

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Blessed Are The Peacemakers

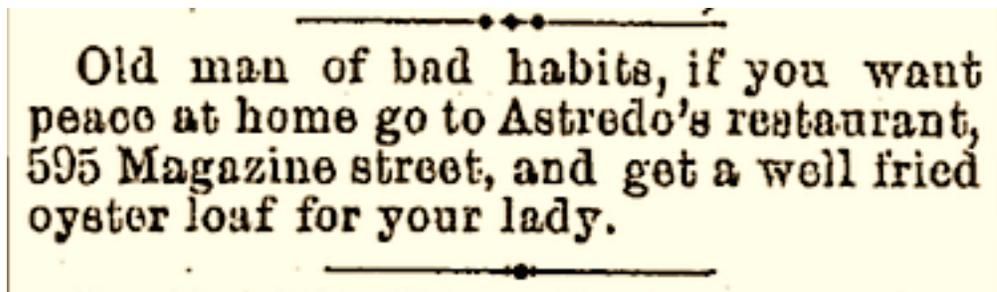
History of the Po-Boy (Part One)

Long before the “poor boy” sandwich made its debut in 1929 in New Orleans (since that time often shortened to “po-boy”), French bread sandwiches were known as loaves. The most significant of these was the “oyster loaf,” also known as “The Peacemaker”.

An article in the Baton Rouge *Daily Advocate* dated May 17, 1891, explained the sandwich and its virtues, as reported in a New York newspaper:

“New Orleans is famous for its oyster loaves. You see them advertised everywhere in the streets. An oyster loaf is half of a ten-cent double-pointed loaf of white bread. It is split down one side and then a part of its soft interior is taken out and all the rest is toasted. After that a dozen fried oysters are put in the loaf and it is closed and has a wedge of toasted bread fitted into its open end. The oyster loaf is said to be an amazing peacemaker for married men on lodge nights.”

One such ad offering “peace at home” is shown below.



Astredo's ad in the New Orleans Item dated November 2, 1880

In other words, if a husband stayed out too late with the boys playing cards or for whatever reason, it was a smart idea to bring home an oyster loaf to his wife as a “peace” offering.

According to an 1873 article in the *Picayune*, dated November 23rd, one unfortunate bookkeeper named Brimmers was working late one evening. On his way home, drawn in by the savory aroma of a nearby oyster saloon, he dropped in to get his wife "a dozen fried oysters in a loaf, put up in one of those square boxes, and styled by rascally old husbands peacemakers."

After partaking a few raw for himself and settling the bill, Brimmers accidentally grabbed the wrong package from the bar. Back at home, after kissing his dear wife Laura, he lovingly presented her with his thoughtful offering of crisply fried, succulent oysters. He went into the dining room to "get a bit of pickle to go with them." After feeling in the sideboard for the jar, he heard "a scream chilling his blood and raising his hair."

"Brimmers, oh Brimmers! has it come to this?" she exclaimed as she "held up a bottle of Schiedam Schnapps".

According to the *Picayune*, "Brimmers never recovered" from his *faux pas*. Schiedam Schnapps is actually Holland gin!



Wolfe's Aromatic Schiedam Schnapps bottle, displayed to the right

It is fortunate that I remember some jokes my grandfather told me, humorous stories from a bygone era in New Orleans. One involved a Frenchman, an Italian and an Irishman. It seemed as if everyone was an immigrant in those days. The joke went like this:

The trio was walking along together and spied a quarter in front of them on the banquette. 25 cents to spend on something worthwhile, but they each saw the coin at the same time. How would they resolve the problem?

After some thought, they decided to buy an oyster loaf and each would take a nap. Upon waking, their dreams would be related and the best dream would win the oyster loaf.

The Frenchman dreamed of Paris in the springtime, a stroll with a lovely *coquette* along the Seine with the Eiffel Tower in the background. The Italian's dream took him to Tuscany, with delicious pasta, a bottle of *Chianti* and, of course, a *giovane e bella donna*.

"Well, what about your dream?" the two asked the Irishman.

"I dreamed I was hungry and ate the oyster loaf," he replied.

That was my first encounter with the expression "oyster loaf".

Curiously, one of its earliest references for "oyster loaf" is found in an 1824 cookery book entitled *The Virginia House-Wife or, Methodical Cook* by Mary Randolph. But Mrs. Randolph's recipe involves "little round loaves" filled with oyster stew (cooked with butter and cream) rather than the fried oyster filling a typical New Orleans oyster loaf.

