

TRAVEL

YUKON

PINKIES UP, toes down, for Dawson City's top attraction

The Sourtoe Cocktail — garnished with a mummified toe — nears milestone

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Who will drink the 100,000th toe?

That's the question the Downtown Hotel in Dawson City, Yukon, is asking this summer as it prepares to pour and serve its signature Sourtoe Cocktail inside the Sourdough Saloon.

Located on a street corner in the frontier town, where dirt roads and wooden boardwalks still rule, the red-painted wood building with white trim looks like part of a Western movie set. Step inside the dim saloon and you'll be transported back to a time when gold fever gripped miners and whisky warmed them up.

For those not in the know, the cocktail in question is a shot of alcohol that's at least 80 proof, most commonly Yukon Jack whisky, with a mummified human toe plunked into the glass.

The oddity was created after resident Captain Dick Stevenson found an amputated toe bobbing in a Mason jar filled with overproof rum inside an old prospecting cabin. The toe belonged to gold-miner-cum-bootlegger Louie Liken, who had lost his right big piggy to frostbite sometime during Prohibition.

Stevenson, inspired by the Robert W. Service poem "The Ballad of the Ice-Worm Cocktail," decided to make his own special libation using Liken's preserved toe. The Sourtoe Cocktail — a play on the word "Sourdough," the nickname for people who have survived a Yukon winter — was originally served by Stevenson himself inside the bar at the Eldorado Hotel. The drink moved to the Downtown Hotel in 1995 after he retired.

In the half-century since its invention in 1973, nearly 100,000 courageous drinkers have downed the concoction to become members of the Sourtoe Cocktail Club, earning a certificate in the process. Served nightly between 9 and 11 p.m. at the Sourdough Saloon, the toe garnish costs \$10, plus the price of the booze.

Currently, the bar is averaging 70 Sourtoes a day. At this pace, Terry Lee, the "toe master" who initiates new members, predicts the

