

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Saucy and Headstrong

"This is 1852, dumplin', 1852. Not the Dark Ages. Girls don't have to simp around in white just because they're not married."

-Bette Davis in *Jezebel*

In addition to the Mummer traditions at Mardi Gras (making their way to New Orleans via Mobile, Alabama), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, has contributed something else quite significant to the Deep South: cream cheese.

Actually, Philadelphia cream cheese is a brand name of American food giant Kraft Foods, which adopted the city as the brand name (since it was viewed as the home of top quality food products). References to cream cheese appeared in England as early as 1583 and in France as early as 1651. Recipes involving cream cheese were recorded in England soon after 1754, and the first cream cheese made in America was in Chester, New York, in 1872. Kraft has been so effective at advertising, Philadelphia cream cheese has become part of the vocabulary. Even in Spain people refer to it as "*queso filadelfia*" instead of "*queso crema*" or "*queso cremoso*".

Julia Read elaborated on cream cheese in *Queen of the Turtle Derby and Other Southern Phenomena*:

"Take Triscuits and cream cheese. Triscuits are a Yankee invention, and the cream cheese I buy has Philadelphia in its very name, but these two items are mainstays of the Southern larder."

She continued, "You would never see a naked block of cream cheese in the South. It will always be coated with one of at least three delicious things: Pickapeppa Sauce, Jezebel Sauce (pineapple preserves, hot mustard, apple jelly, and horseradish), or pepper jelly."

She is quite correct, as this *hors d'oeuvre* is often served at New Orleans parties (and with one of this trio of sauces). One may see presented at such festive gatherings a white brick of Philadelphia cream cheese covered with red or green pepper jelly surrounded by a circle of crackers. Dark brown Jamaican Pickapeppa Sauce is another favorite topping. Flavored with cane vinegar, tomatoes, onions, sugar, mangoes, raisins, tamarinds, peppers and spices, tangy Pickapeppa Sauce is always on hand in uptown New Orleans cupboards. What is perplexing to this author is why the Crescent City hostess simply dumps the ingredients over the rectangular cream cheese brick. Why no imagination? The cream cheese could easily be cut into interesting shapes like diamonds, stars or perhaps a Saints-ational *fleur de lis*.

And then there's the Jezebel Sauce. One might find it odd that a sauce is named after a headstrong woman in the Old Testament who was defenestrated and consequently eaten by dogs. Jezebel, a Phoenician queen, was as an assertive woman vilified for thousands of years because she did not let men dominate her. It was for this trait that a popular 1938 American dramatic film was entitled *Jezebel*. Perhaps the sauce was named "Jezebel" for being (like the headstrong New Orleans woman in the film) assertive, as well.

Jezebel, the movie, tells the story of a determined young Southern belle named Julie Marsden (Bette Davis) during Antebellum New Orleans (1852) whose actions cost her the man she loves. She is engaged to banker Pres (short for Preston) Dillard (Henry Fonda), but she loses his love.

Julie is upset that Pres has kept her waiting in her carriage outside the bank, although she is confident that she has him trained and obedient to her will: "I've been trainin' him for years," she brags.

Furious, she storms into the bank and interrupts his meeting, demanding that he accompany her to a dress-fitting for the great Olympus debutante ball to be held the following evening. He refuses, being in "the fight of my life," and she goes on to dressmaker Madame Poulard's without him.

There we see a magnificent scene, Julie sitting on a stool trapped within a wide crinoline cage frame. This is anachronistic for 1852, since this contraption doesn't come along until a few years later. In her undergarments, Julie insists on flaunting herself in a stunning flame-red taffeta dress (customarily worn by a *demimondaine*), rather than the traditional virginal white gowns worn by unmarried women. Hollywood *modiste* Orry-Kelly delivers the goods by designing Bette Davis an incredible gown, the reddest dress anyone has ever seen in a black and white film (actually bronze to film better in monochrome).

The dialogue describing the dress went something like this:

Julie: (speaking to an assistant who carries off a red dress) "Wait a minute. Bring that over here. (She holds the dress up to herself) Saucy, isn't it?"

Aunt Belle: "And vulgar."

Julie: "Yes, isn't it? Come on, get me out of this."

Aunt Belle: "Julie, what are you doing?"

Julie: "If it fits me, I'm gonna wear it to the Olympus Ball."

Aunt Belle: "A red dress to the Olympus Ball? Why, you're out of your senses."

Julie: "...Mary Vickers couldn't possibly do it justice."

Aunt Belle: "Child, you're out of your mind. You know you can't wear red to the Olympus Ball."

