

Coffee With Chicory, Part 2

Rose Nicaud

The history of coffee in New Orleans would not be complete without mentioning the city's entrepreneurial coffee vendor, Rose Nicaud.



Rose. Cilà qui vende café en bas la halle.
(Rose, who sells coffee in the French Market.)

In the early nineteenth century, Rose Nicaud became renowned as the

first coffee vendor in the Crescent City. Once a slave, later a free person of color, Rose served steaming hot “*café noir ou café au lait*” from her portable push cart, which she rolled through the French Market on Sundays, selling coffee after Mass. She envisioned a way to have a successful business by providing an essential service to French Market vendors, workers and shoppers by providing them with fresh, hot coffee.

Another accomplished woman, Catharine Cole (*nom de plume* of Martha R. Field), who wrote for the New Orleans *Daily Picayune* from 1881 to 1894, was the first full-time woman staff writer on the paper. Here’s what she had to say about Rose and her wonderful coffee:

“Her coffee was like the benediction that follows after prayer, or if you prefer it, the Benedictine after dinner.”



Catharine Cole

Writing for the *Times-Picayune* in 1987, Marjorie Roehl wrote, “Rose’s stand was said to be the most cosmopolitan spot in New Orleans, attracting wealthy planters as well as men from luggers, who couldn’t start their day without a cup of Rose’s *café au lait*.”

In the early days of her successful enterprise, Rose was able to save a portion of her earnings, which she was allowed to keep by law until she earned enough to purchase her freedom. After initially operating out of her cart, she later created a permanent stand in the French Market, with seating for her customers. Rose's achievement inspired numerous other resourceful women of color, who sold coffee from small portable stands. Others in the nineteenth and early twentieth century sold not only coffee, but also calas, pralines and other food and beverage items in the French Market and on the streets of the city's old neighborhoods. These women were known as *Les Vendeuses*.

Today there is a coffee shop named for the pioneering coffee seller, the Café Rose Nicaud, at 632 Frenchmen Street in the Marigny neighborhood. Owned by Melba Ferdinand and her husband Kenneth, a trumpeter, it honors Rose's accomplishments.

Did the Coffee Break Originate in New Orleans?

If one is referring to that time of the day when a factory worker gets a short reprieve from the repetitiveness of his daily routine or a civil service worker gets a break from his white collar job, no, that probably did not originate in New Orleans. It is said that the first coffee break of that kind allegedly was put into effect in the late nineteenth century in Stoughton, Wisconsin, with the wives of Norwegian immigrants. As a result, the city of Stoughton celebrates an annual event known as the Stoughton Coffee Break Festival. *Time Magazine* noted in 1951, that "[s]ince the war, the coffee break has been written into union contracts". Coffee breaks today are usually 10 to 20 minutes long and usually occur at the end of the first third of the work shift.

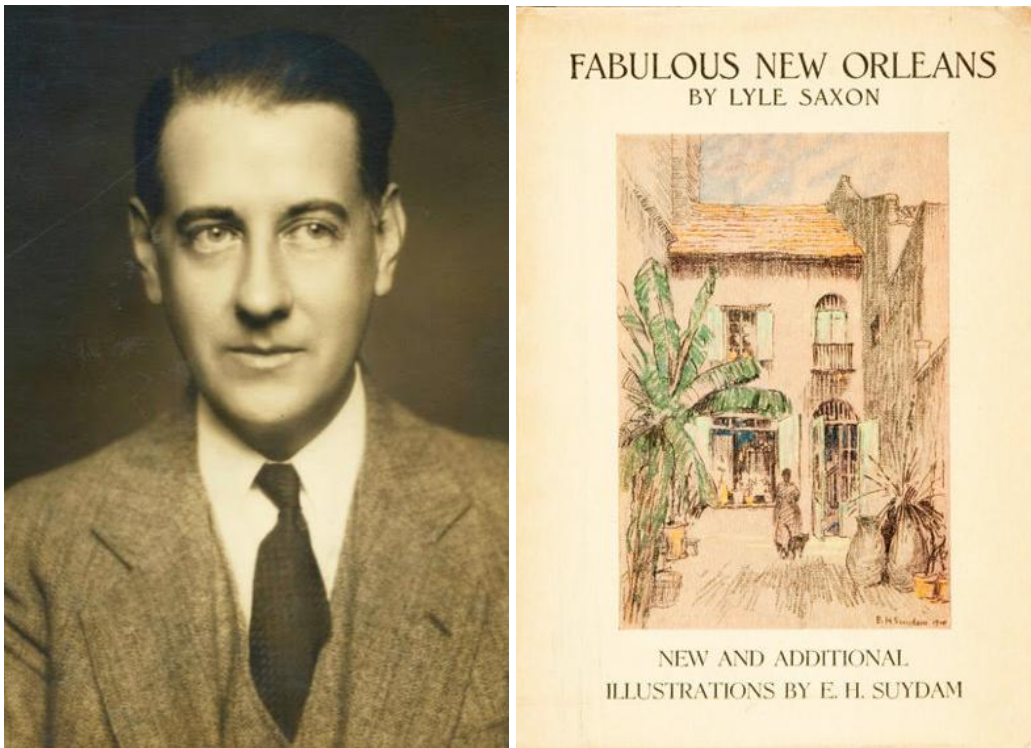
However, if one is thinking of that random escape from the formality of business, New Orleanians have been "breaking" from work for any number of reasons whatsoever and over a much longer period of time than other more fast-paced communities.

