

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémar

Ties That Bind

Several thousand residents of Croatian descent call New Orleans or one of its surrounding parishes home. Seafarers from the Dalmatian coast along the Adriatic Sea had traveled to Louisiana and along the Gulf Coast as early as the 18th century, but most arrived during the first fifteen years of the 20th century. Coming from towns such as Duba, they settled in and around Plaquemines Parish fishing communities such as Olga, Buras, Empire and Port Sulphur. Many became commercial fishermen and others helped develop the state's oyster industry. Luke Jurisich, who settled in Bayou Creek in 1855, is credited as the father of Croatian oyster fishing in Louisiana.

Saint Anthony (whose feast day is in July) is the patron saint of the Dalmatian towns of Sucaraj and Duba, so it was not unusual for Blaise Anthony Jurisich of Duba (born February 12, 1779) to bear his name. He and his descendants have lived and prospered in the greater New Orleans area. Some two and a half centuries before, another Jurisich would make his mark in the world.

In 1520, Turkish Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent was venturing forth with the expansion of the Ottoman Empire into Europe. He hammered the Hungarian and Austrian influenced domains and invaded Hungarian territory in 1526. A crushing defeat of Hungarian forces at the Battle of Mohacs made the Danube Basin vulnerable to attack. The Ottoman army, however, met stiff resistance during the Siege of Koszeg in August 1532, where Captain Miklós Jurisich (and his contingent of 800 men) managed to hold back the Turkish troops. Koszeg witnessed Commander-in-Chief Ibrahim leading nineteen fierce attacks against the town and castle, each of which Jurisich repelled. The 1552 Siege of Eger was another Hungarian victory against the Turks that checked the Ottoman expansion into central and eastern Europe.

Croatians were undaunted and courageous soldiers, so it was only natural that Louis XIII and Cardinal Richelieu would employ them in 1630 as mercenaries in their conflict with the Duke of Guise and Queen Mother Marie de' Medici. The traditional Croatian military uniform created a sensation in Parisian society circles over the distinctively knotted scarves tied about the Croats' necks. These picturesque neckbands (of coarse cloth for enlisted soldiers and fine linen or silk for the officers) were so appealing that they quickly became a fashion item. In so doing, the cloth became narrower and given long hanging ends or was tied into a bow (which was to later become the bow tie). Because the Croatian word for their country is *Hrvatska* and a Croat is a *Hrvat*, the corrupted French pronunciation of *Hrvat* became *cravate*.

When Charles II of England returned home from exile in 1660, he imported with him the latest French clothing craze. The modern *cravat* had replaced the "*ruff*" (more of a ruffled bib to protect the soiling of the doublet) and was on its way to becoming a longstanding men's fashion must. It went through several adaptations (just as the width of neckties did in the 20th century), from the long flowing version to the long and narrow "*Steinkirk*" (named for a battle, of course, in 1692).

Along came the *Macaronis* in the 1770s who brought back the long flowing variety of cravat.

They were overly fashionable fellows who dressed and spoke in an outlandishly affected manner, *maccherone* meaning a boorish fool in Italian. And, of course, everyone remembers the perjorative *macaroni* reference in "Yankee Doodle".

With all of this attention to one's appearance, the manner of knotting a man's neckwear became indicative of his fashion sense and style. After the Battle of Waterloo (1815), the cravat became simply known as a "tie".

Many of the Croatian ties to the Crescent City are more of a culinary nature than a sartorial one. Seafood supply businesses evolved into restaurants, and the greater New Orleans area has several excellent ones.

Drago Cvitanovich's inspiration to enter the restaurant business came from his brother-in-law, Drago Batnich, who previously owned a restaurant on Harrison Avenue in Lakeview (also called Drago's). Drago and his wife, Klara, opened their restaurant in Metairie in 1969 and before long their son Tommy Cvitanovich became manager. It was he who, in 1993, had a great inspiration of his own. While spooning garlic, herbs and butter over drumfish, he wondered what that sauce would taste like topped with parmesan cheese over oysters in their own shells cooked over a hot grill. Drago's signature dish of charbroiled oyster became a phenomenal success, so much so that these and other delicacies are now served at the Hilton New Orleans Riverside. Drago's tirelessly serves the community (such as providing 77,000 free meals following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina), and Klara received the "*Red Danice Kvratske*" award from the President of Croatia for her help in sending aid to Croatia and Bosnia.

Not all Croatian establishments are strictly seafood oriented, for it was back in 1934 that John Vojkovich opened the Crescent City Steak House located at 1001 North Broad. U.S. Prime aged corn-fed beef cooked to perfection with the favorite accompaniments (like potatoes *au gratin* and onion rings) offer a popular local formula.

Then there is the iconic cuisine of another Croatian named Anthony. Anthony Uglesich and his wife Gail worked tirelessly at their 1920s-era run-down oyster house to make their restaurant countless notches above the ordinary fried seafood place. Father Sam Uglesich (who came to New Orleans from Dugi Otok, Croatia, in 1924) started the operation on Baronne Street in Central City in 1927. But the husband and wife cooking team of Anthony and Gail perfected a unique menu that brought pilgrims from miles around. They created classics like sautéed oyster "shooters" (dribbled in a cane syrup and sun-dried tomato vinaigrette), "Volcano Shrimp" (with Asian ginger that erupts in one's mouth) and speckled trout flavored with a tasteful trio of chiles. Uglesich's recipes live on in a wonderful cookbook entitled "Cooking with the Uglesiches".

Louisiana Croatians have made their mark as doctors, lawyers and even entertainers. Pinky Vidacovich, the "Croatian Cajun" from Buras hammed it up on the "Dawnbusters" program on WWL back in the golden age of radio. He played clarinet and alto sax, but his humor and versatility is what most old-time listeners remember.

So when making a trip to Perlis, Brooks Brothers or Joseph Bank to purchase a necktie or bow tie, remember the cravat's Croatian provenance. A visit to Drago's for charbroiled oysters would be a welcome complement, and (considering the delicious and ample sauce) a bow tie would be recommended.

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