

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Court of Appeal

From the earliest of times, a court or courtyard was an enclosed area usually open to the sky surrounded by a building. In ancient civilizations around the world, that structure was very often a temple. Architecture evolved and these spaces in inns and public buildings were oftentimes used as primary meeting places, and hence the legal meaning of the word court. There decisions were made and rulers held sway.

Greek and Roman homes had a *peristyle*, a columned porch or open colonnade, which surrounded the internal courtyard and garden. This open court in a Roman *domus* or *villa* was known as the *atrium*, or *peristylum*. New Orleanians are fond of their Peristyle, built in 1907 along Bayou Metairie in City Park. Designed as a dance pavilion, its stately Ionic columns provide a majestic vista. And the Peristyle Restaurant on Dumaine touts a menu that "adheres to the cornerstone of French cuisine".

The courtyard tradition continued into medieval times in the cloister gardens of monasteries and cathedrals where monks grew flowers and medicinal herbs. On the Iberian Peninsula the Roman homes over time became Spanish villas with tiled patios and gardens. The Moorish occupation of Andalucía brought its influence upon the look and feel of those hidden courtyards ... and the words of love whispered there.

Scholars have found that there were Arabic elements in the medieval concepts of courtly love. These ideas found expression in the lyric poems of troubadour poets beginning around the time of the First Crusade. The notions of "unrequited love", "exaltation of one's beloved lady" and "love for love's sake" have been traced to Arabic literature from the prior centuries.

When Spanish rule replaced that of the former French Louisiana colony, a couple of devastating fires swept New Orleans in the fifteen years preceding the Louisiana Purchase. The rebuilt townhouses are notable to this day for their thick brick walls, the Spanish-Moorish courtyards and intricate iron balconies.

The Cabildo was the seat of Spanish colonial government, and the building's main hall, the *Sala Capitular*, was used as a courtroom. During the French period before, one went to court before the Superior Council of Louisiana. It was before that body on August 7, 1725 that Jean Hemard, baker (no known relation to the author), filed a petition of recovery for 50 pounds of bread advanced to Cariton, a tailor. That was a lot of bread in those days.

These days in the Big Easy, courtly love appears to be focused on another kind of enclosed interior space, the basketball court. The New Orleans Hornets have captured the enthusiasm of the fans, but they were not the first local team with that name. A good many alums and their former adversaries recall the successes of Sam Barthe School for Boys and the Barthe Hornets. Once occupying the City Park mansion of Texas oil millionaire William H. McFadden (before Christian Brothers), the school was located in Jefferson Parish from the late 50s until Sam retired his paddle and sold the school to École Classique.

Local Anglophiles love tea time at the Windsor Court, but there's a whole other meaning to the word court as soon as New Orleans natives slice their first king cake of the year. There

are countless Carnival courts and their krewes, but two of them meet for a rich local tradition. On Mardi Gras evening Comus extends an invitation to Rex and his queen to join him and his consort at the Comus Ball. This wonderful spectacle is called the "Meeting of the Courts".

One should always act with respect and in a polite manner before a court, legal or otherwise. And so the words curtsy and courteous both come from court, which comes by way of the Anglo-French from the Latin *cohors*, *cohort*, meaning an enclosure, group or retinue (*co* + *hort*, akin to *hortus*, meaning garden).

Often there were efforts to seek or gain something before the court, so courting also carries that meaning (like courting wealth and fame). This carries over into the realm of courtship, where one tries to gain the love or affection of another. Courting also connotes inviting by attractions, like courting danger. Tennyson explained that nicely when he wrote, "A well-worn pathway courted us to one green wicket in a privet hedge." That could be a sticky wicket.

Which brings us to a culinary conclusion with Redfish Court-bouillon. Court-bouillon is as old as New Orleans, and one would think by its name that it would be fit for a king or presented to him at court. But the term has a totally different meaning. It is a "short" bouillon in the sense that it is not rich (and usually not served as part of the finished dish). Curt means sharp and abrupt, or having been shortened. It came to England from the Normans, and originally from the Latin *curtus*.

Court-bouillon was an aromatic liquid broth with white wine, celery, onions, water, carrots, herbs and other ingredients used to poach the delicate fish. But a local Creole court-bouillon is a tomato enhanced fish stew that *is* served with all those ingredients ... and then some. Satchmo called it "*cubie yon*" in his autobiography, and that's about dead-on the way it's pronounced by New Orleanians. Proclaim it that way at the Redfish Grill on Bourbon, where they describe it as a "traditional Creole soup of redfish, garlic, roasted bell peppers and fresh herbs simmered in tomatoes and a touch of white wine".

Although courting caloric danger, that court-bouillon sounds incredibly appealing. Hate to be curt, but *au revoir!*

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