

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Jambalaya on the Bayou

"Jambalaya, a-crawfish pie and-a filé gumbo
'Cause tonight I'm gonna see my ma cher a mio
Pick guitar, fill fruit jar and be gay-oh
Son of a gun, we" have big fun on the bayou."

A musician who played and recorded with Governor Jimmie Davis of Louisiana and whose hillbilly boogie style greatly influenced Jerry Lee Lewis of Ferriday, Louisiana (among many other recording giants), co-wrote the above lyrics with the famous Hank Williams. His name was Aubrey Wilson "Moon" Mullican. Hank's "Jambalaya" was a big hit in 1952, as well as the name of a popular Creole dish, but it seems to have made its way into the English language (according to the "Oxford English Dictionary") only eighty years before.

The "OED" states that the "New Orleans Times" featured an article on June 28, 1872, where jambalaya was first mentioned. The story tells of "those who brought victuals, such as gumbo, jambalaya, etc." and they "all began eating and drinking". The first recipe for jambalaya in a New Orleans cookbook was in Lafcadio Hearn's "*La Cuisine Creole*" in 1885 where he wrote of "Jambalaya of fowls and rice". He believed it was of American Indian origin. Madame Begué certified her recipe for "jambalaya of rice and shrimps" in 1900; and the "Picayune's Creole Cook Book" of 1901 has recipes for jambalayas of crab and shrimp, a Creole Jambalaya as well as "au Congri" (with ham, onions and Cowpeas), and a "French Pilou". Célestine Eustis, born in Paris of New Orleans parents, included a "*Jumballaya a la Creole*" and a "*St. Domingo Congris*" in her "Cooking in Old Creole Days" (1904).

But the dish made a much earlier appearance in the "Gulf City Cook Book", published in 1878 by the Ladies of St. Francis Street Methodist Episcopal Church, South Mobile, Alabama. It was listed as "*Jam Bolaya*". With such a strong Protestant background, this group would hardly appear to be an authority on such a representative recipe of Creole cuisine (and one with such a Louisiana *cachet*). But one must remember that the first Creoles were born over a decade before New Orleans was founded, and in Mobile!

So "Creole babies with flashing eyes" may have been in Mobile before New Orleans. Actually these eyes appeared in song way before "Way Down Yonder in New Orleans". New Orleans virtuoso composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829-1869) penned "*Ojos Criollos*" (Creole Eyes), which he labeled a "*Danse Cubaine*". S. Frederick Starr wrote of this work as "a pure contradanza" with "an intriguing pattern that directly anticipates jazz of the 1920s". New Orleans certainly has a rich musical, as well as culinary, heritage.

Researching thoroughly the origins of jambalaya, Andrew Sigal in 2007 discovered in the May 1849 issue of "American Agriculturist" a published recipe entitled "Hopping Johnny (jambalaya)", submitted by Solon Robinson while in Alabama on March 25, 1849 (years before the "New Orleans Times" reference. The recipe directs one to "take a dressed chicken", add "one onion chopped fine", as well as "spices, and red pepper pods". The dish requires stirring in the rice with the rest of the ingredients, boiling then simmering just like Louisiana cooks prepare their jambalaya. But this is not the "Hoppin' John" rice and beans dish popular throughout the South and the Caribbean. And once again the lexicographical

journey has returned to Alabama.

The "Oxford English Dictionary" also traces jambalaya's origins to *Provençal*, and "*jambalaia*" appears in a "*dictionnaire Provençal-Français*" by Frédéric Mistral in 1878 as a word of Arabic origin as a "*ragoût de riz avec une volaille*" or "*méli-mélo*". This means "a rice stew prepared with fowl" or "a mish-mash (or jumble)". Sigal seems to think that (ham) "*jambon/jamón*" is in no way the defining element" in the definition that most cookbooks give. He believes "*jambalaia*" to be a "jumbled paella", or "a mixture of rice, meats" and other ingredients. The term "*jambalaia*" even appears in a *Provençal* poem from 1837 in a "jumbled" context (with no culinary reference).

Both paella and jambalaya are similar, and the Spanish version of "*arroz con pollo*" could certainly have had influence during Spain's rule over Louisiana. The etymology continues to be a magical mystery tour into the past. Most explanations combine the French *jambon* with "*a la*" (in the manner of) and "*ya*" (thought by some to be a West African word for rice). The "Oxford Companion to Food" thinks *jamón* plus paella combined to form jambalaya. And "*ya-ya*" means "everybody talking at the same time" in the Creole *patois*. Remember Lee Dorsey's "sittin' here *la-la* waiting for my *ya-ya*"? And what were those "Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood"?

Cajuns have embraced jambalaya as their dish. The word probably did originate in Provence, and perhaps the Acadians met some *Provençal* Huguenots in the Carolinas (who may have had a recipe for a *pilau* named *jambalaia*). Some Cajuns were deported there before making their way to Louisiana. When they got to the bayou country they would have spiced it up. *Mais oui, cher!*

An article in the 1875 "New Orleans Times" said it was "spelled in French *jumbliade*; but the dish is of Indian origin" and "originally made of *zizania aquatica*, or wild rice". So is jambalaya French, Spanish, African, Native American, from Carolina or from Alabama? It appears to be child with a "Mamma-Mia" parentage.

Modern day jambalayas may also include sausage (like Andouille or chorizo), crawfish, oysters, duck, turtle, turkey, venison or alligator. And don't forget the cayenne and the "holy trinity" of Cajun cooking: onion, celery and green bell pepper. Throughout South Louisiana jambalaya is a staple with infinite variety. It is even offered as a main dish in MREs for the military (with Tabasco, of course).

Gonzales, Louisiana, has been the Jambalaya Capital of the World since 1968 and has a fabulous Jambalaya Festival every Spring. Although it's been difficult to determine where jambalaya truly originated, the birthplace of the man who sang its praises is undeniable. Hank Williams actually was born in Alabama.

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