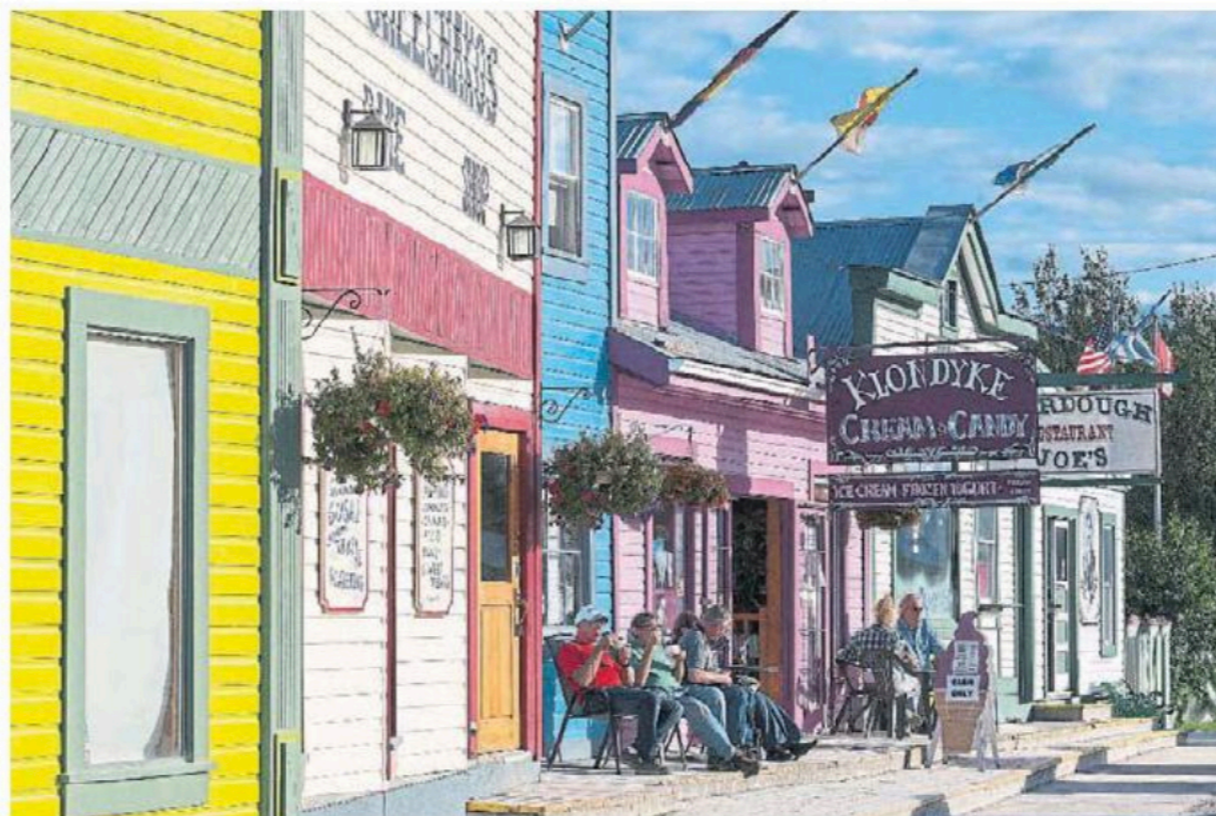


KLONDIKE VISITORS ASSOCIATION

Since the Sourtoe Cocktail's invention in 1973, nearly 100,000 people have tried it.

A view of downtown Dawson City, Yukon. For some locals, the toe symbolizes the town's quirky personality.

ENVIRO FOTO



"Toe master" Terry Lee filling in a Sourtoe Cocktail certificate for a new initiate.

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100,000th pair of lips will touch the necrotized digit sometime in mid-July.

The lucky drinker will even get to do the shot with one of Stevenson's

moved to the Yukon from Newfoundland in 2012.

As a newcomer, she felt it was important to do the toe in order to fully immerse in the small community — similar to how the Rock's new arrivals, called "come from aways" or CFAs, get "screeched in" with a codfish kiss and a shot of local rum.

"It's a ritualized way to embrace and welcome people with laughter and joy," says Sherrard.

"It lets people engage with the community they're in and feel they're part of it."

George McConkey has been living in Dawson City since 1976 and has yet to do the toe.

"I just don't give it much thought," he says.

Still, despite his lack of membership in the storied club, McConkey finds the whole thing fascinating. "It's kind of genius, actually," he says.

"Old Dick Stevenson, he came up with something that caught on around the world."

Even if some locals can't quite wrap their heads around the toe, most Dawson citizens have embraced the Sourtoe Cocktail as the town's defining attraction.

"It's a point of pride," says Adam Gerle, vice-president of marketing for Northern Vision Development, which owns the Downtown Hotel, noting how it's put Dawson City on the map.

"There are detractors who say the Yukon is full of stunning natural beauty and culture and art, so what's up with the crazy toe getting all the attention?" Gerle concedes.

"Well, many Canadian destinations have wilderness and Northern Lights, but the toe is unique. It's different. It cuts through the clutter."

In other words, there's only one Sourtoe Cocktail.

Those who travel nearly all the way to the Arctic Circle to try the drink may lose their stomach over it, but they won't soon forget the moment their lips touched that gnarly toe.

WRITER LISA KADANE TRAVELLED AS A GUEST OF VISIT DAWSON CITY AND TRAVEL YUKON, WHICH DID NOT REVIEW OR APPROVE THIS ARTICLE.

toes — he willed all 10 of them to the Sourdough Saloon when he passed away in 2019.

Though it sounds off-putting, the ritual has become a global sensation, with tourists journeying from as far away as Mongolia to try it. The Downtown Hotel is even hoping to entice a celebrity like Ryan Reynolds to come and do the 100,000th honour, perhaps pairing the toe with his Aviation Gin.

Dawson City resident Joanne Sherrard isn't surprised the Downtown Hotel is making such a fuss over the event. "The toe symbolizes the quirky, out-there personality of Dawson," says Sherrard, who