guess whether it specialized in food or drink.28

While prohibition ruined or disrupted some businesses, it made others rich. Entrepreneurs of all kinds — some legitimate entrepreneurs, others from the criminal underworld — cashed in on the insatiable demand for booze. As with today’s illegal drug trade, the potential for profit was too great to resist.29

Bootleggers, who were often legitimate liquor distributors before being put out of business, needed new outlets to sell their product. Aside from restaurants, soft drink stands and soda bars often replaced saloons. Soft drinks were popularized at the same time prohibition was gaining momentum, and often acted as a sweet substitute for something harder. The name “soft drink” was meant to stand in sharp contrast to “hard liquor” by marketers. It is one of history’s ironies that “soft drink” fountains and ice cream parlors often acted as fronts for bootlegging and retail liquor sales.

In 1919, on the eve of nationwide prohibition, Tampa supported only nine soda fountains. A year later, with the U.S. a dry nation, there were 49, a sufficient number to replace most of Tampa’s saloons. In 1924, 115 soft drink retailers populated the business community, peaking with 131 in 1930. It should come as little surprise that the number of soda fountains fell sharply immediately after prohibition was repealed. Within three years of repeal, half of the

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fountains closed, and the numbers continued to fall steadily. Billiards halls followed a similar pattern. Billiards began as a gentlemen’s game, but the prohibition years would give pool halls a seedy reputation as a haven for illegal liquor and gambling. On the first dry day in Florida, a saloon reopened as a pool hall, and others were expected to follow. Pre-prohibition numbers showed an average of between seven and nine establishments in Tampa in the years just before prohibition. That number ballooned to 22 in 1925 and 27 in 1932, only to drop to 11 just three years after repeal.

El Pasaje was not the only high-profile speakeasy in Tampa. The newly-expanded Columbia was notorious as well. According to the *Tampa Tribune*,

Men would gather in the bar to drink liquor in coffee cups, smoke fat cigars, and decide elections. Men would bring their wives and children to eat in the café. And some would bring their mistresses to drink in the private rooms upstairs. While entertaining young ladies upstairs one night, the Bambino [Babe Ruth] consumed two cases of beer by himself. On another visit Ruth reportedly downed 27 Café Diablos. The repeal of prohibition seemed so remote that the Columbia built walls around its beautiful marble bar. Rediscovered in 1980 when a restaurant employee knocked a panel of wood loose, the vintage bar is again being used for its original purpose.

Most speakeasies stood in sharp contrast to the opulent El Pasaje. The majority served the working class with much less pomp and more ordinary food. Illegal bars with names like Pete’s, the Lincoln Club, and Larry Ford’s did a roaring business in the Roaring Twenties. Prohibitionists claimed that national alcohol consumption had dropped since laws took effect, a trend hardly in evidence in the smoky rooms of Tampa’s restaurants and bars.

Profitable speakeasies had no trouble staying in business if they could avoid the attention of police. Legitimate businesses did not have it so easy, especially those at the top.

The repeal of prohibition seemed so remote that the Columbia built walls around its beautiful marble bar. Rediscovered in 1980 when a restaurant employee knocked a panel of wood loose, the vintage bar is again being used for its original purpose. Most speakeasies stood in sharp contrast to the opulent El Pasaje. The majority served the working class with much less pomp and more ordinary food. Illegal bars with names like Pete’s, the Lincoln Club, and Larry Ford’s did a roaring business in the Roaring Twenties. Prohibitionists claimed that national alcohol consumption had dropped since laws took effect, a trend hardly in evidence in the smoky rooms of Tampa’s restaurants and bars.

**The Fall of Fine Dining**

If prohibition fostered small and large-scale crime, it also threatened to wipe out a whole section of the restaurant industry. In 1931, a journalist wrote, “The art of noble dining... was assassinated under legal process on January 16, 1920, the day on which the prohibition laws became effective.” One of prohibition’s unforeseen consequences was the virtual elimination of fine dining from the restaurant market. From the 1880s until the 1920s, “fine dining” usually meant French cooking, but in Tampa, Spanish food was king.

Early in the century, hotels often featured the finest food in the city. The Tampa Bay Hotel, whose dining room epitomized the ideal of opulence, had menus written primarily in French and featured French sauces and cooking techniques to prepare their dishes. Other upscale restaurants like...
El Pasaje served up Spanish food in an elegant atmosphere. While Tampa's fine dining scene no doubt was very small and reserved for the elite, changes at the top of the socioeconomic ladder affected the development of Tampa's entire restaurant industry.

