

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

A Confederacy of Bunches

As an adult and fugitive philatelist, having escaped that avocation of my youth with just a *soupeçon* of stamp collecting knowledge, I still remembered enough to have observed the unusual connection between German postage and homemade soup preparation in the Crescent City.

I recollected that *Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, or the Federal Republic of Germany, was on my German stamps after World War II. That was because the *Deutsche Bundespost* (German federal post office) was created in 1947 as a successor to the *Reichspost* (German imperial post office). *Bund*, I learned, is the German word for bond, federation or confederacy. Even the very popular bundt cake is derived from the German *bundkuchen*. The *bund* in *bundkuchen* originated either due to the fact that a *bund* is a gathering of people (federation) or from the practice of bundling the dough around the cake pan's center hole. (In both German words, the final *d* is pronounced like a *t*.)

So what does all this have to do with soup preparation?

It has to do with another type of bundling (one of vegetables) called the "soup bunch," which appears to be a compound loan word, or calque, of the German *suppenbund*. The word "bunch" has an entirely separate etymology. A modern-day *Deutsche* "soup federation" might consist of *1-2 möhren, 1 lauch und 1 scheibe sellerie - gewürfelt*. That's 1-2 carrots, 1 leek and a slice of celery – diced. In one recipe, the *zweibel (gehackt)*, or chopped onion was added later.

But the "*Picayune Creole Cookbook*" (first published in 1901) lists a different set of contents for a New Orleans "soup bunch": "pieces of cabbage, a turnip or two, carrots, parsley, celery and onion." It goes on to say, "Many Creole cooks add garlic and cloves, thyme, bay leaf and allspice." The "soup bunch" is not to be confused, although it often is, with an "herb bouquet", which is "made of a spray of parsley, a sprig of thyme, celery and bay leaf. These are tied together ..."

The contents of a modern-day “soup bunch” found in various New Orleans groceries are quite similar to those used over a century ago: cabbage, turnip, carrots, parsley, celery and onion (with perhaps the addition of bell pepper and corn). They are packaged in-house and (by offering just the amount needed for the soup pot) save the shopper the expense of buying all the ingredients individually. The “soup bunch” contents are simply the essential starting ingredients of numerous local soup favorites, but especially good old-fashioned homemade vegetable beef soup. Other important components are tomato paste (and canned tomatoes), beef brisket (or other delicious slow-to-cook, less expensive cuts of soup meat) and oftentimes a little vermicelli. Oh, and all that good Creole seasoning.

Vegetable beef soup is nothing more than a soup version of the *pot-au-feu* (“pot on the fire”), a French beef stew. The “*Picayune Creole Cookbook*” offers its *Pot-Au-Feu À La Créole*, described as truly delicious, savory and delicately odorous. The best cut for this is from the round lower end of the beef.” The recommended “soup bunch” for this recipe consists of tomatoes, turnips, onions, carrots, parsnip, parsley, Irish potatoes and a sprig of cabbage. Added to this is the “bouquet” of salt and pepper, garlic, allspice, celery leaves, red pepper and cloves. Célestine Eustis in her 1903 “Cooking in Old Créole Days” offers a *pot-au-feu* recipe, as well, given to her “by an old colored cook who was brought up in James Madison’s family”.

In “Hoppin’ John’s Lowcountry Cooking” by J. M. Taylor, the author calls the “soup bunch” a *bouquet*, but it is actually similar to the Creole variety. He states, “the bunch is an elaborate *bouquet garni* of mixed vegetables and aromatics for the soup pot. A typical soup bunch includes a carrot, celery, thyme, cabbage, and turnips with their greens.” Célestine Eustis also mentions the use of a “bouquet”. She writes, “flavor with pepper, red or black, a laurel leaf, or put in a bouquet of aromatic herbs for a few minutes, having tied it with a thread so as to pull it out.”

In Savannah, Georgia, the city’s open-air market, where white and black vendors had stands purveying sugarcane and palmetto fronds, fresh squab, fish, poultry and turtle eggs, there were “soup bunches” of carrots, celery and turnips selling for a nickel. Charleston’s marketplace put out “a ‘soup bunch’ of fresh collards, parsnips, rutabagas, turnips, red and white cabbage, onions, sprigs of thyme, carrots, and celery to use in soup preparation,” writes Marcie Cohen Ferris. Charles H. Gibson’s “Maryland and Virginia Cook Book” (December 1894) states, “The soup bunch at market is generally a very good distribution of vegetables.” It is perhaps the first convenience food (commercially prepared and packaged food designed for ease of consumption).