Julie: "Can't I? I'm goin' to. This is 1852, dumplin', 1852. Not the Dark Ages. Girls don't have to simp around in white just because they're not married."

Aunt Belle: "In New Orleans they do. Julie, you'd insult every woman on the floor."

Later on, Pres can't dissuade her from her folly.

Pres: "Julie! You can't be serious."

Julie: "Are you afraid somebody will take me for one of those girls from Gallatin Street?"

Pres: "Julie!"

Julie: "Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot I'm a child. I'm not supposed to know about things like Gallatin Street. I'm just supposed to flutter around in white."

Preston: "You're supposed to know better than to scandalize the whole town."

Pres decides at this point to rethink his assessment of Julie as a proper wife. At the ball, once Julie realizes she is being shunned by all present, she begs Pres to take her home. But Pres decides that it would be best to publicly announce the breaking of their engagement

in the presence of all of New Orleans Society. After Julie is humiliated into dancing with Pres, the other couples move off the ballroom floor and the orchestra stops playing, leaving the pair isolated on the dance floor with everyone looking away from Julie.

Pres leaves Julie after the mortification and shame of this social *faux pas*, for a gentler young lady (Amy, whom he married while in the North). Julie suffers but endures. There's a tragic duel, and still more suffering. Julie later gains redemption when Pres is stricken with yellow fever, and she goes off with him to be quarantined on an island with the other victims.

Bette and the dress were both "saucy", defined as "impertinently bold and impudent". And so one might say of Jezebel Sauce. Here's what's in this bold concoction:

The ingredients stay pretty much the same in this recipe, although in varying proportions, according to preference.

Coarsely ground Black pepper (or white pepper) is optional, as is salt.

1 (5-ounce) jar horseradish
1 (1.12-ounce) can dry (ground) mustard
1 (10 to 18-ounce) jar pineapple preserves
1 (10 to 18-ounce) jar apple jelly (or half peach jelly and half apple jelly)

Combine the horseradish, preserves, jelly and dry mustard well, mixing thoroughly. Good with pork or ham as a glaze, or ladle over one 8-ounce package of Philadelphia cream cheese.

Where exactly did this bold and spicy (like Jezebel herself) sauce originate? Cooks have been pairing spicy fruit sauces with meat for centuries (think turkey and cranberry sauce or pork with applesauce). Also, mixtures of sweet fruit or wine jellies and savory components (mustard, horseradish) are found in cuisines throughout the world (not just the South). Print sources and culinary experts generally point to the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Cookbooks from the late nineteenth to the mid twentieth century Creole cookbooks contain numerous peppered jellies and creamy horseradish mustard sauces (similar to, but nothing quite like Jezebel Sauce). The use of commercial products in cans or in jars might suggest the sauce was developed in corporate kitchens, but in the Deep South one never knows.

The earliest recipe in print for Jezebel Sauce was October 26, 1958, and discovered by popular newspaper columnist Clementine Paddleford (far from the Mississippi Gulf Coast in Kansas, of all places). In 1967 this recipe was featured in almost all the nation's newspapers during the winter holidays. None of the articles offered a factual origin story.

An earlier *San Antonio Light* article by Mary Lee Swan, May 21, 1939, mentions "Fruit Horseradish Sauce" but, alas, there is no description of its contents.

Frankie Laine recorded a hit song in 1951, entitled "Jezebel". This million seller reached Number 2 on the Billboard Chart and may have influenced the naming of the sauce: "If ever the Devil's plan was made to torment man, It was you, Jezebel, it was you."

Rodney Simmons of Bell Buckle Country Store in Tennessee began producing Jezebel Sauce recently for sale, and was also curious about the sauce's origin. He, too, traced the recipe's source back to the Gulf Coast region. "I thought it was Creole or Cajun, but after a recent conversation with Paul Prudhomme, we think that it originated on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, around Gulfport," Simmons said.

Incidentally, Bette Davis was not the only "Jezebel" to wear something shocking in New Orleans - even if it was very little. A famous striptease artist of the 1950s and early 1960s was a featured attraction using the stage name "Jezebel". She first appeared as "Wildcat Frenchie", but made her fame as "Jezebel". As "Jezebel", she was the headliner at the Poodle's Patio, a club that was named after her pet poodles, which she dyed in various colors. Saucy and headstrong, "Jezebel" lived in the French Quarter for forty years until marrying a wealthy man, relocating to Washington State, and traveling the world. She passed away in 2006.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Saucy and Headstrong"
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2011