



# The Rickey

## A Distinctly DC Cocktail

*A city with a heated climate – literally and politically speaking – the rickey is a cocktail to cool them all down. From a bourbon-based drink to one that utilizes gin, the simple ingredients leave much room for experimentation for DC's mixologists.*



Summertime in the nation's capital brings out all the jokes about DC's swamp-like qualities, so it's no wonder July was dubbed Rickey Month in the District.

"We're one of only two cities that has our own identified cocktail," notes Hunter Douglas, bar program manager of Hank's Oyster Bar and Hank's Cocktail Bar. "The rickey is up there on the pantheon of drinks that cocktail bartenders in DC really care about. Everyone has a good way that they like to make a rickey."

The first-ever rickey was sipped in the District and has remained a distinctly DC cocktail ever since. Shoomaker's Saloon is credited with mixing up the first one in the late 1800s – the local bar stood where the current JW Marriott is downtown. Named for Colonel Joe Rickey, the original libation mixed bourbon with lime juice and sparkling water – a simple enough drink that gained popularity with the substitution of gin for bourbon. These days, say "rickey" and the latter is what comes to mind for most.

The leap from bourbon to gin seems understandable, but the addition of lime foam, cumin or pickled lime? These days, the drink has been elevated with mixologists putting their own stamp on the classic. From more understated additions to some rather unexpected ingredients, bars are continuing to transform the drink further.

"The rickey, first and foremost, should be refreshing," Douglas continues. "It should be able to cool you down. It should be a light, refreshing drink while you're in 90-degree weather."

Douglas manages the menu and team behind the recently

relocated cocktail bar (now in Dupont Circle) from the Hank's brand. Among the nearly 40 cocktails on the menu, the Rick Rolled presents itself as a slightly fresher, sweeter upgrade to the classic. Aviation Gin infused with dehydrated cucumbers works as the base upon which lime and honey are layered on top. Shaken and strained over fresh ice and soda water, it's "light, refreshing and not overly sweet, and you get these cool herbal, floral notes from the citrus oil, honey and cucumber."

Just down the street from where the original was created, The Occidental's version from mixologist Frankie Jones adds earthy notes with coriander, turmeric and white pepper. The spices provide an unexpected flavor that plays well with the gin. The I Only Had A F.E.W. Rickeys is an off-menu item, and can be ordered as Jones had intended or customized to any guest's palate.

"I just ask people, 'What kind of flavor are you into?'" Jones says. "Literally, I can make a rickey with anything. Choose bourbon or gin. If you want a fruity rickey, we can do that, too."

The rickey is a blank canvas of sorts because of its simplicity.

"It leaves so much room for experimentation and the addition of flavors and textures, so it's quite fun to play around with," Jones adds.

His former stomping ground, 14th Street's The Gibson, has been in operation for a decade, and the team is well-versed in making the rickey.

The Gibson's creative director Julia Ebell notes, "We are so classically focused here. It's a place where you can come and get a really

The Sally's Rickey on the Row

Photo: Mynor Ventura



Gibson Rickey

Photo: courtesy of The Gibson



fantastic standard rickey or Colonel Joe anytime, year-round.”

The DC heat makes the rickey a bit of a necessity come summer months, but that doesn't stop the team from having a little bit of fun with it.

“We have an outdoor space, so rickies are a formula we love playing around [with] here,” Ebell says.

The speakeasy's latest iteration, made just in time for Rickey Month, was born of a multilayered conversation between staff members about everything from *Rick and Morty* to *Little Women* to realizing how much they “love putting pickled and preserved product into our drinks.” The Beth's Cure: A Pickle Rickey features Brooklyn gin, turmeric and pickled lime and ginger soda over ice and garnished with a pickled lime.

On why the drink remains as popular in the District as it has for so many years, Ebell notes, “It's kind of spirit(ual) air conditioning. DC is warm and muggy, and just having something you can drink outside without feeling like you're drowning yourself is fantastic. It's something that comes out of the place where it was born. It's as much DC as go-go is.”

From a non-DC resident's perspective, Pyramid Hotel Group Director of Restaurants Davide Crusoe points out that very few cities have a signature cocktail, and the draw comes from the rickey's history and unique DC character.

“[The rickey] will be forever and always on our [menus].”

He designed The Sally's cocktail menu, located in Dupont Circle's The Fairfax at Embassy Row, which includes the Rickey on the Row made with Hangar 1 vodka, kaffir lime, Plymouth gin, The King's Ginger, lime foam and egg. The cocktail is intended to be “a fun play with a lot of different things that we think are cool.”

Of all the elevated versions and plays on the original, Crusoe says, “It sort of morphed over time with people's palates. The rickey has grown up with time and it's stayed synonymous with the city.”

For some bars, the key rickey ingredient comes from an unexpected source: bubbles. Micah Wilder, mixologist and partner at Zeppelin, explains how the Shaw newcomer's program is focused on Japanese spirits and bubbles.

“The Toki Highball is a really great example of a whiskey rickey: just super classic and simple,” he says of his rickey concoction.

Zeppelin is able to increase the fizziness of the cocktail by nearly freezing it using a special machine, which helps retain carbonation.

“The way the temperatures are working with the machine, it's just really amazing.”

Made with Roku Gin, Italicus Rosolio Bergamot Liqueur, grapefruit, lemon and baller bubbles, Zeppelin's Kabuki Springs cocktail is “a little bit more of a signature gin rickey [that tastes] like you're drinking this Japanese soda.”

Wilder adds, “It's super simple and good, and really what it's supposed to be.”

No matter how it's shaken, stirred or garnished, Jones says the rickey is still “the perfect cocktail for our weather.”

“It's just this refreshing thing that you can drink fast and it cools you down a bit,” he elaborates. “And if you have enough of them, it'll probably warm you up but you won't care about the humidity anymore.”

Despite differences (political or not), DC denizens can all agree on one thing: the rickey belongs to the District.

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**The Gibson:** 2009 14th St. NW, DC; [www.thegibsondc.com](http://www.thegibsondc.com)

**Hank's Cocktail Bar:** 1624 Q St. NW, DC; [www.hankscoktailbar.com](http://www.hankscoktailbar.com)

**The Occidental:** 1475 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, DC; [www.occidentaldc.com](http://www.occidentaldc.com)

**The Sally:** 2100 Massachusetts Ave. NW, DC; [www.thesallydc.com](http://www.thesallydc.com)

**Zeppelin:** 1544 9th St. NW, DC; [www.zeppelindc.com](http://www.zeppelindc.com)

Zeppelin's Toki Highballer

Photo: courtesy of Zeppelin

