

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémar

Food of the Gods: Ambrosia and Nectar Soda

It has been determined that design flaws in the levee system surrounding New Orleans represented its "Achilles' heel", or fatal weakness, after Katrina's powerful assault. The two most popular explanations for the creation of the Achilles myth come from classical antiquity.

Achilles' mother, Thetis, dipped her baby son in the river Styx in order to make him invulnerable wherever the waters touched him. Only trouble is she held him by the heel with her thumb and forefinger, thus missing that area that would later prove his downfall. Another version making Achilles almost immortal has his mother employing the Phoenician custom of rubbing his body with ambrosia and holding him over a fire every night. Once again she missed the heel.

So what is this ambrosia? In Greek mythology it is the food (and sometimes the drink) of the gods, often providing immortality upon those that consume it. The other sustenance up on Mount Olympus is nectar, which Homer sets forth as the divine drink and ambrosia the food. In "The Odyssey", nectar and ambrosia are depicted as quite sweet smelling, and in this epic poem Calypso spreads "a table with ambrosia" and mixes "the rosy-red nectar". Circe later tells Odysseus that ambrosia is carried up to the gods on the wings of doves.

Most believe the word ambrosia to be derived from the Greek prefix *a-* ("not") and *mbrotos* meaning ("mortal"). But other classical scholars think ambrosia has a "fragrant" origin rather than immortal one, and hence a connection to amber. Amber stems from the old Arabic word *anbargis* or *ambergris* meaning an oily perfumed secretion from the intestines of a sperm whale. Melville mentions ambergris in "Moby Dick". This precious substance, actually used in making perfumes, is created synthetically today. But since it floats on water and is washed up on beaches, just like the honey-colored fossil resin of tree sap millions of years old, the ancients may have confused the two. One classical scholar posits that both ambrosia and nectar were types of honey, and honey's healing powers may have conferred a kind of immortality. But does this mean that Achilles may have been honey-roasted?

And all of this brings us back to a deeply religious city, which is nevertheless mindful of sin and forgiveness. New Orleans also can't get enough of gods, nymphs, muses and other assorted sub-deities.

They dominate its street nomenclature and its rich carnival culture. It is only appropriate that the food and liquid refreshments of the gods are also prevalent in a metropolis famous for its culinary skills.

The Crescent City has produced a fine array of sparkling beverages such as Big Shot, Dr. Nut (the favorite of Ignatius Reilly in "A Confederacy of Dunces"), Barq's and others. Coca-Cola tried to compete with its "Rex" Root Beer but ended up buying the entire Barq's enterprise from John E. Koerner, III (Carnival's "Rex" in 2008). But another great New Orleans classic came on the scene in the late 1880s when a local pharmacist, Isaac L. Lyons, concocted the ingredients for making a Nectar Soda. His wholesale pharmaceutical company stood on the corner of Camp and Gravier Streets rising eight stories high.

New Orleanians remember with fondness sipping this splendid elixir made by combining Lyons' cerise pink syrup flavored with vanilla and almond, a vanilla ice cream scoop and some seltzer from behind their favorite K & B drugstore counter. This went on for nearly a century until Katz & Besthoff closed its last soda fountain. This author recalls the tall ice tea spoons for scooping, the circular chrome barstools for spinning and the straws for shooting the paper wrappers at friends.

There were other purveyors of this uniquely New Orleans syrup through the years, including Charles Dennery (whose bakery supply company began in 1894 – its chocolate fudge sauce was also a big hit) and Fuerst and Kremer on Canal Street. City sno-ball stands like Hanson's on Tchoupitoulas recognized how incredible this syrup was on this icy confection. It is still a Big Easy favorite, and today the soda is being canned and marketed as "Mardi Gras in your Mouth". The gods would be pleased.

Another New Orleans favorite is a type of fruit salad dessert known as ambrosia. Richard and Rima Collin have recorded their recipe for "New Orleans Ambrosia", a dish they describe as a "simple 19th century dessert made with fresh oranges, grated coconut and confectioner's sugar". The oranges are layered in between the sugar and coconut and then chilled. One may recall Richard Collin and his "Platonic dishes" from his salad days as New Orleans' "Underground Gourmet". Some recipes for ambrosia even add bananas to the mix.

Stanley Clisby Arthur wrote in his "Famous New Orleans Drinks" of the Ambrosia Cocktail at Arnaud's Restaurant. It is a champagne cocktail blended with cognac, applejack, cointreau and lemon juice. "Count Arnaud" Cazenave, the proprietor back then, claimed "that the ambrosia he brews is one the lovely Hebe might well have served Juno, Jupiter, Gannymede, and the balance of the Olympic crowd."

It is unlikely that fruit or alcoholic ambrosia cocktails are to be found at Club Ambrosia on Chef Menteur Highway or along the route of the Krewe of Ambrosia that rolls in Thibodaux during Carnival season. But on one's Odyssey down to Bayou Lafourche, there may be a few Abita Ambers in evidence along the parade route. This popular deep golden lager (brewed by the Abita Brewing Company across the lake) continues to prove that when in and around New Orleans, although the elevation is not high, one is atop the Mount Olympus of outstanding food and drink.

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