

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémond*

### Hunger After Battle

In Homer's Iliad, after Neptune provided his horses with "their ambrosial forage", he came "up out of the sea" and spoke to the two Ajaxes. One was Ajax, son of Oileus, while the other was Ajax the Great, son of Telamon. Then this "earth-encircling lord" struck both of them with his sceptre and filled their hearts with daring". The two warriors spoke to each other about their newly bestowed powers:

"Thus did they converse, exulting in the hunger after battle with ? which the god had filled them."

Three millennia later, a famous general had a much different "hunger after battle", or at least that's the popular story. And a great one it is.

One of Napoléon's greatest victories was the Battle of Marengo. It is immortalized in New Orleans' street nomenclature, as well as in the name of a renowned chicken dish.

The battle took place on June 14, 1800, when Napoléon's forces drove back those of the Austrians on the Marengo plain near Alessandria, in the Italian province of Piedmont. Since the enemy was driven from Italy, it enhanced Napoléon's political clout back in Paris. The French were at first surprised and fell back, but success came with the arrival of French General Louis Desaix whose brilliant counter attack saved the day. He is said to have told Bonaparte, "This battle is completely lost, but it is only two o'clock, there is time to win another." A cavalry charge by Francois Étienne de Kellermann completed the victory, but Desaix became a casualty of the battle.

Victorien Sardou's play *La Tosca* (for which Puccini's opera is based) is set against the events around the Battle of Marengo. Honored by Antoine's famous creation Eggs Sardou, Sardou and his play *Thermidor* were the inspiration in 1894 for Lobster Thermidor (created by Marie's, a Parisian restaurant). Marengo, too, inspired a famous dish.

It was immediately after that battle when First Consul Bonaparte had developed a huge appetite. It was, after all, Napoléon who observed that "armies travel on their stomachs", eating whenever it was possible. To solve this ongoing military dilemma he even offered a prize. It later led to the invention of food canning. But for the moment he was famished and demanded a meal. His cook, Dunand, was desperately scrounging for ingredients worthy of the future Emperor. He scavenged together a scrawny chicken, some crawfish, tomatoes and eggs and formulated a recipe. He cut up the chicken in pieces with a sabre and braised it in oil with crushed garlic along with Napoléon's own brandy from his canteen. He finished it off with stale bread, each soldier's emergency ration. Napoléon was so pleased he ordered that Chicken Marengo be served after every battle.

It was a great culinary story, promoted by Dunand himself and then by the great chef Carême. Prosper Montagné accordingly included the tale in his great tome, *Larousse Gastronomique*, and others followed. But it didn't happen that way, for Dunand did not enter Napoléon's service until quite some time later. It is said that his employer frequently ate *poulet à la provencale*, and Dunand may have expanded that dish into Chicken Marengo

(along with a fabulous back story). The crawfish topping, along with Napoléon's long association with the history of New Orleans, makes this dish a popular entrée at many of the city's fine dining establishments.

Legendary rescue stories abound in the Crescent City, like the plot to bring the exiled Emperor to the home of Nicolas Girod, now the Napoleon House. And in 1834, Dr. Francisco Antomarchi who had attended Napoléon at St. Helena, moved to New Orleans and established his practice on Royal Street. Before leaving for Mexico four years later, he donated the Emperor's bronze death mask to the city (on view at the Cabildo).

When the Faubourg Boulogny was being developed in uptown New Orleans, promoters Laurent Millaudon and Samuel Kohn may have been the decision makers when it came to naming Marengo Street and others in their new suburb after Napoléon and his victories. Some believe strongly that it was engineer Charles Zimpel's idea, while others seem to think it may have been that of Pierre Benjamin Buisson. This former French Army lieutenant settled in New Orleans after Waterloo and became a surveyor. Just like Chicken Marengo, the true story is as cloudy as the fog of war.

In 1883, Robinson's Atlas shows a misspelled Dessaix Place (now Dessaix Circle) in the Gentilly area near the Fair Grounds. The Dessaix Traffic Circle is home today to an imposing sculpture rising some nineteen feet above the street. Entitled "Spirit House", it was crafted by the late John T. Scott and fellow sculptor Martin Payton to honor the city's African American population and their forebears. This *mélange* of Afro-Caribbean icons has been called "an altar of memory celebrating the dreams and aspirations of those whose hands and passions made this city what it is today". In the early 1800s one such interesting ancestor was the original "Dr. John" who practiced a form of voodoo in this vicinity. His real name was John Montenet, a free man of color whose obituary was written by Lafcadio Hearn. Dessaix Boulevard came along quite some time after Dessaix Place.

According to Karen Smith Riecke, it was developed before and after World War II. Her father, L. P. Smith was a contractor who built a number of homes on Dessaix Boulevard. The government put a halt to all home construction so that all focus could be placed on the war effort. But after the war was over and the soldiers came back home to their loved ones, there was a great hunger for affordable housing.

Napoléon paid tribute to Louis Charles Antoine Dessaix de Veygoux by erecting monuments to his memory on the *Place de Victoires* and *Place Dauphine* in Paris. Along with other great military heroes, his name is written on the *Arc de Triomphe*. And there is a huge statue of Dessaix on the *Place de Jaude* in *Clermont-Ferrand*, France. Before Marengo, Dessaix fought bravely before the Mamluk attack at the Battle of the Pyramids in 1798. The Egyptian *fellahin* called him the "Just Sultan", but in New Orleans, oh how they mispronounce his name!

## **NED HÉMARD**

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