

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Chili Today, Hot Tamale

Many years before the Spanish erected a structure at the present site of the New Orleans French Market in 1791, they were off conquering Mexico in the early 16th century. Conquistador Hernán Cortés and his men landed in the Yucatan Peninsula in the spring of 1519, won a battle against the natives of Tabasco (overlooking the peppers) and by November had arrived at the gates of Tenochitlan. The following year hostilities had erupted there, and an ensuing massacre resulted in the death of Montezuma (the Aztec ruler).

Despite the decline of their empire, much of the Mesoamerican culture remained intact after the fall of the Aztec's capital city. In fact, the freedom from Aztec domination was welcomed by most of the other cultures under their control. These people of Central Mexico spoke Nahuatl, the language used in the region since at least the 7th century AD.

If one were to take a stroll through the fruit and vegetable stalls in the French Market, English words of Nahuatl origin would be quite commonplace. Spaniards first heard the words "avocado" and "tomato" by their similar Nahuatl names. The avocado also created a legal conundrum.

The word is derived from *ahuacatl*, meaning both "fruit of the avocado tree" and "testicle". *Ahuacamolli* were two Nahuatl words combined to mean "avocado soup or sauce", and that was the origin of *guacamole*. Spanish speakers substituted *avocado* for *ahuacatl*, since *avocado* was the early Spanish word for "lawyer" and it sounded so similar. The Spanish word for someone in the legal profession has since been changed to *abogado*. One can only guess why.

Avocado first appeared in English in 1697 in the compound phrase "*avogato pear*", and "alligator pear" is a very common New Orleans nickname for the popular green fruit. *Avocado* was the original Spanish word for "lawyer" because of its Latin connection (*advocatus* being the past participle of *advocare*, to call or summon for counsel). "Advocate" is another English word for "attorney", and in French it's *avocat*. *Avocat* is also the French word for *avocado*.

Of course there's no escaping the fact that the Latin word for "witness" is *testis*, which derives from an Indo-European word for the number three. At first this may seem like faulty math, but the Romans regarded a witness as a trustworthy third party. "Testimony", "testify", "attest", "intestate", "contest", "testament" and "testamentary" all derive from this Latin source, but only in a figurative way. It wasn't that the Romans would have a "witness" swear on his "avocados", but that they were a "witness" to that person's virility.

Leaving Rome for a return trip to Mesoamerica, additional English words of Nahuatl origin include "chili" (great on a "Lucky Dog" purchased in the French Quarter), "chocolate", "coyote" and "tamale". And one can't think of tamales without remembering fondly Manuel's Hot Tamales on South Carrollton in Mid-City.

Manuel Hernandez started the business in 1932 and operated a handcart lit by a kerosene lantern at the corner of Carrollton and Canal. Depending on one's age, one's memory of their price varied through the years. It was not unusual to buy two dozen for only a dollar, return

home to watch "Saturday Night at the Movies" followed by "Morgus the Magnificent". In those days these all beef tamales were wrapped in real cornhusks, but in the years leading up to Hurricane Katrina they were wrapped in paper (but every bit as good). The other key ingredients were corn meal, chili powder and great spices.

Manuel and his family had other locations around town, and there was the main operation at 4709 South Carrollton (with sliding window take-out service). Manuel's Hot Tamales were a favorite food of author John Kennedy Toole, as was a Parasol's roast beef po-boy. Many New Orleanians bemoan the fact that Manuel's hasn't returned since the storm. Great places like Sid-Mar's in Bucktown elicit similar feelings. For a good while, Camellia Grill was sorely missed but is now back stronger than ever.

For some time, tamales have been prevalent along the Mississippi from New Orleans up to Memphis. Migrant workers from the eastern coast of Mexico came through the Port of New Orleans, worked on riverboats and barges and ended up working in the cotton fields of the Delta. There they introduced the tamales to their black co-workers. Other tamales have steam-cooked corn dough known as *masa* and come with or without a filling (often chicken or other ingredients). In the Delta (and in Manuel's version), the tamales were made with corn meal instead of *masa*. These "tamales calientes" became "hot tamales" and even became famous in song.

Delta blues giant Robert Johnson recorded the song "They're Red Hot" on November 27, 1936 (after Manuel had been in business for four years). This blues classic was covered (appropriately) by the "Red Hot Chili Peppers", and was also recorded by Eric Clapton. Johnson also wrote "Sweet Home Chicago", a song later played by the "Blues Brothers". Delta tamales made their way up to Chicago with Delta musicians and other black workers migrating from the South. Chicago's "Mother-in-law sandwich" features a tamale in a hot dog bun loaded with chili. Would love to have "witnessed" Ernie K-Doe's "testimonial" on that.

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