

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Beignet ... Done That!

"Coffee is strong at the Café du Monde. ☐

Donuts are too hot to touch.

Just like a fool, when those sweet goodies cool,

I eat 'til I eat way too much."

- Jimmy Buffett

Bet you dollars to donuts that there's more history behind this deep-fried doughy confection than you may have imagined.



A trio of Morning Call beignets with hot café au lait

According to Michael Krondl, author of *Sweet Invention: A History of Dessert*, "In medieval Europe, donuts were what you gorged on during the Carnival, the feast period before the 40 days of Lent." But the word "doughnut" did not originate in Europe. That was something purely American. Krondl wrote, "Donuts' evolution began in America" in the 1600s with the Dutch who brought their version to New Netherlands and the Puritans who "brought 'fry cakes' to New England."

"Doughnut" is an All-American word, and its earliest recorded occurrences were in the early 1800s:

In an 1803 English cookbook (claims anthropologist Paul R. Mullins), which included "doughnuts" in an appendix of American recipes.

In an 1808 short story describing a spread of "fire-cakes and doughnuts".

Or a year later (1809) in the *History of New York* by Washington Irving, most commonly cited as the first written reference of the term "doughnut". Irving described the tasty treats as "balls of sweetened dough, fried in hog's fat, and called doughnuts, or *olykoeks*". *Olykoeks* is the New York Dutch spelling of a word literally meaning "oil cakes", first eaten by Germanic tribes in the Netherlands during the period between December 26 and January 6 (Twelfth Night).

These original balls of dough, when fried to a deep golden brown, resembled nuts ... hence the name. These "nuts" today might now be called doughnut holes. The ring-shaped doughnut did not come along until 1847 when Hanson Gregory, an American, reportedly invented the doughnut hole aboard a lime-trading ship when he was a mere sixteen years of age. Dissatisfied with the raw centers of doughnuts then twisted into various shapes, he punched a hole in the center of the dough with the ship's tin pepperbox. Removing the centers ensured that the doughnuts would be cooked evenly throughout, a technique he later revealed to his mother.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, "doughnut" (not donut) is the more traditional spelling. In the advertising-conscious United States, where "minit" and "kwik" are not unusual, the alternative spelling "donut" was used when the New York-based Display Doughnut Machine Corporation shortened the word so that it would be more pronounceable by foreigners (who they hoped would buy their automated equipment). The first known printed use of "donut" was in *Peck's Bad Boy and his Pa*, published in 1900. You may recall James Cagney (as George M. Cohan) playing the role of *Peck's Bad Boy* in the biopic *Yankee Doodle Dandy*. Although "doughnut" dominates outside the US (especially in the UK), "doughnut" and the abbreviated form

"donut" are at present both in widespread use in American English.

In 1934, Clark Gable showed Claudette Colbert how to "dunk" donuts in *It Happened One Night*, the same year mechanically produced donuts were being touted at the World's Fair in Chicago as "the food hit of the Century of Progress". Three years later, the very first "Krispy Kreme" was opened in Old Salem, North Carolina, and in 1948 the "Open Kettle" in Quincy, Massachusetts, opened. Two years later, the name was changed to "Dunkin' Donuts" and another national chain emerged (that's "Donuts", not "Doughnuts").