Lyle Saxon offered that particular interpretation of what is meant by a coffee break in his book *Fabulous New Orleans* (1928):

"Visitors never fail to comment upon the coffee-houses tucked away in corners. For French drip-coffee is the favorite legal beverage of the men of New Orleans. And it is no unusual thing for a business man to say casually: 'Well, let's go and get a cup of coffee,' as a visitor in his office is making ready to depart. It is a little thing perhaps, this

drinking of coffee at odd times, but it is very characteristic of the city itself. Men in New Orleans give more thought to the business of living than men in other American cities, I believe. ... There is a certain leisureliness, a certain willingness to amuse one's self by the way, which is, to me, very delightful. I have heard northern businessmen complain bitterly about these little interruptions for coffee or what-not; but it is strange how soon they adapt themselves to the habits of the city. In time they seem to grow to like it."

With great coffee stands like Café Du Monde (1862) and Morning Call (1870) that have been in operation cumulatively for more than three hundred years, it is no surprise that any one of us would take off for such a satisfying interlude.



Lyle Saxon, author, and his work, Fabulous New Orleans

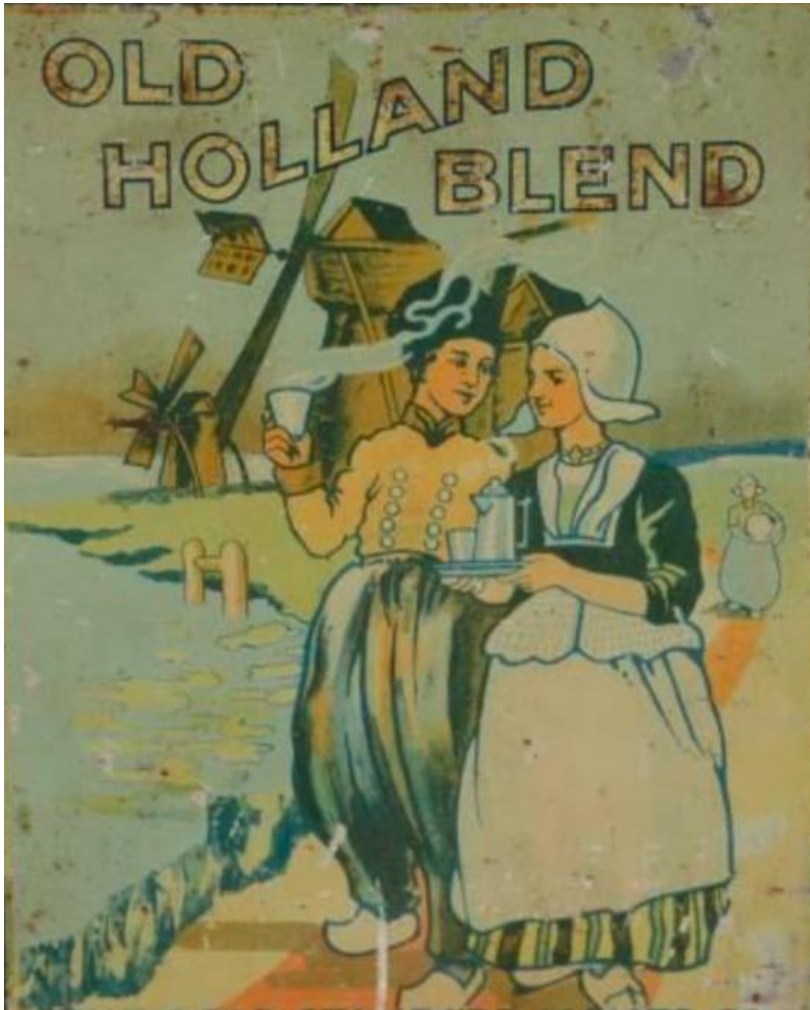
Who First Mixed Coffee With Chicory?

It was the Dutch.

Chicory is an anglicised French word, the original being *chicoree*. The root was used on its own, in tea or in medicinal remedies to treat gout, rheumatism, jaundice and liver enlargement.

According to an article in the *Picayune*, dated March 18, 1908, Chicory blended with coffee was a Dutch invention:

“Although chicory was probably known and used by the ancient Romans as a pot herb, it remained for the Hollanders about 200 years ago to discover that the roots of the chicory plant, dried, ground and roasted produced a drink like coffee both palatable and healthful.”
That would have been in the very early years of the 1700s.