Fine dining and Old World cuisine relied upon wine as an ingredient and accompaniment. Prohibition seriously undermined the food preparation and presentation at the few elite hotels and restaurants in Tampa. Prevailing expectations by guests in expensive restaurants were that they would be “wined and dined,” and one was just not the same without the other. Prohibition drove up the price of legal cooking wine, a fermented grape juice that proud and experienced chefs must have frowned upon. After prohibition took effect, lavish Old World feasts for Tampa's elite could only happen behind closed doors. Demitasse cups replaced wine glasses and champagne flutes.

Since most hotels and restaurants depended upon beer, wine, and liquor sales for profits, prohibition forced them to close or compromise their quality. Even today, Bern's Steakhouse (arguably one of the finest restaurants in Florida and in the nation) depends heavily upon alcohol for profits. In 1981, Bern's lost $300,000 on food. If prohibition were to go in effect today, Bern's and Tampa's other high-priced restaurants would waste no time before scaling back operations or even closing their doors.36

Before 1920, Tampa's popular hotels served some of the most elaborate meals in Tampa. By the 1930s, their quality had irreversibly slipped. “The major hotels,” Ferdie Pacheco remembered, “the Tampa Terrace, Jefferson, Floridian, and such-featured hotel food, and in the thirties that was condemnation enough.”37 Tampa's hotels clung to the restaurant market long after, but prohibition sent them spiraling downward in quality and popularity. Even today, hotels depend upon tourists and high prices to turn a profit, or let a chain run its restaurant. It is commonplace today for hungry hotel patrons to be fed by a Waffle House, Denny's or Pizza Hut on the premises.

**Women on the Move**

In 1929, Casimiro Hernandez died, and his savvy son, Casimiro II, took over the Columbia. By 1935, he could see that prohibition had changed the restaurant industry. More women flocked to restaurants, and couples were more interested than ever in dining and dancing. Hernandez designed a new, elegant addition to the Columbia that would benefit from these recent trends. He took out a loan to pay for a palatial room that could accommodate an orchestra and dance floor. Adela Gonzmart remembered when her father returned home from the bank. “I heard him
tell my mother that Mr. Simpson had given him thirty-five thousand dollars on a handshake. He sounded very worried. Then I heard him say, 'Carmita, if this room is not a successful venture, I'll have to blow my brains out.' 

Casimiro need not have worried. With the addition of the elegant ballroom, the Columbia became a destination for couples looking for romantic ambience and dancing. Old-timers would recognize the old Saloon Columbia of 1905, but the Columbia’s ballroom could not have been more different. Advertisements for the Columbia and photographs of the time featured impeccably-dressed couples enjoying formal service, fine food, passionate flamenco music and the romantic ambience of their opulent dining room, a far cry from the pre-prohibition saloon atmosphere. 

During prohibition, women felt more comfortable eating out in Tampa’s alcohol-free restaurants. But, younger, more flamboyant woman of the 20s, the adventurous flappers, drank, danced and smoked in speakeasies. Both circumstances revealed changing traditions. With the great increase in the number of women customers, the restaurant industry blossomed in Tampa. Tampa’s 117 restaurants in 1919 jumped to 275 by 1925. Tampa’s population overall had grown, but increasing numbers of women customers also meant almost twice as many potential patrons.

Going out to eat at a restaurant rather than cooking a meal at home grew to be a favorite activity. Along with other societal changes in dating and marriage, eating out at restaurants was just one of the ways couples married and single spent more time together.

REPEAL OF THE "NOBLE EXPERIMENT"

By the time prohibition was repealed, one could honestly wonder who had voted
for enactment of the laws in the first place. Authorities were not interested in enforcing the measure. Prohibitionists were exhausted by the debate and disgusted by the crime lords who got rich from smuggled liquor. The government needed the tax revenue that alcohol imports, production and consumption would quickly generate. Drinkers, liquor manufacturers, and saloon owners simply wanted to get back to the pursuit of happiness. In fact, the only ones who wanted the “noble experiment” to continue were the gangsters, and who could blame them?

Beer became legal again in Florida on May 8, 1933, and the state scarcely took a look back. While Tampa’s drinkers sang “Happy Days are Here Again,” dozens of trains, trucks and ships converged on Tampa – Florida’s hardest-drinking city – bringing in 3.2% beer from New Orleans and Cuban beer prized for its higher alcohol content. The freighter Pawnee arrived just as the Beer Bill was signed, with enough beer to fill three railroad cars. In the months that followed, Hillsborough’s residents drank more beer than any other county in Florida: an average of 2½ bottles per person per day.