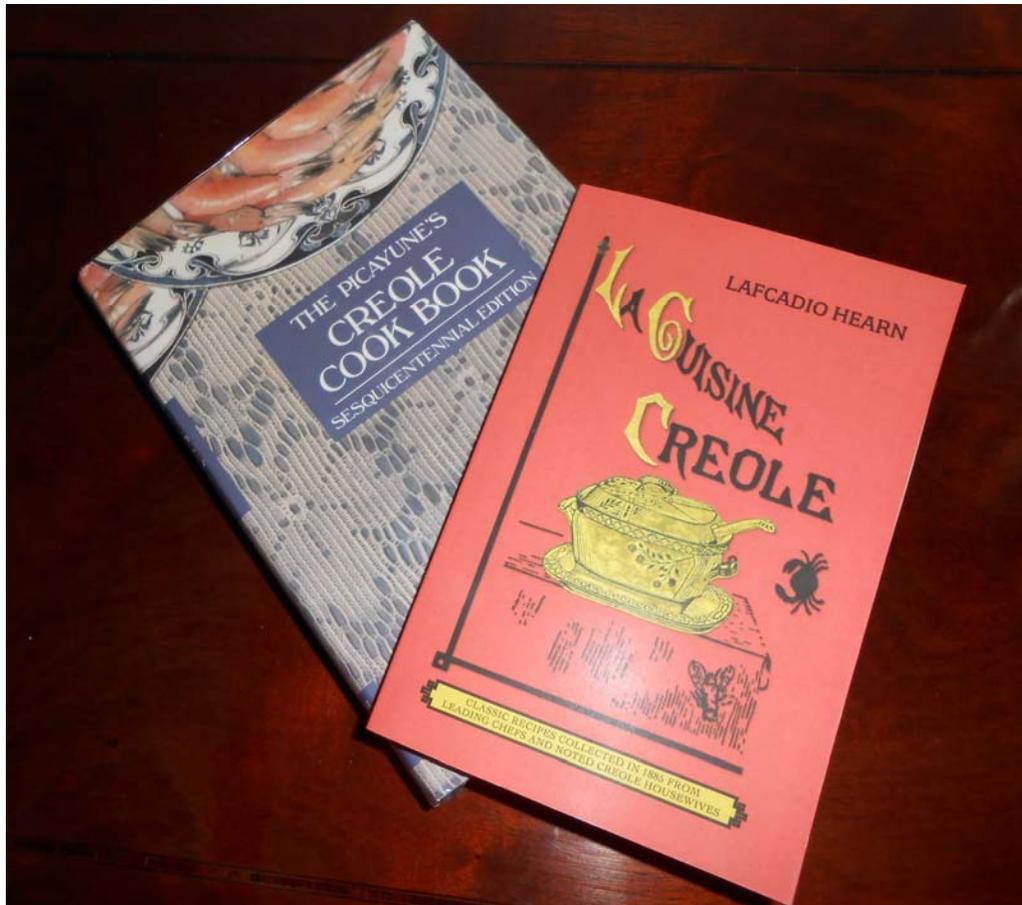
By the way, the expression "dollars to donuts" is an alliterative pseudo betting term, pseudo in that actual donuts are not involved, but a phrase that indicates short odds. Being willing to bet dollars against doughnuts (viewed as being worth less, and appearing to be a big zero) means that one is totally confident that it's a certainty – a sure bet. The phrase appears to have originated in mid nineteenth century America, where "dollars to dumplings" and "dollars to cobwebs" were also used. *The Daily Nevada State Journal*, February 1876, printed the "dollars to doughnuts" spelling ("donut" wasn't used until later):

"Whenever you hear any resident of a community attempting to decry the local paper ... it's dollars to doughnuts that such a person is either mad at the editor or is owing the office for subscription or advertising.

In New Orleans, donut history is every bit as interesting as the rest of the country. The two most common types of doughnuts in the US are the torus-shaped doughnut (with hole) and the filled doughnut, a flattened sphere injected with fruit preserves, custard, cream or other sweet fillings. But in New Orleans, there's the *beignet*. When locals say they're off to get coffee and donuts, they mean *beignets*. But in Lafcadio Hearn's 1885 classic *La Cuisine Creole*, the city's distinguished writer mentions the recipes for "doughnuts" five different ways, but there is no mention of the word "*beignet*".

In *The Picayune's Creole Cook Book* of 1901, the New Orleans "doughnut" is referred to as a "true Creole *Croquignole*", but still no mention of the word "*beignet*" (except in the introduction to the "Sweet *Entremet*" section of the cook book, where the "doughnuts" are one of the listings). An *entremet* (or *entremets*), from the Old French, means literally "between servings" and is in more recent French or Creole cuisine a small dish served between courses or simply a dessert. *The Picayune's Creole Cook Book* explained, "The ancient French colonists brought the custom of serving *Entremets Sucres* and *Entrees*, such as *Beignets*, *Compotes*, *Souffles*, *Gelees*, etc., from the old mother country to Louisiana. The Creoles applied these to the various delightful and refreshing fruits, which abound in Louisiana." Thus it was the French colonists of the 18th century that brought the custom of making *beignets* to New Orleans or

(according to some historians) the Ursuline Nuns in 1727.



The Picayune's Creole Cook Book and La Cuisine Creole

In Québec, the *croquignole* is an egg-based pastry of butter, sugar, flour and milk, deep-fried in grease. At Saint Pierre and Miquelon off the coast of Newfoundland, the only remnant of the former colonial empire of New France still under French control, *croquignoles* are traditionally prepared "à l'occasion du carnaval du Mardi Gras" – another carnival connection. .

But there's so much more to learn about the *beignet*?

Beignet is defined as: "fritter," 1835, from French *beignet* "fritter, eggroll, doughnut" (14th century), from Old French *buigne* "bump, lump," from a Germanic source (cf. Middle High German *bunge* "clod, lump"), or from Gaulish **bunia* (cf. Gaelic *bonnach*).

Today, New Orleans locals and visitors go crazy for these clods, bumps or lumps at the *Café du Monde* or the Morning Call (once in the French Quarter but now in Metairie). *Beignets*, the New Orleans specialty of deep-fried raised pieces of yeast dough, are usually about two inches in diameter or two inches square. After being fried, they are sprinkled with powdered sugar and served in groups of threes along with *café au*

lait. Beignets were declared the official state doughnut of Louisiana in 1986, and the powdered sugar played a part in the mail-borne anthrax scare of 2001. The airport's hazmat team was called out twice to inspect a powdery substance which turned out to be nothing more than *beignet* "donut dust". Often my tails or tuxedo fell victim to this sugary residue after a ball or other formal event.

