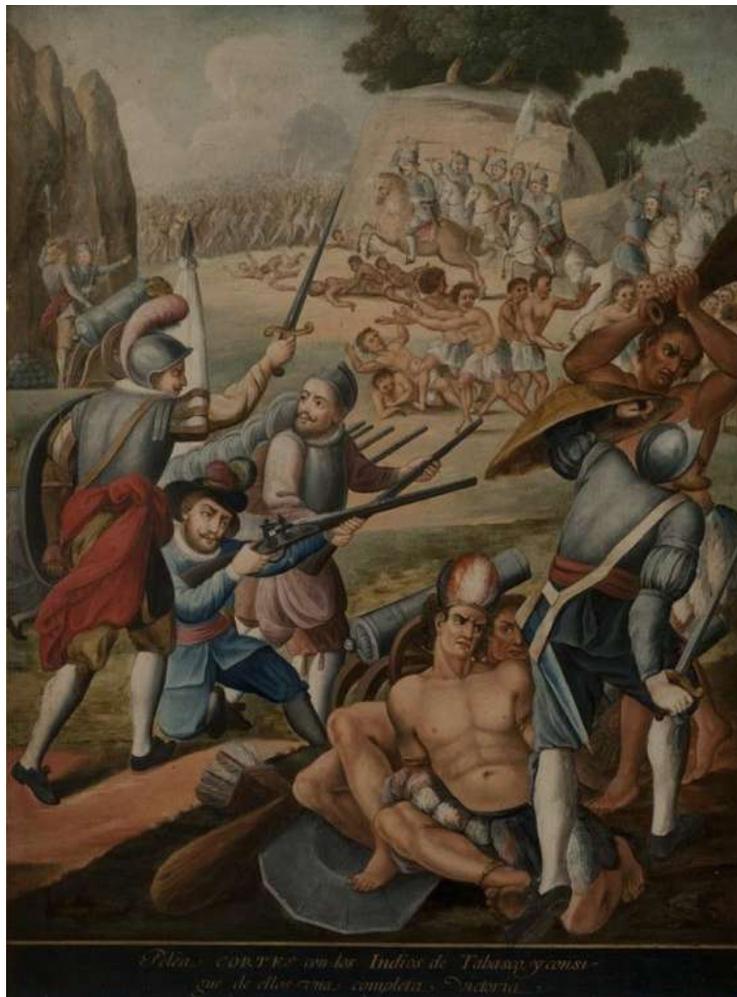


Chili Today, Hot Tamale

Many years before the Spanish erected a structure at the present site of the New Orleans French Market in 1791, they were off conquering Mexico in the early 16th century. Conquistador Hernán Cortés and his men landed in the Yucatan Peninsula in the spring of 1519, won a battle against the natives of Tabasco (overlooking the peppers) and by November had arrived at the gates of Tenochitlán. The following year hostilities had erupted there, and an ensuing massacre resulted in the death of Montezuma (the Aztec ruler).



Victory of Hernán Cortés at Tabasco, Museo de América, Madrid

Despite the decline of their empire, much of the Mesoamerican culture remained intact after the fall of the Aztec's capital city. In fact, the freedom from Aztec domination was welcomed by most of the other cultures under their control. These people of Central Mexico spoke Nahuatl, the language used in the region since at least the 7th century AD.



Avocado, derived from ahucatl, the Nahuatl word for "testicle"

If one were to take a stroll through the fruit and vegetable stalls in the French Market, English words of Nahuatl origin would be quite commonplace. Spaniards first heard the words "avocado" and "tomato" by their similar Nahuatl names. The avocado also created a legal conundrum.

The word is derived from *ahuacatl*, meaning both "fruit of the avocado tree" and "testicle". *Ahuacamolli* were two Nahuatl words combined to mean "avocado soup or sauce", and that was the origin of *guacamole*. Spanish speakers substituted *avocado* for *ahuacatl*, since *avocado* was the early Spanish word for "lawyer" and it sounded so similar. The Spanish word for someone in the legal profession has since been changed to *abogado*. One can only guess why.

Avocado first appeared in English in 1697 in the compound phrase "avogato pear", and "alligator pear" is a very common New Orleans nickname for the popular green fruit. *Avocado* was the original Spanish word for "lawyer" because of its Latin connection (*advocatus* being the past participle of *advocare*, to call or summon for counsel). "Advocate" is another English word for "attorney", and in French it's *avocat*. *Avocat* is also the French word for *avocado*.