Drinkers and federal authorities alike could not wait for prohibition to be repealed. Although Florida did not do so until the end of 1934, the Federal government sent in personnel a year earlier to regulate the production and sale of liquor – still illegal under Florida state law, but now legal nationwide. The *Tampa Daily Times* explained further:

Uncle Sam isn’t fooled a bit by Florida’s bone-dryness. He knows there is liquor in Florida; he knows that more will be made and more will be imported, but the mere presence of the liquor doesn’t bother him at all. To him, Florida is the same as other states, and if Florida has a dry law, that’s Florida’s business. All that concerns him is seeing that the ‘Feds’ get their cuts on licenses and sales, and that terms of the new amendment [for repeal] were obeyed.

Since all of Tampa’s legitimate saloons had been out of business for over a decade, it took some time before they were ready to accommodate Tampa’s drinkers again. In the meantime, the city’s restaurants gladly filled the gap. Romano’s Restaurant offered a glass of Italian Claret free with each meal. Frank’s Delicatessen rushed to be the first downtown restaurant to offer beer the day it was legalized. Home brewing was so popular at the time that many ads offered refrigeration equipment, pumps, and ice. After repeal, restaurants reminded diners to order alcoholic beverages with their meals. A 1935 newspaper ad for Alhambra Restaurant went so far as to offer “3 special turkey dinners,” the only difference between them being their price and the drinks that were served “free” with them. The Columbia’s elegant addition of 1935 would not have been as successful without the one all-important ingredient – alcohol. A Columbia menu of 1938 listed “drinks that are mixed by men of pre-prohibition experience,” because many Columbia workers stayed throughout their entire career.

Post-prohibition changes were many. While public drinking increased, fine dining did not recover. Establishments selling alcohol would never go back to the controversial title of saloon. Tony Pizzo explained, “The idea of the saloon was so sordid that after [prohibition’s] repeal, new euphemisms had to be invented to describe the new watering places.” Years of negative
campaigning against saloons had taken their toll, and the industry would reinvent itself. What’s more, it was now acceptable for a woman to enjoy a drink with her meal in a restaurant.46

Tampa’s restaurant industry should have been soaring in profits with the reemergence of liquor sales, but economic downturn following the Florida Land Boom and then the Great Depression forced Tampa’s economy into a tailspin. Following the 1929 crash of the stock market and the Great Depression of the 1930s, it would take events equally as dramatic and life altering to lift the country and the economy out of its doldrums – it would take a second World War.

ENDNOTES

Andrew T. Huse has his M.A. in History from the University of South Florida and is employed as a researcher at the USF Libraries Florida Studies Center.

1. “A Taste of Spain,” Columbia’s 90th Anniversary booklet, Special Collections, University of South Florida Library.
2. Handwritten Tony Pizzo note, Special Collections, University of South Florida Library, Pizzo Collection.
10. Tampa Daily Times, 1/1/15.
11. Ibid., 10/2/15.
13. Ibid., 97.
14. Tampa Morning Tribune, 1/1/19.
15. Alduino, Noble Experiment, 81.
17. Tampa Morning Tribune, 1/1/19.
18. Tampa Daily Times, 1/1/19.
19. Tampa Morning Tribune, 1/1/19.
20. Tampa Daily Times, 1/1/19.
22. Ibid.
27. Ibid., 4/21/94.
28. Tampa Daily Times, 1/1/19.
30. All statistics from Poll’s City Directories.
31. Tampa Daily Times, 1/1/19.
32. Tampa Tribune, 10/5/80.
33. St. Petersburg Times, 10/10/80.
34. Tampa Tribune, 5/7/78.
37. Pacheco, Chronicles, 225.
39. La Gaceta ad, July 2, 1945 and April 4, 1940; Burgert Brothers Photographs, v1765 and v1771.
41. Tampa Morning Tribune, 5/7/33.
42. Tampa Daily Times, 12/4/33.
43. Ibid., 12/8/33.
44. Tampa Daily Times, 10/31/35; Special Collections, USF Library, Menu Collection.
45. Handwritten Tony Pizzo note, Special Collections, USF Library, Pizzo Collection.

Copies of newspaper advertisements used to illustrate this article are from editions of the Tampa Daily Times and Tampa Tribune courtesy Special Collections, University of South Florida Libraries.