

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Sweet New Orleans Delights

Renaldus Columbus (aka Matteo Realdo Colombo) was an Italian professor of anatomy at the University of Padua in Italy. Like the other Columbus, he made a monumental discovery in 1559 when he published *De re anatomica* describing the “seat of a woman’s delight”. He opined, “Since no one has discerned these projections and their workings, if it is permissible to give names to things discovered by me, it should be called the love or sweetness of Venus.” The French slang for this erogenous “c” spot is *praline* (originally spelled *prasline*), but in New Orleans the *praline* (a copiously concocted confection made from pecans, sugar, butter and cream) provides its own unique form of sweetness and delight.

Its origin story begins back in France. Before John Law, mathematical wizard and gambler, came up with a scheme to colonize Louisiana and build *La Nouvelle-Orléans*, Louisiana’s charter was in the hands of a wealthy entrepreneur named Antoine Crozat (c. 1655-July 7, 1738). Born in Toulouse, France, to peasants, Antoine and his brother Pierre became two of the wealthiest merchants in France. Antoine Crozat, by lending money to the French government, was ennobled as the *Marquis du Châtel* (a title he passed on to his elder son Louis-Francois) and became a financial counselor to Louis XIV. His investments in two lucrative overseas ventures, the Guinea Company and the Asiento Company, made him so financially powerful that the Sun King offered him a fifteen-year private proprietorship of the new colony in Louisiana. It only lasted from 1712 to 1717. Crozat entrusted Lamothe-Cadillac (Detroit’s founder) with prospecting for precious metals that were rumored to be there, but there was no gold and Crozat surrendered his monopoly, dying in Paris in 1738.

Pierre Crozat, known ironically as *Crozat le pauvre*, was a prominent art collector, financier, and treasurer to the king. Principal patron of Antoine Watteau and other early Rococco artists, Crozat also worked for seven years as negotiator and agent for the Regent, Philippe II, *duc d’Orléans*, on the purchase of the art collection of Sweden’s Queen

Christina for the Orléans Collection. Crozat's own collected treasures were inherited by his nephews Louis-Francois, Joseph-Antoine and Louis-Antoine (who added to them). Catherine the Great of Russia bought the collection of Louis-Antoine Crozat, and it went to the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg.

Louis-Francois (also the *Marquis du Châtel*) had a daughter named Louise-Honorine, who married in 1750 French diplomat and statesman Étienne-Francois, *duc de Choiseul* (1719-1785). She brought her husband her share of the large Crozat fortune of her grandfather Antoine, and was in other ways a most devoted wife. Choiseul Island, the largest in the Solomons, is named after this *duc de Choiseul*. But before Étienne-Francois became *duc de Choiseul*, there was another that bore that title and served as Minister of State and Marshal of France. It is from him that the world was given the name for the sugary treat known as the *praline*. His name was César, *duc de Choiseul, Comte du Plessis-Praslin* (pronounced "prah-lan", died December 23, 1675).

The first recipe originated with the chef and/or valet of *Maréchal du Plessis-Praslin* at the *Château de Vaux-le Vicomte* back in the seventeenth century. César's chief culinary expert developed and named these early *praslines* for his boss, and (in their original state) they were whole almonds covered in caramelized sugar (individually coated, as opposed to a group of nuts being blanketed by a sheet of dark nougat). The idea was to sugarcoat the almonds to prevent indigestion.

French settlers brought the recipe to New Orleans where it was transformed into a Creole delicacy. Local pecans were abundant and replaced the almonds. Sugar cane abounded, as well, and one had to add butter and cream to round it out. The Crescent City has claimed the *praline* as its own, and it has been a popular candy throughout the Old South. It is said that house servants learned to prepare this Creole confection from their mistresses and many began to sell them for extra money on the streets of the *Vieux Carré*. Aunt Sally's Original Creole Pralines and Laura's Candies (both in the Quarter) date from the first half of the twentieth century and conjure up these old images.

Historian Antoine-Simon Le Page du Pratz, who arrived in Louisiana the year New Orleans was founded, praised the pecan and its use in "the *praline*", which he described as "one of the delicacies of New Orleans". Le Page du Pratz is best known for his *Histoire de la Louisiane*, which was published in three volumes in Paris in 1758. It was a work considered critical enough for Meriwether Lewis to bring along on the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

In other parts of the country, some people pronounce these crunchy, sugary morsels “pray-leens”, but never in New Orleans. “Prah-leens” is the way it’s said this far south.

The *praline*’s namesake hailed from an old family of Choiseul, which arose in the valley of the upper Marne in the tenth century. The family divided into numerous branches, three of which (Praslin and du Plessis and Hostel) were borne by César du Plessis-Praslin, Marshal of France. Armand-Jean du Plessis was the name of Louis XIII’s Cardinal Richelieu, and Armand Chapelle, 7th *duc de Richelieu* (distant kinsman of the Cardinal) was married to Alice Heine of New Orleans (who later became Princess of Monaco). César Gabriel de Choiseul, *duc de Praslin* (1712-1785) was another significant French diplomat and statesman. He succeeded his cousin Étienne-Francois, *duc de Choiseul*, as Minister of Foreign Affairs (Secretary of State) and served from 1761 to 1766. In 1763, he was made a peer of France and *duc de Praslin*. That was also the year he negotiated the peace that ended the Seven Years’ War and signed the Treaty of Paris (with France ceding Québec to Great Britain).

The Praline Connection is the name of a popular restaurant on Frenchman Street in the Faubourg Marigny. Founded in 1990 by Cecil Kaigler and Curtis Moore, this excellent eatery serves “down-home” Cajun-Creole style soul food. Creoles with soul, Dukes and delicacies, Cardinals and confections, it’s all part of New Orleans’ intricate *praline* connection.

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