Of course there's no escaping the fact that the Latin word for "witness" is *testis*, which derives from an Indo-European word for the number three. At first this may seem like faulty math, but the Romans regarded a witness as a trustworthy third party. "Testimony", "testify", "attest", "intestate", "contest", "testament" and "testamentary" all derive from this Latin source, but only in a figurative way. It wasn't that the Romans would have a "witness" swear on his "avocados", but that they were a "witness" to that person's virility.

According to a 2011 article in *Psychology Today*, we learn more about "testifying" in ancient Rome. There, "two men taking an oath of allegiance held each other's testicles, and men held their own testicles as a sign of truthfulness while bearing witness in a public forum." Although the Romans found a word to describe this, they didn't invent the practice itself. "Other primates had already been doing this for millions of years," explained the article. Two male baboons cooperate with each other in this manner today. In "forming aggressive alliances against other baboons", they "frequently fondle each other's genitalia."

Leaving Rome for a return trip to Mesoamerica, additional English words of Nahuatl origin include "chili" (great on a "Lucky Dog" purchased in the French Quarter), "chocolate", "coyote" and "tamale". Tamales originated in Mesoamerica as early as 8000 to 5000 BC, and pre-Columbian Aztecs made theirs from all manner of ingredients, including frog, flamingo, turkey, gopher, rabbit, fish, fruits, squash and beans. And no pre-Katrina New Orleanian can think of tamales without remembering fondly Manuel's Hot Tamales on South Carrollton in Mid-City.

Born in Mexico, Manuel Hernandez (1892 – 1999) started the business in 1932 and operated a handcart lit by a kerosene lantern at the corner of Carrollton and Canal. Depending on one's age, the remembered price varied through the years. When Manuel began, it was only 15 cents a dozen. It was not unusual in my family for us to

buy two dozen Manuel's tamales for only a dollar, and return home to watch "Saturday Night at the Movies" followed by "Morgus the Magnificent". In those days, Manuel's all beef tamales were wrapped in real cornhusks, but in the years leading up to Hurricane Katrina they were wrapped in paper (but every bit as good). The other key ingredients were corn meal, chili powder and great spices.



Manuel's New Orleans Tradition For 50 Years

Manuel Hernandez started selling his hot tamales in New Orleans from a cart at the corner of Canal Street and Carrollton Avenue for 15 cents a dozen in 1933. He moved to the company's current location, 4709 South Carrollton, in 1960.

Hernandez died in 1968, and the business passed to William Schneider, his son-in-law. Manuel's tamales are known for their juiciness and their secret blend of spices and peppers. This is really a French-Spanish Tamale that was created a half century ago. The secret is really good meat & a lot of spices.

In addition to Manuel's grand tamales, they also have a spicy selection of other taste treats to choose from. All food items are prepared to go & include famous Chili, Tamales with Cheese & Chile, Enchiladas, Nachos & Hot Dogs with Chili.

Manuel's is open 7 days a week, 12 Noon to 1 AM



Memories of Manuel's, local tamale favorite for over seventy years

Manuel and his family had other locations around town, not to mention the main operation at 4709 South Carrollton (with sliding window take-out service). Before Katrina, they were producing 16,000

tamales a week. Manuel's Hot Tamales were a favorite food of author John Kennedy Toole, as was a Parasol's roast beef po-boy. Many New Orleanians bemoan the fact that Manuel's, having been inundated by nearly six feet of water, hasn't returned since the storm. Great places like Sid-Mar's in Bucktown elicit similar feelings. For a good while, Camellia Grill was sorely missed but is now back stronger than ever.

For some time, since the early part of the 20th century, tamales have been prevalent along the Mississippi from New Orleans up to Memphis. Migrant workers from the eastern coast of Mexico came through the Port of New Orleans, worked on riverboats and barges and ended up working in the cotton fields of the Delta. There they introduced the tamales to their black co-workers. Other tamales have steam-cooked corn dough known as *masa* and come with or without a filling (often chicken or other ingredients). In the Delta (as in Manuel's version), tamales are made with cornmeal instead of *masa*, which (according to Amy Evans, oral historian for Southern Foodways Alliance) has a grittier texture than fine corn flower (and) they are boiled, not steamed."