Journalist Charles Kuralt wrote, "You can buy beignet mix and cans of distinctive chicory-flavored Louisiana coffee and take them home, but the sugary square doughnuts and the cafe au lait never taste the same as when they are brought hot to your table and served in the open air beside the crossword puzzle and the basketball scores there at the corner of Decatur and St. Ann. There is never an hour of the day or night when beignets and coffee are not tendered at the Cafe du Monde, but even if you have to keep your jacket buttoned against the cool fog rolling over the levee into the market squares, the hour after sunrise is best. Then, late revelers and early risers meet. Once I was among the former, but in my old age I have discovered that the coffee, the best in the world, tastes even better after a little bit of sleep."

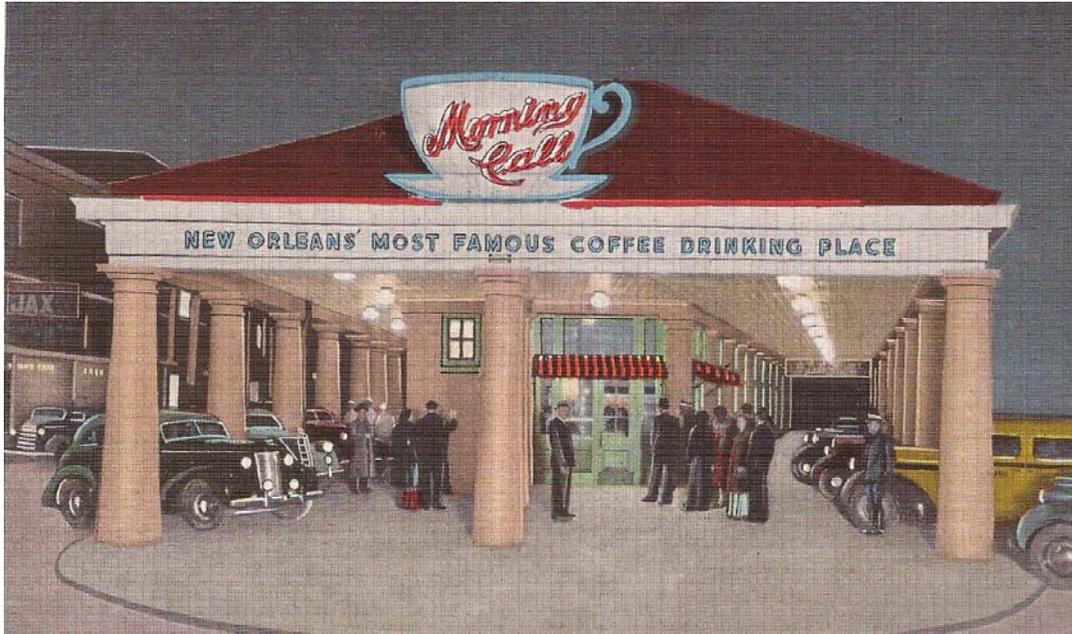
Beignets have enjoyed a Mardi Gras connection in France since at least the sixteenth century. The *Dictionnaire de la langue française du seizième siècle* (1925) by Edmond Huguet points out "*bignetz*" as something consumed during "*les Jours gras Bancquetz*," mentioning its usage by Pierre Gingore in his play *Le Jeu du Prince des Sotz et de Mere Sotte*, first performed on Mardi Gras in 1512. The *Différences de la Religions* (a seventeenth-century work) identifies "*bignets*" as a food eaten the last day before Lent.

Mots de Table, Mots de Bouche (1996), suggests that "buignets" were first brought into Provence by Muslims in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries. *Le Trésor de la langue française* states the use of *beignet* (or *bignez*) as a culinary term can be traced to the *Roman de Fauvel* of 1314. Massialot's *Le Cuisinier roial et bourgeois* (1691), *Le Cuisinier gascon* (1747) and *Le Dictionnaire portatif de cuisine* (1767) all mention *beignets* as a kind of pastry fried in butter, lard or sometimes oil.

Our New Orleans *beignets* of deep-fried *choux* paste may in fact have their origin in a medieval Islamic dish called *luqam al qadi*, the recipe of which calls for "a firm dough" shaped "in the size of hazelnuts" and fried "in sesame oil" and sprinkled "with fine ground sugar". The Moors of Andalusia may have introduced *buñuelos* (their word for *beignets*) into Mediterranean France. The Spanish name for this confection appears to have the same roots as the Old French *buigne*. Since Andalusia was under Islamic rule until the end of the fifteenth century, it is not surprising that the *beignet* was quite at home in New Orleans while under Spanish rule. And when it comes to New Orleans'

two most famous *beignet* purveyors, one was a Croation and the other of German extraction.