The 1901 edition of *The Picayune's Creole Cook Book* printed a recipe for the "oyster loaf" or "*La Médiatrice*". Simply stated, it included:

"Delicate French loaves of Bread.
2 Dozen Oysters to a Loaf.
1 Tablespoon of Melted Butter."

"This is called the 'famous peacemaker' in New Orleans," it explained.

"Every husband, who is detained down town, laughingly carries home an oyster loaf, or *Médiatrice*, to make 'peace' with his anxiously waiting wife. Right justly is the Oyster Loaf called the 'Peacemaker,' for, well made, it is enough to bring the smiles to the face of the most disheartened wife."

Interestingly, the *Cook Book* suggested "broiled or creamed oysters" rather than "fried" ones.

The *Picayune* had earlier, on March 1, 1896, bestowed the popular French bread sandwich "beatitude" status, as shown below:

OUR PICAYUNES.

Charity visiting is as expensive as shopping.

A walking dress for a long walk should be short.

A grand jury should never be charged with wind.

Blessed is the peacemaker, for he shall be an oyster loaf.

Bank robbers are not elected by

But who was the actual creator of the New Orleans version of the sandwich known as "The Peacemaker" or "Oyster Loaf"? His name was Captain Ignatio Catanzaro. According to an article in the *Picayune*, dated June 21, 1903, "Catanzaro came to New Orleans, accompanied by the bright, winsome young beauty, who was afterwards made his wife, on a steamship that sailed from Palermo, Italy, in 1840."

Catanzaro's life was one of adventure for, after remaining some time in the Crescent City, he became attached to travel and shipped out on board an English trader. He was a sailor by nature, skilled in the art of handling canvas-clad boats. After spending two years at sea, visiting almost every port in the world, including Le Havre, Liverpool, New York and Mobile, he returned to New Orleans and wed in the St. Louis Cathedral the young lady he had previously courted.

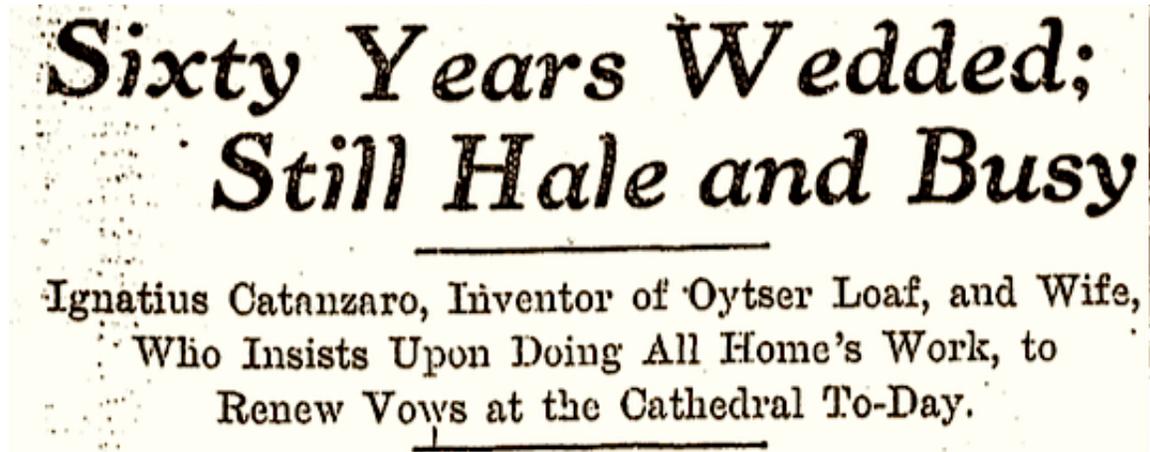
At the outbreak of the American Civil War, Catanzaro returned to his native Italy, leaving his family in New Orleans. Due to the rigid Union Blockade, he was forced to remain in Europe for some time. He made his way back to New Orleans and decided to try his hand in Mexico, so he "sailed for Matamoras in an oyster lugger" (a small two or three-masted sailing vessel with asymmetrical four-sided sails known as lugsails). Before long, Captain Catanzaro was quite successful in the Mexican-American trade, acquiring and maintaining a number of trim luggers that plied the waters of the Gulf Coast. His fleet of boats became the official carriers of the Mexican Government, which had become independent of Spanish rule. Gold and cotton were Mexico's chief exports. Eventually steamships replaced the luggers commanded by this hardy sea captain.