Frederick the Great banned the importation of coffee into Prussia in 1766, which offered an opportunity for innkeeper Christian Gottlieb Förster (died 1801) to develop chicory as a coffee substitute. He acquired a concession in 1769-1770 to produce it in Brunswick and Berlin.

K. Annabelle Smith, writing for the *Smithsonian*, in 2014, concurred that the Dutch were first to use chicory as a coffee substitute:

"The coffee/chicory mixture probably began in Holland, but the drink wasn't widely considered until 1801 when it was introduced to France by two men, M. Orban of Liege and M. Giraud of Homing, according to 19th-century writer Peter Simmonds in his *Coffee and Chicory: Their Culture, Chemical Composition, Preparation for Market and Consumption.*"

Smith went on to write, "American interest in chicory shared a corollary path to popularity, but first coffee had to take root as the beverage of choice. After British taxes on tea imports and an infamous tea party rocked the colonies, the locals acquired a preference for coffee. The French, meanwhile, had their own claims in North America as well as the Caribbean, establishing coffee plantations in Haiti and post-slave-rebellion, Cuba. In founding the city of New Orleans at the mouth of the Mississippi in 1718, France solidified its trade access to the continent. Coffee crops would soon follow and become part of the city's culture, even as ownership of the port would switch from French to Spanish to French and finally to the United States over the course of the next 85 years. By 1840, the port of New Orleans was the second largest importer of coffee in the United States."

Coffee is one of the top imports in New Orleans today, as well. At Dupuy Storage, which has been warehousing imported coffee since 1936, they store the green beans before they're roasted. Those are the beans that come straight from different countries like Costa Rica, Brazil, and Asian countries like Vietnam and China. Today, the Port of New Orleans is home to 14 coffee warehouses.

Did the Civil War Blockade Cause New Orleanians to Drink Coffee With Chicory?

According to K. Annabelle Smith, in her *Smithsonian* article, "during the American Civil War, Louisianans looked to adding chicory root to their coffee when Union naval blockades cut off the port of New Orleans. With shipments coming to a halt, desperate New Orleanians looking for their coffee fix began mixing things with coffee to stretch out the supply. Acorns or beets (*cafe de betterave*) also did the trick."

Other researchers have their doubts. Sharon Stallworth Nossiter points out that "Europeans had been drinking chicory coffee since the early 1800s, and until 1897, all chicory used in the U.S. was imported from Europe and would have been unavailable in New Orleans during blockades," according to an article by Judy Walker in the *Times-*

Picayune, dated February 2, 2012. But chicory was available in New Orleans. An ad in the *Louisiana Advertiser* (August 27, 1827) offered "Chicoree" and other "FRESH GARDEN SEEDS" for one's garden. And most mentions of chicory in local newspapers prior to the Civil War were that of its use as an adulterant. An 1865 blurb in the *Picayune* mentioned that a "fellow" was tried and acquitted on a charge of stealing a certain quantity of coffee. His charge was dismissed after it was learned that it was made of "only chicory and peas."

Café Brûlot

I have written about this delightful postprandial libation in my previous article, entitled "Burnt Offerings". For those unaccustomed to this New Orleans potable of flaming brandy and coffee, Antoine's, Arnaud's or Galatoire's are the recommended French Quarter restaurants to visit to place one's order. In addition to consuming this delicious concoction, one also has the opportunity to observe the pyrotechnic spectacle that is part of the *tout ensemble*. What can make any Creole feast more spectacular?

Café is, of course, French for coffee, and *Brûlot*, means "incendiary" or according to a 1913 letter to the *New York Times*, French for "firebrand".

The waiter pours a brandy mixture into a silver bowl after which steaming hot, sweet coffee is added. Deep citrus and clove flavors help to mellow the sweetness. A long handled ladle does its magic, while, in most cases, the lights of the dining room are dimmed to highlight the impending dance of a blue-gold flame that captures the attention of all. Sometimes the liquid is ladled down a spiraled orange peel held over the bowl to create a mesmerizing ribbon of fire that captivates the awaiting audience. It's a Crescent City classic.

This dazzling drink preparation enjoyed special popularity, it is said, during Prohibition, when the coffee provided necessary cover for the then-illegal alcohol. But, for the life of me, I can't figure out how a flaming spectacle in any way hides the presence of alcohol.

The Future

Imperial Woodpecker Sno-Balls, located at 3511 Magazine Street, owned and operated by Neesa Peterson, offers a house-made "cream of chicory coffee" flavored sno-ball. That will cool one off on a hot

day, as will "Coffee & Chicory" flavored ice cream from the New Orleans Ice Cream Co.



Who knows in what numerous and unsuspected ways New Orleanians will continue to enjoy chicory with their coffee? If you ask the average New Orleans native, it's all about the tradition, and, yes, a taste we have all come to love. In addition to being delicious, *café au lait* (coffee and chicory with hot milk), especially served alongside hot sugary *beignets*, is a permanent and treasured part of the city's history.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Coffee With Chicory, Part 2"
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2018