

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Let Them Eat *Brioche***

*Brioche* is a type of French bread with a rich and tender crumb. It has a dark, golden and flaky crust from an egg wash applied after proofing. *Brioche* dough often appears in recipes for New Orleans styled king cakes, where it is often fashioned in a *couronne* shape (or that of a crown). What follows is the story of how two important crowns were lost.

“Let them eat cake” is the traditional translation of the French phrase commonly attributed to Marie Antoinette, Queen of France and Navarre, upon learning that the peasants had no bread to eat. Although commonly attributed to young *Dauphine de France*, there is no record of these words ever being spoken by her. The quote appeared in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions*, a purportedly autobiographical work completed in 1769. Rousseau ascribed these words to an anonymous “great princess”, and no other source for this anecdote is known. Marie Antoinette was only 13, however, and not yet married to Louis-Auguste, the *Dauphin* and future Louis XVI, King of France and Navarre. Furthermore, Rousseau had used the phrase in a letter dated 1737, long before his *Confessions*, and eighteen years before Marie Antoinette was born.

These are the words that Rousseau actually wrote concerning the words of the princess:

*“Enfin je me rappelai le pis-aller d’une grande princesse à qui l’on disait que les paysans n’avaient pas de pain, et qui répondit: ‘Qu’ils mangent de la brioche.’”*

“Finally I recalled the last resort of a great princess who was told that the peasants had no bread, and who responded: ‘Let them eat brioche.’”

And although Marie Antoinette never uttered “Let them eat cake,” what she really didn’t say (at least according to Rousseau) was “Let

them eat *brioche*." *Brioche* is a considered a luxury bread. Highly enriched with eggs and butter (*brioche* dough also contains flour, milk, yeast, salt, and sometimes some sugar), it was clearly representative of the naïve and blasé attitude an oblivious princess might have toward the hunger of her people.

The Queen's well-known English-language biographer, Lady Antonia Fraser wrote that "Let them eat cake" was uttered one-hundred years earlier by Marie-Thérèse, the wife of the Sun King, Louis XIV. Fraser wrote, "It was a callous and ignorant statement and she, Marie Antoinette, was neither." In addition, Fraser points out, Marie Antoinette was a generous patroness of charity and moved by the plight of the poor when it was brought to her attention, thus making such a statement out-of-character. A letter home to her family revealed a caring Marie Antoinette:

"It is quite certain that in seeing the people who treat us so well despite their own misfortune, we are more obliged than ever to work hard for their happiness. The King seems to understand this truth."

Initially charmed by her beauty and personality, the French people generally came to dislike Marie Antoinette, accusing the Austrian Archduchess (she was the daughter of the Empress Maria Theresa and Emperor Francis I) of being recklessly extravagant, promiscuous and sympathizing with France's enemies. In fact, many anti-royalists so believed (albeit incorrectly) that it was the Queen who had single-handedly ruined France's finances that they nicknamed her *Madame Déficit*. They issued numerous *libelles* (political pamphlets damaging to the *Ancien Régime*).

The *Petit Trianon*, a small château on the grounds of Versailles, became associated with Marie Antoinette's perceived profligacy. It was rumored that she plastered its walls with gold and diamonds. But a much larger problem, however, was the debt incurred by France during the Seven Years' War, still unpaid. It was further exacerbated by Louis XVI's helping the rebellious North American colonies in their war with France's rival, Great Britain. Not long after, France had its own revolution.

At the height of the French Revolution, Louis XVI was deposed and the royal family was imprisoned. Nine months after her husband visited the guillotine, Marie Antoinette was tried, convicted of treason, her hair was cut off and she was driven through Paris in an open cart, wearing a simple white dress. She met the same fate as her husband on October 16, 1793, at the *Place de la Révolution* (present-day *Place de la Concorde*). Her last words were, "Pardon me Sir, I meant not to do it", to Royal Executioner Charles-Henri Sanson, whose foot she had accidentally stepped on as she approached the guillotine.

Sanson had executed her husband months before, as well as what would amount to more than three thousand people. Years later it is said, Napoleon Bonaparte asked Sanson how he could still sleep after so many executions. Sanson's reply was, "If emperors, kings and dictators can sleep well, why shouldn't an executioner?"

In New Orleans, the two French monarchs can be seen in grander, happier times. The New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA) has on permanent exhibit the large and splendid portrait of Marie Antoinette by Élisabeth-Louise Vigée Lebrun, which was commissioned by the King's younger brother, the Comte d'Artois. Also on display at the museum is the impressive painting of a resplendent King Louis XVI, painted by the King's official portraitist, Antoine-François Callet.

The Crescent City is also home to the St. Louis Hotel at 730 Rue Bienville in the French Quarter, where one can dine at its Louis XVI, Restaurant Française. Originally completed in 1837 as the residence to James Walters Zacharie, a merchant prince and famous host, this building was purchased in the late 1800s by philanthropist Amaron Ledoux. Mr. and Mrs. Louis Bézaudun leased the property in 1881 as the site of a hotel and restaurant. Guests from Rod Stewart to Richard Burton have dined at the Louis XVI, including sports artist Leroy Neiman, who presented the owners with a sketch of the kitchen on the back of a menu.

The Times-Picayune has stated, "...when classical French cooking and atmospheric refinement are the subjects at hand, the combination at Louis XVI is unbeatable."

And the St. Louis Hotel advertises what they call their "sister property", the St. Ann/Marie Antoinette Hotel at 717 Rue Conti in the *Vieux Carré*. Namesake Marie Antoinette was not actually the "sister property" of Louis XVI, but his spouse and Queen.

For *le petit déjeuner* (breakfast), would you care for some *brioche*? Its first written appearance was in 1404, apparently from a traditional Norman recipe. The word comes from the Old Norman French verb "*brier*" (an old form of "broyer"), then used in the sense of "to knead dough with a wooden roller". Despite its French origin, *brioche* is considered a *viennoiserie* (French for Viennese specialty). Favorite *viennoiseries* include *croissants*, *pain au lait*, *pain aux raisins* and *pain au chocolat*. Less rich versions of *brioche* are sometimes used in savoury meat dishes, most commonly stuffed with *foie gras*. Speaking of *viennoiseries*, Marie Antoinette was born in Vienna, too.

As for a New Orleans breakfast at the Louis XVI, a modern Marie Antoinette might have to say:

“Let them eat Belgian waffles,” “Let them eat English muffins,” “Let them eat bagels with cream cheese,” or “Let them eat buttered milk biscuits.”

They’re all on the menu, with no *brioche* in sight.

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