After Federal troops had captured Mobile, Catanzaro returned home

and immediately started in the saloon business on Baronne Street, between Lafayette and Poydras, where he remained for four years. Later, he moved his business to 1310 Dryades, near Erato. During the Federal occupation of the city, "Captain Catanzaro was the proprietor, in conjunction with his wife's father, of all the round stalls in the Poydras Market. He was doing a thriving business until General Butler tore the stands down during his regime as Commander of New Orleans during the Civil War."

The *Picayune* further reported, "Captain Catanzaro has the honor of having originated the oyster loaf. He was one of the first to see that money could be made in the oyster trade, and in order to get trade he conceived the idea of making the famous oyster cocktail, which, with the oyster loaf, soon won fame and fortune for their originator."

On June 6, 1913, the *Picayune* announced Captain and Mrs. Catanzaro's 60th wedding anniversary.



The paper once again acclaimed him as the "father of the oyster loaf" and inventor of that "delectable sandwich". In addition to that accolade, he and Mrs. Catanzaro, the paper stated, were to enjoy the anniversary celebration with "their offspring, eight children, twenty-three grandchildren and one great-grandchild."



IGNATIUS CATANZARO.



MRS. I. CATANZARO.

Originator of the Oyster Loaf, Ignacio Catanzaro, and his wife

Later that summer (August 24, 1913), there was an obituary in the *Picayune* for one of Captain and Mrs. Catanzaro's children, Joseph I. "Joe" Catanzaro, age 57. It was stated therein that it was Joe, "born and reared in the Second Ward," some forty years before, "at 1310 Dryades Street, made the first oyster loaf, which he called 'peacemaker,' and the new manner of preparing the luscious bivalve sprung into instant popularity that has survived to this day." That would have been circa 1873 when Joseph Catanzaro was about 17 years of age. Remember that the "oyster loaf," aka "peacemaker", was already a local mainstay in 1873 when the *Picayune* reported poor Brimmers bringing the wrong package home to his trusting wife.

So who was the creator, father or son? It would appear that the father, as reported in the *Picayune* more than once, was undoubtedly the iconic sandwich's creator – as well as the originator of the oyster cocktail. It might be the case that Papa Ignatio invented the actual sandwich, while Son Joe came up with the name "Peacemaker". But how did an "Italian" creation made with French bread come to be given the French name "*La Médiatrice*," or "Mediator" – another name for "Peacemaker" – as it was called in the *The Picayune's Creole Cook*

Book?

To determine the answers to this series of historical conundrums, I hope I have been a respectable *médiateur*.



Oyster Loaves, much loved in New Orleans for years

One thing is evident. The New Orleans version of the oyster loaf, also known as "The Peacemaker," or "*La Médiatrice*," composed of French bread and fried oysters, first appeared in New Orleans as early as 1873 or perhaps almost a decade earlier, when Captain Catanzaro first opened his business in the Crescent City. He has truly earned his rightful place in the Pantheon of New Orleans Po-Boy History.

Also going into service in 1873 was the Colt Single Action Army revolver. It, too, was known as the "Peacemaker".

Incidentally, poor Brimmers was not the only person to have bad luck with an oyster loaf. In early November 1910, two accidents occurred in New Orleans involving the popular sandwich, one resulting in death and the other possibly fatal. Each accident occurred in the Carrollton area of the city, and the victim in each case was named Fitzgerald, although neither was related to the other. Thomas G. Fitzgerald rushed to board a car with an oyster loaf tucked under his arm. He fell beneath the wheels, and it was reported that he might not recover from his injuries. William O. Fitzgerald, a painter by profession, had a little too much to drink, bought an oyster loaf on Oak Street, heard a police whistle, frantically ran into a telegraph pole, knocked himself out and drowned to death in a ditch.

That such a tragic coincidence could even transpire indicates how much the oyster loaf's popularity had grown in the Crescent City. The

unique dual event was featured in newspapers throughout the nation, such as the *Dallas Morning News* and the *Trenton Evening Times*, whose headlines are displayed below.

COINCIDENT IS PECULIAR.

**Two Men Named Fitzgerald, Each
Carrying Oyster Loaf, Figure in
Different Accidents.**

BAD LUCK IN OYSTER LOAF.

**Concerned in Accidents to Two, One of
Which is Fatal.**

Oak Street will be a happier place this month when it is transformed into a corridor of joyous celebration. On Sunday, October 23, 2016, the 10th Annual Oak Street Po-Boy Festival will be held in appreciation of one of New Orleans most distinctive and appetizing culinary creations. But let us not forget what came before.

Blessed are the peacemakers, and all those other fabulous French bread creations from our unique and fascinating hometown.

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New Orleans Nostalgia
"Blessed Are The Peacemakers"
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