The Origins of the Singapore Sling; Some Facts, Some Fancies.

Premise: The Singapore Sling was a drink created in or around 1915 in the Long Bar of the Raffles Hotel probably under the original name of the Straits Sling, renamed commonly and then officially the Singapore Sling some time between 1922 and 1930. Raffles no longer has the original recipe, a fact recorded by the hotel biographer and by the Communications Department of Raffles Hotel. The name “Straits Sling” dropped from common usage sometime around 1936.

Other than the recipe they currently use to produce the drink in pre-mixed form, the only vintage recipe displayed there is one of a bar patron that dates from approximately 21 years after the drink’s purported creation. The earliest published recipe yet located under the name “Straits Sling” was in 1922*, 7 years after the drink’s recorded creation. The earliest published recipe yet located under the name “Singapore Sling” was in 1930** 15 years after the original introduction of the drink.

A great number of recipes that have circulated since the drink’s purported creation date have varied widely on several points: • The inclusion or exclusion of water, sparkling or still. • The inclusion or exclusion of Benedictine • The inclusion or exclusion of pineapple juice and other fruit juices • The type of so-called cherry brandy.

Several Researchers, Chroniclers, and Barmasters have expressed theories about which recipe was most likely to have been the “original” one based on supporting interviews and documents.

Of the 1922 version* as written up by Robert Vermeire in Cocktails and How to Mix Them (Jenkins 1922) as the Straits Sling, he merely refers to it thusly:

(*)This well-known Singapore drink, thoroughly ice and shaken, contains:
2 dashes of Orange Bitters, 2 dashes of Angostura Bitters,
The juice of half a lemon
1/8 gill of Bénédictine.
1/8 gill of Dry Cherry Brandy
1/2 gill of Gin.
Pour into a tumbler and fill up with cold soda water.
Harry Craddock in the *Savoy Cocktail Book* (Constable 1930) listed the drink under both titles (The Straits Sling** served in a punch-fashion for six people and what appears to be the first publication of the Singapore Sling, so-called**) without commentary:

(**) Singapore Sling  
The Juice of 1/4 lemon  
1/4 Dry Gin  
1/2 Cherry Brandy  
Shake well and strain into medium size glass, and fill with soda water.  
Add 1 lump of ice.

(**) Straits Sling (6 people)  
Place in a shaker 4 glasses of gin, 1 glass of Benedictine, 1 glass of Cherry Brandy, the juice of 2 Lemons, a teaspoonful of Angostura Bitters and one of Orange Bitters.  
Shake sufficiently and serve in large glasses, filling up with Soda Water.

In 1939 Charles Baker gave the recipe he encountered in 1926, and believed, to be original thusly:

The original formula is 1/3 each of dry gin, cherry brandy and Benedictine; shake it for a moment, or stir it in a bar glass. With 2 fairly large lumps of ice to chill. Turn into a small 10 oz highball glass with one lump of ice left in and fill up to individual taste with chilled club soda. Garnish with the spiral peel of 1 green lime. In other ports in the Orient drinkers often use C & C ginger ale instead of soda, or even stone bottle ginger beer.

The first description of the look of the drink so-far located was in *Esquire Magazine* in 1936 —which published an unidentified reader’s description as

“...deep red in color.”

The current-day Raffles Hotel offers a recipe which they describe, in public literature they produce, this way:

Originally the Singapore Sling was meant as a woman’s drink, hence the attractive pink colour. Today, it is very definitely a drink enjoyed by all, without which any visit to Raffles Hotel is incomplete.
Recipe
30ml Gin
15ml Cherry Brandy
120ml Pineapple Juice
15ml Lime Juice
7.5ml Cointreau
7.5ml Dom Benedictine
10ml Grenadine
A Dash of Angostura Bitters
Garnish with a slice of Pineapple and Cherry

Dale DeGroff asserts the following:

The following is the only and real recipe for the Singapore Sling (also the best
tasting). I have a fax from the head bartender sent to me at Rainbow several years ago
with their original recipe...all the others whether they are in books or not are wrong
AND they don’t taste good! Everyone quotes Bakers version and it is wrong and
doesn’t taste good...
3 oz. pineapple juice
1 1/2 oz. gin
1/4 oz. lime juice
1/2 oz. Cherry Heering
1/4 oz. Benedictine
1/4 oz. Cointreau
1 dash Angostura bitters
Shake with ice, strain. Top with a little soda water. Garnish with a flag.

