

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Hot Air

"Full of hot air!" This is not a phrase to attach to the author, although he has been known to expand while expounding. Furthermore he assures the reader that he has researched each fact, no matter how trivial, with the strictest attention to historical detail.

Nor is it referring to the politicians of New Orleans, past or present, even though the epithet has often been appropriate. This is a story concerning a culinary creation of inflation, a delectable delight full of hot air.

Now one may be thinking this is about those wonderful soufflé potatoes that are twice fried in two different temperature oils to make them puff up into splendid salted dirigibles of flavor. Popular at both Antoine's and Galatoire's, they would certainly fit the description. And so would the billowing beignets ascending from sugary snowdrifts at Café Du Monde or Morning Call. But this is about an entrée of historical proportions, *Pompano en Papillote*, a signature dish created at Antoine's.

Jules Alciatore was the architect-chef of this lighter-than-air ship fashioned from a paper bag. It was presented at a banquet honoring the Brazilian balloonist Alberto Santos-Dumont. It was based on an earlier recipe that his father Antoine Alciatore had created called *Pompano Montgolfier*, honoring the French Montgolfier Brothers who had designed the first hot air balloons. One must remember them from the totally insane sketch performed by *Monty Python's Flying Circus* entitled "The Golden Age of Ballooning." In any event, a filet of pompano (topped with a white wine *velouté*, shrimp and lump crabmeat) is baked in an oiled paper bag of sealed parchment. The hot steam from the ingredients within should inflate the bag a bit to resemble that air balloon of bygone days.

Pompano en Papillote is the essence of grand Creole cuisine. It showcases all the wonderful bounty of the Gulf waters, yet it employs its own local version of great French *haute cuisine*. But most of all it is about drama and theatre, a spectacular presentation (as well as a gustatory pleasure). New Orleans has always loved a remarkable spectacle, which brings us back to ballooning. Way back.

The year was 1827, and the French balloonist, Guillerme Eugene Robertson, was in town. An announcement was placed in the local publication *L'Argus* on April 19, 1827, stating that on Sunday afternoon at 4:30, three days later, "in the spacious yard of the late convent of Ursuline Nuns" that Robertson would perform "positively the last aerostitic experiment that he will undertake in the city of New Orleans." The ad went on to play up "French genius" and the immortal name of "Montgolfier". Seats were to be set up under awnings to protect the ladies from the sun, and experimental balloons would begin the program by going up "to the sound of appropriate music, and salvos of artillery." All of this was for the admittance price of \$1.50, with tickets available at a number of local coffee houses. It was further announced that at 4:45, the "Aerian Promenade with Captive Balloon will take place."

The next part of the hype was that Monsieur Robertson would invite a number of ladies and gentlemen into the gondola, which was to be lifted to a certain elevation (but still secured by lines). Then at 5:00 the fearless "aeronaut" would ascend solo to a similar point. Then these lines (described delicately as "ribbons") would be cut by a "lady" and then the "aerial voyager will rise majestically to the sound of music" and "throwing flowers around as he rises."

But that's not all he throws. Once at 3,000 feet, he was to "let fall a young quadruped, in a parachute" in order for the audience to witness such a scene for the first time. Robertson did not take his profession lightly, even though the Montgolfiers believed that the hot air that lifted the balloons had a special property they called "levity". Robertson later went on to make

the first ever balloon flight in Mexico on February 12, 1835.

In February, 1858, the quadroped in the parachute turned out to be an alligator dropped by two local air enthusiasts, Morat and Smith. *L'Abeille de la Nouvelle-Orléans* reported that the two gentlemen had raced from Congo Square "on the bare backs of two monster alligators." The balloonists and alligators landed in a Garden District garden, wiping out the flowerbeds.

Other ascensions took place in the city in 1859, 1875 and 1884 with mixed success. Buddy Bottle performed balloon ascensions from Milneburg at Lake Pontchartrain. In 1897, Jacob D. Graybill of New Orleans received a U. S. Patent, Number 592,704, for an "aerial machine".

When the new century came along, airplanes became the new focus, but lighter-than-air designs continued to be important. During World War I, the British used some small airships that collapsed when deflated. They were called "limps" and (since the type-B model was the most common) the new name became blimp. Zeppelins from Germany, on the other hand, were of the rigid variety. Blimps were extremely important in World War II in stopping German U-boats from sinking U.S. ships in the Gulf of Mexico. These subs sank 397 ships in U.S. waters from mid January to June 1942, killing 5,000 seamen. In May alone, forty-one ships were sunk in the Gulf. Blimps made a big difference after that (both in pinpointing their locations and in taking them on with depth charges).

Goodyear began making airship envelopes in 1911 and introduced the company's first blimp in 1925. Great for advertising, blimps have appeared at the Super Bowl in New Orleans (even in fiction). The 1975 book, *Black Sunday* (later a 1977 movie) had a psychotic blimp pilot conspire with terrorists to detonate a bomb over the Super Bowl in New Orleans (Miami in the movie). These were pre-baghead days in New Orleans when bags were filled with pompano, but not Saints.

As an interesting footnote, the Montgolfiers were not the first to observe that hot air made objects rise. A Brazilian priest had grandly demonstrated this property seventy-five years earlier in Lisbon at the Portuguese Court. Another Brazilian, Alberto Santos-Dumont, would make history not only in the air but also in the world of fashion. He popularized wristwatches for men. Men once preferred pocket watches, with wristwatches being worn mostly by women. But in 1904 while being honored at another classy restaurant (Maxim's in Paris), Santos-Dumont told jeweler Louis Cartier about the difficulties of checking the time while manning controls in flight. Cartier designed a watch with a leather wristband, which men have favored ever since.

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