

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Coffee With Chicory

On the Ides of September, 1805, Admiral Lord Nelson set sail for Trafalgar and his destiny. By that time, his successes and those of Lloyd's of London were intricately interwoven. The fortunes of each revolved around Britain's safety and prosperity in connection with its command of the sea.

The merchants of Lloyd's, as insurers, were keenly aware of the brave risks which Nelson and the Navy took to protect England's maritime trade. They also raised money to help the wounded and bereaved after each of the major naval battles. And after the Battle of the Nile in 1798, they also donated a silver dinner service to Nelson "as a small token of their gratitude".

Lloyd's began as Edward Lloyd's coffeehouse around 1688 in Tower Street, London. There sailors, merchants and ship owners gathered for coffee and reliable shipping news. This led to insurance deals amongst themselves. How did it all start?

It is thought that the renowned Persian philosopher and physician Razi (c. 800 AD) may have been the first writer to mention the coffee plant (native to the similarly sounding Kaffa district of Ethiopia), calling it *bunchum*. In Ethiopia, coffee was not first brewed to drink. Monks digested the beans whole to aid in wakefulness during prayers. But within a few centuries, *al-qahwa* was a beverage widely available in the Arab and Persian world. Muslim trade with Venice had brought the custom into southern Europe by the early Renaissance, and the British and Dutch East India companies had brought coffee to England by the 16th Century. The Dutch dominated the coffee trade in Mocha (Yemen) in 1696, and introduced the precious crop in their colony of Java, providing yet another nickname.

Lloyd's was not the first coffeehouse in England. A Turkish Jew named Jacob (or Jacobs) opened the first one in 1650, and in twenty-years there were several thousand operating in the British Isles. Even

before Lloyd's opened their doors, there was an anonymous "Women's Petition Against Coffee" published in London in 1674:

"The Excessive Use of that Newfangled, Abominable, Heathenish Liquor called *Coffee*, which Ruffling Nature of her Choicest *Treasures* and Drying Up the *Radical Moisture*, has so Eunucht our Husbands ..."

The distraught Englishwomen were afraid that their "Gallants" would "become impotent" and that the "continual sipping of this pitiful drink" would make the poor dears more adept at "talkativeness" than their wives.

As with other tropical commodities, coffee did not become widely available outside of wealthier domains until the establishment of slave-powered coffee plantations in the Americas. The French established their plantations in the West Indies during the late 1600s and early 1700s. Successfully cultivated in Martinique about 1720, coffee was brought by the French to their new colonies. This included New Orleans, founded only two years before. Haiti soon followed and, from the 1730s until the slave uprising in 1791, it supplied fifty percent of the world's coffee and forty percent of its sugar.

After all that tea unpleasantness in Boston Harbor (and his visits to France), Thomas Jefferson called coffee "the favorite drink of the civilized world". By 1815, the word "café" was beginning to replace coffeehouse, in large part due to the young nation's acquisition of New Orleans with the Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase. So what brought about the New Orleans' famous pairing of coffee with chicory?

Chicory grows in Europe and North America as a wild perennial plant with blue, lavender, or some times white flowers. In the United States and France it is known as curly endive (*Chicorium endivia*). Endives are used for salad, but it is the chicory root that is used as a coffee additive.

The chicory plant has been cited in the earliest recorded literature. Horace touts it as a major component of his diet when he writes, "*Me pascant olivae, me chicorea, me malvae*" ("As for me, olives, endives and mallows provide sustenance"). But how New Orleanians came to drink chicory with their coffee had much more to do with Admiral Horatio Nelson and Union General-in-Chief Winfield Scott.

Lord Nelson's dominance of the sea during the Napoleonic wars impeded the importation of coffee into France, so chicory often appeared as either a coffee substitute or an adulterant. The same thing happened in the Crescent City during the Civil War. The Union blockade of the port of New Orleans (implemented as part of General Scott's Anaconda Plan) led to the sudden scarcity of coffee and other commodities. So just as the French did, New Orleanians added ground, roasted chicory root to stretch their limited stock of imported coffee. The chicory, grown locally as a wartime measure, moved from

the realm of temporary fix due to scarcity to the embracing of the chicory blend on a permanent basis. Its smooth texture and comforting caramel-like flavoring helped coffee with chicory become and continue to be a local favorite. The New Orleans City Guide compiled by the Federal Writers Project of the WPA informs us that "Creole coffee is a mixture of pure coffee and about twenty per cent chicory".

Coffee has always been serious business in New Orleans, being a major port for Latin American trade. But besides the stacks of sacks on the port docks, locals have always enjoyed this stimulating brew. Coffee shops are not just a modern phenomenon in this Starbucks age. Even in the decade before the Civil War, there were over 500 coffeehouses in the city.

Today, it is estimated that one-third of all coffee imported into North America makes a stop through the port of New Orleans. Folgers Coffee (now a division of jelly giant, the J. M. Smucker Company) operates the world's largest coffee roasting plant a few miles down the Mississippi from the French Quarter. Some dozen local roasters, including Folgers, import an average 250,000 to 300,000 tons of coffee beans annually through the port. So important is coffee to New Orleans, President Bush visited Folgers' plant in September 2005 right after Katrina. Folgers had sales in 2007 totaling \$1.6 billion. Local roasters prepare products for some twenty local and national brands.

Many like their coffee black (like the young girl in "Airplane"), but *Café au lait* is an immensely popular New Orleans favorite. This custom began in Vienna when the military obtained huge quantities of beans from the defeated Turkish army and then set up shop. Adding milk and sugar to coffee is believed to have originated with a Polish-born army officer named Franciszek Kulczycki, who opened the first Viennese coffee establishment.

Café Du Monde (CDM) coffee (since 1862) is traditionally served *au lait* (mixed with half coffee and half hot milk) and *beignets*. One can even get mocha added there now. William B. Reilly founded the company that produces CDM Coffee, believing New Orleans would be an ideal place to set up a coffee roasting and grinding business. The company that began in 1902 now produces not only coffee, but a vast array of products.

Morning Call was the other great French Quarter coffee stand on Decatur, where debs and dates or parents (with kids in their pajamas) could drive up for beignets and coffee. Founded by Joseph Jurisich in 1870, it moved to Jefferson Parish in 1974.

Community Dark Roast Coffee (owned by the Saurage family) is popular with New Orleanians, and today there are CC's throughout the city. From 1957 to 1961, Jim Henson made lightning-fast humorous

television commercials with his muppet-like characters for Community and other coffee companies. They were a huge success and bolstered his career.

In 1890, French Market Coffee & Chicory was first roasted, blended and packaged in New Orleans. A century ago, there were some twenty-four coffee dealers in the city, including Merchants Coffee Company. Merchants merged in 1986 into the American Coffee Company (at 800 Magazine Street since 1941), which produces French Market and Union Coffee. New Orleans author and food critic Tom Fitzmorris recommends Union Coffee and Chicory as his preference.

There are so many favorite coffee brands and shops in the New Orleans area. Phyllis Jordan opened the first PJ's on Maple Street in 1978 and others followed. There's Rue de la Course, Royal Blend, Croissant d'Or, Café Beignet, VooBrew and Nola Beans, to name just a few.

The incredible olfactory delight of roasting coffee is the best form of aromatherapy in New Orleans, and it is the memory of that extraordinary smell that now compels me to take a coffee break.

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