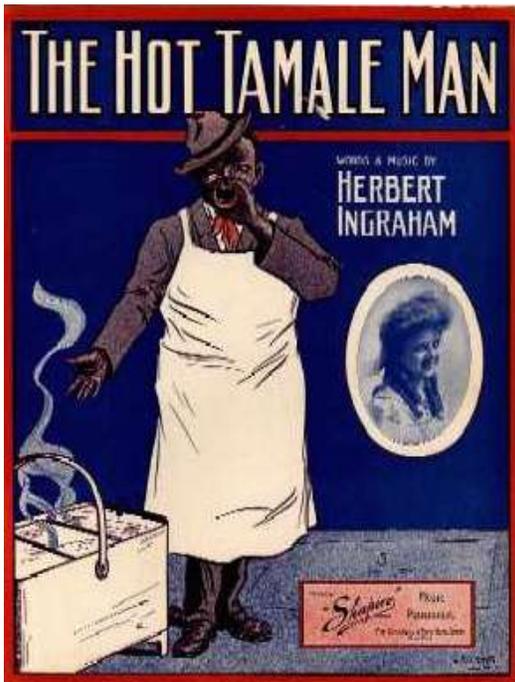


Tamales presented at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893

Tamales, as we know them today, were first eaten in the United States as early as 1893, when they were featured at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, which was held to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' arrival in the New World in

1492. Tamales became popular in Chicago and, as a result, a tradition of roving tamale sellers peddling “tamales calientes,” which became “hot tamales,” and the subject of early 20th-century songs.

In 1909, Chicago composer Herbert Ingraham published “The Hot Tamale Man,” with a lyrical description of “a hot ta-mot out of a steamin’ pot.” Early New Orleans-born jazz cornetist Freddie Keppard (1889 – 1933), like so many local musicians, made a career in Chicago. He played with Cook’s Dreamland Orchestra, as well as its smaller contingent Cookie’s Gingersnaps, and recorded “Here Comes The Hot Tamale Man” in 1926. New Orleans beloved New Leviathan Oriental Foxtrot Orchestra recorded the song in 1989 (with lyrics sung by George Schmidt) and was the album title, as well. The band provides a great Charleston rhythm response: “We’ve Got Red Hots! Red Hots, That’s What!”



The Hot Tamale Man (1909)

Jazz great Freddie Keppard

Delta blues giant Robert Johnson (1911 – 1938) recorded the song “They’re Red Hot” on November 27, 1936 (after Manuel had been in business for four years). This blues classic was covered (appropriately) by the “Red Hot Chili Peppers”, and was also recorded by Eric Clapton. Johnson also wrote “Sweet Home Chicago”, a song later played by the “Blues Brothers”.

Some say Delta tamales made their way up to Chicago with Delta musicians and other black workers migrating from the South, although there is that earlier Chicago tamale connection with the World's Fair in 1893, as well as early songs with Chicago pedigrees.

In New Orleans today, we have a number of tamale options. There are pop-ups, food trucks and, at R & O's in Bucktown, there is a meatball version of the classic New Orleans style tamale. For a touch of the Delta, native Memphian Chip Apperson (at his High Hat Café on Freret Street) offers cornhusk tamales, as well as pimento cheese plates, awesome fried chicken, watermelon and lump crabmeat salads, flavorful greens and delicious fried catfish with hushpuppies.

Tamales have been made in Louisiana for several centuries. Spain established the presidio *Nuestra Señora del Pilar de Los Adaes*, located near present-day Robeline, Louisiana, only twelve miles from Natchitoches. Descendants of these Spanish settlers from central Mexico were the first tamale makers to arrive in the eastern United States. Earlier this October, Zwolle, Louisiana, hosted its annual tamale festival, dedicated to celebrating the "rich Spanish and Indian heritage of the people of the town." Originally an Indian village, Zwolle was named for the hometown of a wealthy Dutch coffee merchant who helped finance the railroad there. It didn't hurt that "Zwolle" rhymes with "Tamale".

This author has recently returned from the Delta Hot Tamale Festival in Greenville, Mississippi, held each year on the third weekend in October. I was delighted to meet two of the three "Hot-Ta-Mama" organizers of the festival, Anne Martin and Betty Lynn Cameron. Valerie Lee is the third. They had the vision to see not just a tamale cooking competition, but an entire festival devoted to Delta tamales. After Greenville's mayor proclaimed his town "The Hot Tamale Capital of the World" in 2012, the first festival was held later that fall.

New Orleans Garden District resident, writer and Greenville native Julia Reed hosted a "Literary/Culinary Mash-Up", which featured authors and culinary historians (such as Jessica Harris and Patrick Dunne), artists (such as John Alexander), journalists (such as Hodding Carter III) and notable New Orleans chefs (such as Ryan Prewitt of *Pêche* and John Goodenough of Carrollton Market), as well as others from around the country. The event has been featured in *Garden & Gun*, *The New Yorker* and other publications.