There are many more recipes and theories, but the ones herein listed are
either directly from the source, are of earliest known publication, or
directly assert to be the original recipe.

Regarding Slings historically: Several slings were prevalent from before
1862, and the first recorded definition of a Sling, circa 1675, quoted in
the 2 volume Beverages Past & Present (Edward R. Emerson, G. P.
Putnam’s Sons, 1908) as follows:

Long-sup or sling was one half water and one half rum with sugar in it to taste.

No sling recipe yet found from 1675-1921 contained soda water. Man-
made soda water was invented in 1767, however, and references to the use
of soda water in Slings of the period DO exist. Drinks of the World (James
Mew & John Ashton - Scribners 1892) defines hot Slings and goes on, in
a footnote, to add a reference to a definition given by The Slang
Dictionary (John Camden Hotten, Chatto & Windus, 1874) as follows::
The Slang Dictionary...defines Sling as a drink peculiar to Americans, generally composed of gin, soda-water, ice and slices of lemon.

Cooling Cups and Dainty Drinks (William Terrington, Routledge, 1869) gives a recipe for gin & whisky Slings which does NOT call for water of any sort but calls for the Sling to be served in a “soda-water glass”.

No sling recipe yet found from 1675-1921 contained pineapple or fruit or fruit juice other than lemon or lime. In that same period, no references to such fruit in Slings has been found, though such fruits were found in Juleps, punches, etc. in both recipes & references.

Here follow my “from-the-ground-up” thoughts:

There was an approximate six year period where there was some confusion over the dual name of the drink, 1930-1936.

The reason for the name change seems to deal with embedding the attribution of the drink in its title, the new one of which rolls off the tongue better as well.

The original secret recipe has not yet been confirmed by documentation.

There is a difference between the origin of a drink and its heyday.

While the earliest recipe may or may not be the correct recipe, in style it is in much closer keeping with the Slings which preceded it than the other recipes offered up as “original”. It has been shown that all ingredients in the 1922 recipe were correct and accepted for that drink type up to that time. It has been shown that other ingredients offered as original had not previously been used in Slings before (or shortly after) that time frame.

The flavor of the 1922 version as specified with true cherry brandy eau de vie is much closer to the form of Sling being mixed at the time, a bottled example of which would be Pimm’s. Raffles was a British hotel in British Colonial Singapore. Pimm’s Cup, Gin & Tonic and refreshers of this sort would appear to be more to the taste of the specified drinker at that time. The use of pineapples and other fruits in drinks seem more connected to the faux-Polynesian drink craze of the mid 1930s, and that drink type would become popular enough to either radically or
incrementally change the recipes and drinking habits of other tropical resort-type areas shortly thereafter as well. This would surely include Singapore.

The color of the original Straits Sling has not been documented contemporary to its creation. Later descriptions of the color differ from one another markedly. Some recipes turn out deep red, others amber, and still others orange & light pink. The 1922 recipe with the 2 bitters is light pink.

The Charles Baker claim to an original recipe fails to approach anything theretofore Sling-like. It is also a particularly unmemorable recipe for a drink so well remembered.

The Dale DeGroff claim for an original recipe seems to have been based on what he was told by the modern Raffles - albeit several years ago. If Raffles still had the recipe to give him, why then, scant years later, do they use a different recipe (documented on page 3)? Furthermore, both Raffles’ biographer and the hotel itself later admitted not having the original recipe at all. I believe this and the other aforementioned ingredient problems with this and similar current recipes eliminate it from contention as THE original. I must also note, I know Dale, and I believe that his greatest concern is not the historical accuracy of a drink but that the flavor be excellent by his exacting standards and those of his clientele. His version of the Singapore Sling is certainly delicious —just not the first one.

Sometime in the past, not only did this drink’s name change, but its composition as well. Perhaps beginning with a misapprehension about the kind of water and the term cherry brandy. These were not the only changes, however. Over time the Singapore Sling transcended its category - and the Sling category today would be dead without it. No, the Singapore Sling ceased to be a Sling a long time ago. Partially mutations based on the number of years and hands through which the drink went, partially because eventually it became unique and unto itself. It became a Personality Drink. Most of us grew up with a Singapore Sling which was fruity, red, sweet, and festive. Sometimes the true origins of a thing can seem to undermine the underpinnings of what we thought we knew… a bit of our lives’ very foundations. Some passion is to be expected. And sometimes tastes just change.

—Ted Haigh, Dr Cocktail 2/25/02