The younger of the two venerable New Orleans coffee houses, Morning Call, has been serving *café au lait* and *beignets* to generations of native New Orleanians and tourists since its founding in 1870 by Joseph Jurisich.



Old postcard view of the original Morning Call, from the collection of Ned Hémond

Operated by succeeding generations of his family, this popular donut café was located on Decatur Street near where the Joan of Arc statue stands today. Cars could pull up all around the point, and many families with kids in pajamas parked and got their *beignet* fix without leaving their vehicles. Morning Call (like Café du Monde) is open 24/7, left their Quarter location in 1974 and moved to Metairie.

Morning Call's *beignets* are hand rolled and cut before being deep-fried. The rich chicory coffee (chicory root has been a New Orleans coffee additive for over a century) is brewed using the traditional "french drip method" which allows the coffee to build body and intensity. Whole milk is heated to a near boil then mixed with the coffee to form the perfect *café au lait*. It is a real treat to watch one's server pour the *café* and the *lait* simultaneously high above the cups.



Morning Call by night, 17th Street location

Customers have been enjoying coffee and *beignets* at *Café du Monde* all the way back to the Civil War. 1862 was the year when the iconic "Coffee and Doughnuts" stand was founded by Fred Koeniger in the upper end of the French Market. Hubert Fernandez purchased the business in May of 1942, and it has remained in family hands ever since. At the time of the acquisition, Fernandez was the proprietor of the Fernandez Wine Cellar across the street in the Lower Pontalba Apartment Building.

In 1972, the family closed the wine business in order to focus all their efforts on the historic coffee stand. *Café du Monde*, upon the death of Hubert Fernandez, came under the management of his widow, June Fernandez, along with his sister Leonora Schwarz, and two daughters, Sylvia Maher and Cynthia Roman. The spouses of these three women, Wilbur Schwarz, Bob Maher and Harry Roman became the main officers of the corporation. Wilbur Robert Schwarz, who served as President of H. N. Fernandez, Inc., died in April of 2012 at 95 years of age.



Postcard scene of the Café du Monde, from the collection of Ned Hémar

For its first 123 years, *Café du Monde*, had but one location (shown above). But during the 1984 World's Fair in New Orleans, Japanese businessmen came to the popular café and were duly impressed. The following year (1985), the second *Café du Monde* opened in Esplanade Mall. Others were established in the Lakeside Mall, the Riverwalk and in Mandeville. Meanwhile, back in Japan, the franchise took off. According to the company website, as of May 2002, there were over 50 *Café Du Monde* coffee stands throughout Japan in cities such as Tokyo, Osaka and Hiroshima. Lafcadio Hearn would be delighted.

Café du Monde is open 24 hours a day every day except Christmas or on days when the occasional hurricane gets too close for comfort, like Katrina. It also closed in the spring of 2001 because of a kitchen fire but was back in business a week later.

As for traditional toroidal doughnuts and those jelly and cream filled varieties, McKenzie's Pastry Shoppes and Tastee Donuts were two popular stops for donut lovers. Long before the McKenzie chain's demise in 2001, Dick Bruce appeared on local TV commercials praising McKenzie's doughnuts, pies and king cakes (to name just a few of its many popular items).



The McKenzie sign back on Harrison Avenue

Tastee Donuts was founded by Popeyes Chicken founder Al Copeland's brother Gil. The Tastee franchise purchased its old rival's logo rights and recipes after McKenzie's went under. In 2009, the familiar McKenzie's sign (shown above) appeared once again on Harrison Avenue in Lakeview at the very same location where a McKenzie's bakery once operated. Curiously, the new shop is a Tastee Donuts franchisee. The Tastee sign's there, too, but it's the McKenzie's logo that gets all the nostalgic attraction. Customers crave the items that use the original McKenzie's recipes, like buttermilk drops and turtles. And you can order a few Kastle Burgers, as well.

Now there's a new donut emporium on the Northshore. The Butter Krisp Diner in Covington cranks out donuts 24/7 from 150-200 dozen glazed and about 100 dozen mixed each weekend. Owners Debbie & Gil Copeland have the donut pedigree (Young Gil's dad created Tastee Donuts). Years before, a "Butter Krisp" Restaurant stood at 2010 St. Charles Avenue and served "hot chili" (among other dishes).

New Orleans is, without doubt, a donut town (although its residents have apparently forgotten the various Mardi Gras connections to this delectable treat). And where else but the Crescent City would there be a high energy band known for their wild stage antics that plays 80s, 90s, and Glam Rock? The band's name?

"Bag of Donuts," of course.

NED HÉMARD

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