

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

The Cup, the Cap and the Cupola

Cupolas and *coppolas* can both be found atop domes, and in New Orleans they can also be found in the French Quarter (in more ways than one). In architecture, a *cupola* is itself a dome-like ornamental structure located on top of another larger dome or roof. It can be used as a "lookout" or to admit light and ventilation. This Italian word comes from the classical Latin word for a small cup, since this mini-dome resembles an upside down cup. *Cupolas* can be found positioned above the Cabildo, Presbytere and the Napoleon House. The Presbytere had a *cupola* just like the Cabildo until the hurricane of 1915. After over ninety years without bilateral symmetry, the Presbytere is back to normal (with a design by the architectural firm of Yeates & Yeates).

The Italian word *coppola* is the name for the traditional cloth cap that can be seen worn on men's "domes" back in Sicily in the film classic "The Godfather". It is so appropriate that the movie's director and part-time Quarterite is the acclaimed director and screenwriter, Francis Ford Coppola. Another French Quarter homeowner is his nephew, actor Nicolas Cage, nee Nicholas Kim Coppola. In 2007, Cage paid \$3,450,000 for the famous LaLaurie mansion at 1140 Royal Street. Delphine LaLaurie (who first lived there in 1831) was infamous for her sadistic treatment of her slaves, and it is said that the home is haunted.

Another Italian word for *cupola* (usually if a stair is involved) is *belvedere*, literally meaning a "beautiful view". It is curious that *Beauregard*, the city's Creole Confederate general and victor at the First Battle of Bull Run, also means "beautiful view" or "beautiful lookout" in French. For that reason, *Beauregard* was a popular name for numerous fortified positions throughout England in bygone days. The Napoleon House, named for another impressive general, has an imposing *belvedere* (or *cupola*) above its roof.

Only in New Orleans can one encounter such a fine old building, steeped in the history of a Corsican-born French Emperor, owned for years by a family of Sicilian ancestry (the Impastatos), and famous for a refreshing beverage so British that it's regularly served at rowing regattas and cricket matches. The Napoleon House exemplifies the cosmopolitan nature of the Crescent City.

Its peeling paint, uneven plastered ochre walls, dark wood furnishings, cozy courtyard and minimal lighting all contribute to its atmospheric chic. Entrees include gumbo, red beans and rice, po-boys, shrimp remoulade, jambalaya and muffuletta sandwiches.

Before its emergence as the quintessential afternoon watering hole noted for its classical music and opera, great food and the Pimm's Cup, it was known as the residence of New Orleans' mayor Nicolas Girod. The city's 5th mayor, Girod was in office from 1812 to 1815, two significant dates: Louisiana becoming the 18th state on April 30, 1812, and the victory at the Battle of New Orleans in 1815.

The rear wing of the Girod House was built soon after the fire of 1794 and left to Girod by his brother. The three-story structure with the belvedere at 500 Chartres (at the corner of St. Louis) was begun in 1814. Above the saloon is a salon, now restored for private parties. Legends abound as to the conspiracy to rescue Napoleon from his island exile and bring him back to this refurbished dwelling. Some plot narratives include Jean Lafitte, while others feature Girod and Lafitte's canoneer, Dominique You. None have been proved or disproved,

but the stories have been going on for years. The expedition was said to have fallen apart with the death of Napoleon on St. Helena, apparently from arsenic poisoning.

Back on Chartres one can name his own poison, and tradition at the Napoleon House has made that drink the Pimm's Cup. James Pimm was a young man who had married into a family of fish factors from the Aylesfield area of Kent. In his early 20s he set up as a shellfish monger (Alive, Alive-o) near Billingsgate in London. By 1823, he became the owner of his own oyster bar. Soon Pimm concocted a gin-based drink containing quinine and a secret mixture of herbs and bitters as an aid to sliding down the slippery bivalves. He served it in a small tankard known as the "No. 1 Cup", hence its additional name.

Before long several restaurants were in operation. Large-scale production began in 1851 to keep up with the demand for Pimm's, and in 1859 commercial distribution commenced. A chain of Pimm's Oyster Houses was franchised in 1887. Over the years, other numbered "cups" with different alcohol bases were produced with "No. 1" always the most popular. Pimm's is currently owned by the Diageo Group (since 2006), the merger of Guinness and Grand Metropolitan.

To this day, the recipe for the "No.1 Cup" is secret, but the refreshing drink has a dark tea color with a slight reddish hue. Mix with lemon and 7-Up or ginger ale, add a cucumber wedge and one has a Pimm's Cup. Extremely popular in the South of England, it is often served as a punch at summer with mint, citrus fruit, apple and cucumber slices added to the mix. Think croquet at a garden party.

The *coppola* was introduced in Sicily around 1800 as a variation of the English gameskeeper's cap. This was due to the fact that Ferdinand I, King of Naples and Sicily left Naples for Sicily in the face of Napoleon's invasion. Thousands of British came to help defend against a French invasion, plus Sicilian sulfur happened to be vital to England's war effort. Ferdinand was an avid sportsman who spent time hunting near Corleone, accompanied by diplomats and military officers from Great Britain. The keepers wore tweed and their distinctive caps as they held royal hunts for boar, pheasants, hare and deer.

Just as Sicilians had introduced and adapted a British cap during Napoleonic times, the Sicilian Impastato family introduced a British cup for good times at the Napoleon House.

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