

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Réveillon Dinners

It was 1942 and America was at war. Hollywood was doing its part by producing war movies on an assembly line. Some were unforgettable, like the wartime love story set in the Vichy-controlled Moroccan city of "Casablanca" with Ingrid Berman and Humphrey Bogart. At first, the two leads were to be Ann Sheridan and Ronald Reagan, but Ingrid and Bogie got the parts. The future president was drafted back from the Army Air Corps to star in "This is the Army" in which Irving Berlin (dressed as a doughboy) sings his aversion to *Reveille* in "Oh, How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning":

"For the hardest blow of all
Is to hear the bugler call
You gotta get up
You gotta get up
You gotta get up this morning.

Someday I'm going to murder the bugler.
Someday they're going to find him dead.
I'll amputate his *reveille*
And step upon it heavily
And spend the rest of my life in bed."

Reveille is, of course, that "reviled" sunrise bugle call associated with the military. It is derived from the French word *réveil* (meaning "waking"), as are the sumptuous Creole holiday feasts known as *réveillons*. These dinners are so named because participation in these fantastic meals involves staying awake until well after midnight.

Early New Orleans was almost entirely French and Catholic, so virtually the entire community would revel in this traditional custom inherited from the mother country. Family members would have fasted from the previous midnight in order to receive Holy Communion at Midnight Mass, leaving them famished after leaving Mass in the wee hours of Christmas day. So the sideboard was set with what could only be

described as the gout hall of fame. The presentation consisted of food of an exceptional nature, such as oyster stew or turtle soup, soufflés or other egg dishes, *grillades* of veal, game pies, elaborate desserts (like a *bûche de Noël* or *croquembouche*), wine, brandy, cordials and other fortified drinks (and at some point coffee). The celebration would go on and on.

This compared and melded favorably with the French *réveillon* menu back in Europe, which may have featured escargots, lobsters and *pâté de foie gras*, followed by turkey stuffed with chestnuts. A Canadian *réveillon* was famous for their delicious *tourtières*. In Québec, a *tourtière* is nothing more than its version of a meat pie. When a roast or sautéed piece of meat or game is sliced and reheated in sauce, the resulting mixture is known as a *salmis*.

Louisiana has long been famous for its meat pies, which are the signature dish of the state's oldest city. Established in 1714 by Louis Juchereau de St. Denis and preceding the founding of New Orleans by four years, Natchitoches is the oldest permanent settlement in all of the vast Louisiana Purchase. The city serves its version of a *tourtière* at its annual Christmas lighting festival that brightens the Cane River until after New Year's Day. Fact is, in Natchitoches it was more of a Native American-Spanish connection. The Natchitoches Indians (for whom the city was named) are believed to have come up with the idea, but with improvements by the Spanish. The Spanish, after all, had been eating *empanadas* for centuries. The name comes from the Spanish *empanar*, meaning to wrap or coat in bread. Popular in the northwest area of Spain known as Galicia, *empanadas* have a middle-eastern origin in the *fatay*, a dish introduced during the Arabic occupation of the Iberian Peninsula.

All of this interesting diversion brings us along to what is known as the Second *Réveillon*, or evening meal celebrated on New Year's Eve. In France December 31 is called *la Saint-Sylvestre* with the usual *fête* entitled *le Réveillon de Saint-Sylvestre*. It is not named for the slobbering three-time Academy Award-winning cartoon cat who craves Tweety Bird, but for the Pope from 314 to 335 A.D. (during the time of Constantine the Great). December 31 just happens to be his feast day. Sylvester the Cat's name comes from *Felis silvestris catus*, the scientific name for the domestic cat.

Saint-Sylvestre's feast usually includes fine champagne and *foie gras* and can range from an intimate banquet with friends to *une soirée dansante* (a full-fledged ball). This *réveillon* has everyone kiss under the mistletoe (*le gui*) and wishing all a "*Bonne Année*". This is hopefully followed by *une bonne résolution*. The Feast of the Epiphany on January 6 includes in France (as well as New Orleans) *la galette des rois* (or king cake).

Besides the two traditional *réveillons*, New Orleans now has many. Numerous New Orleans restaurants begin *prix fixe réveillon* dinners on December 1 and continue them even beyond New Year's. They are offered at more conventional dining hours and were reintroduced as recently as 1988, when Sandra Dartus of the French Quarter Festival thought it would be a classic way to draw people to the *Vieux Carré* during December (a slow time for tourism and conventions).

All of this decadent, luxurious cuisine tends to lead to "a long winter's nap". Just leave a bugle call for the morning so as to not miss Santa.

Joyeuse Noël et Bonne Année! Et Bonne fête de Hanoukka!

NED HÉMARD

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