In Greenville, there are numerous tamale purveyors, even without the festival. In addition to an extraordinary steak at Doe's Eat Place, tamales were an additional culinary bonus. Hot Tamale Heaven is another popular local provider.



DELTA HOT TAMALES FESTIVAL

It must be noted that New Orleans tamale master Manuel Hernandez's experience came directly from Mexico and not by way of the Delta. His daughter Frances Schneider said that her father came from a large family and "was a little bit wild, and he used to ... ride the dangerous bulls." In the merchant marines as a young man, Manuel sailed around the world before landing in New Orleans, marrying and settling down.

As for Chicago, the tamale wasn't the only first at the 1893 World's Fair. Fatima Djemille, one of three belly dancers performing under the stage name "Little Egypt" also appeared at the 1893 Columbian Exposition.

World's fairs have often started a year late. Celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the St. Louis World's Fair did not open until 1904.

After many years as delicious food on the run, reasonably priced and often packaged in newspaper - and they still are today - tamales can almost be considered *haute cuisine* in some circles. Many chefs prepare imaginative sauces or garnishes that thrill the palate, as well as the eye. For years now, I've particularly enjoyed the tamales at

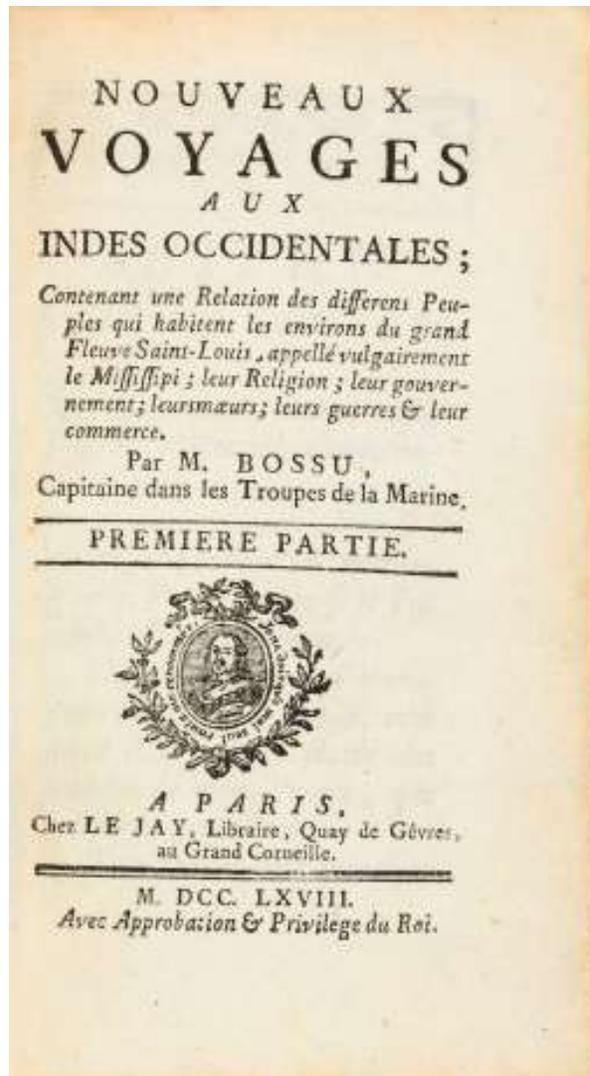
Walker's Drive-In, located in the Fondren arts district of Jackson, Mississippi. Promising "an upscale experience in a casual atmosphere," Walker's also offers incredible fried Portobello mushrooms with Comeback sauce, an outstanding introduction to their creative tamale dish (shown below):



The sauce is wonderful on Walker's tamales.

Eventually, the chili of Mesoamerica became a Southern stew popular with the Indians. French adventurer and chronicler Jean Bernard Bossu, who visited Louisiana in 1751, and subsequently in 1761, wrote about chili in his *Voyages*:

"The natives, as I have already said, lived on dried and smoked game, roasted or boiled with corn ground in a hardwood mortar. This food called chili, is very tasty and healthful. When I went up the Mobile River with the Indians, I lived for about two months on this food. I can assure you I never felt better than I did during this period."



Nowadays, Chicago's "Mother-in-law sandwich" features a hot tamale nestled in a hot dog bun loaded with chili. Wouldn't you love to have "witnessed" Ernie K-Doe's "testimonial" on that?

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Chili Today, Hot Tamale"
Ned Hémard
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