In Laurel, Mississippi, an entry in the July 8, 1909, issue of the *Laurel Ledger* mentions a recipe for "Vegetable Soup—One-half can tomatoes, cupful of navy beans, one onion, one soup bunch."

In the Crescent City, all good soul food chefs use a "soup bunch" to prepare their soups. "Soup bunch" in the South Carolina Lowcountry, says Regina Saunders, "the black folks know what it is ... It's got rutabaga and celery, carrots, collard greens."

Also in that area of the South, there is the "traditional Charleston soup bunch. This is a bouquet of herbs and vegetables tied up with string, consisting of parsley, a slice or two of squash, some spring onions or small leeks, a few bay leaves on the stem, and a small parsnip. It is removed when the stock is strained." So states W. W. Weaver in "Country Scrapple". During the Civil War Isaac J. Levy described the Charleston soup bunch as a Sabbath and Passover soup, made from bunches of vegetables, sold to this day in Charleston markets. The "soup bunch" varies seasonably but always includes onions, carrots, and turnips. Sometimes rutabagas, cabbage, celery, collards, tomatoes or cauliflower are added. At Jewish tables, matzo balls are added.

Marcie Cohen Ferris, in "Matzoh Ball Gumbo: Culinary Tales of the Jewish South" (2010), relates heartwarming tales of how Southern and Jewish cultures have melded at the Southern dinner tables. In New Orleans she heard people calling matzo balls "dumplings", or *kneidlach*. Sometimes the dumplings were made as they were in Alsace-Lorraine and Germany, the origins of many of the early Louisiana Jews. Other times they were served Creole-style, seasoned with salt and pepper, parsley, scallions and sometimes red pepper. Ferris describes the special family nature of the tradition, "In New Orleans, cuisine is so strong that they can't withstand the influence of gumbo, even now. Lately, people are making Creole matzo balls because they speak of the experiences of the flood. It is a way of keeping New Orleans in our hearts, especially at Passover."

According to "The Joy of Cooking", soups were the essence of the very first restaurants: "If any food seems inherently calming, and even consoling, it is soup. Soup feels good when the weather gets cold. It restores our spirit and our vigor. (The first 'restaurants' were eighteenth-century Parisian establishments that served rich soups to restore, or *restaureur*, the hungry citizenry.) In the old days, when a 'soup bunch' of vegetables and herbs cost a nickel and bones were free from the butcher, American home cooks routinely made soups from scratch."

Alternatively called a "soup pack" by some, the oldest written mention of the phrase appears to be in an 1883 article from the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* entitled "Hermann and the Hucksters". Hermann approaches

an “ample matron” at a “vegetable dealer’s stall” and asks, “How do sell these soup bunches?” “After picking up a peck measure full of herbs,” Hermann received her reply. “Two cents a piece,” she said. Things were a lot cheaper back then.

In the 1898 book, “The Lost City,” by Joseph E. Badger, Jr. (a fantastic tale of a flying machine and the lost city of the Aztecs), the character Waldo says, “good luck for one soup-bunch”.

The term “soup bunch” is obviously much older than these examples. Writing in *Louisiana Cultural Vistas* in Fall 1997, Sally Reeves describes the New Orleans French Market through the ages. “In 1821 Jean Jacques Audubon wrote in his journal: ‘passing through the stalls we were surrounded by Negroes, mulattos, and quadroons, some talking French, others a patois of Spanish and French, others a mixture of French and English ...’ A century later *The New Yorker* noted the ‘Sicilian’ flavor of the produce stalls where a ‘huge fat man daintily tied up’ aromatic vegetables for soup bunch amid cascades of fruit and herbs, garlic and vegetables.” The “soup bunch” has certainly been part of the New Orleans market experience for quite some time.

Across the street from the French Market toiled the consummate German cook, Madame Begué. Née Elizabeth Kettenring in Bavaria, she may have had a part in bringing the *suppenbund* to the Crescent City. She died in 1906. In “Mme. Begué and her Recipes – Old Creole Cookery”, her “bouquet” is tied up “in a bit of cloth” and includes “a small quantity of thyme, sweet bay leaves and parsley”.

Madame Begué’s little cookbook (1900) was published by the Southern Pacific Railroad’s Sunset Limited for only 25 cents. And New Orleans’ special confederacy of soup vegetables (like the city in which it is so at home) is truly a fine bunch of ingredients.

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