

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **From Mosquitoes to Fashionable Finger Food**

Yellow fever epidemics in North America have caused some 100,000-150,000 deaths. More than 41,000 people died from this terrible scourge in New Orleans alone between the years 1817 (the first year that reliable statistics are available) and 1905 (the Crescent City's last epidemic and the last major outbreak in the United States).

Carlos Finlay, a Cuban doctor and researcher, first proposed in 1881 that yellow fever may be transmitted by mosquitoes. Investigating huge human losses due to yellow fever during the invasion of Cuba in the 1890s prompted further experiments by a team under Dr. Walter Reed who successfully proved Finlay's mosquito hypothesis, that yellow fever was caused by the bite of an infected mosquito, *Stegomyia fasciata* (later renamed *Aedes aegypti*). The physician William Gorgas then applied these insights and eradicated yellow fever from Havana and fought yellow fever during the construction of the Panama Canal.

By 1905, New Orleans was better prepared. In *Yellow Fever Prophylaxis in New Orleans, 1905*, published for the Committee of the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, Rupert Boyce wrote on how this latest New Orleans outbreak was checked by vigorous mosquito control:

"In a few days with very little opposition, sixty to seventy thousand cisterns had been screened in order to prevent the breeding of the *Stegomyia fasciata*. Mosquito nets became more than ever the rule ..."

Mosquito netting has an extensive history. Though the use of the term dates from the 1700s, use of nets to keep out mosquitoes has been dated to prehistoric times. Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, is said to have slept in her bed beneath a mosquito net. Mosquito netting was employed during the construction of the Suez Canal, and Boy Scouts and other campers use netting known as mosquito bars over their sleeping bags.

But how many dear readers know that the origin of the word, *canapé*, has its origins in mosquitoes and mosquito netting?

*Canapé* (French/Spanish for couch or sofa) is a small bite-size appetizer, usually artfully decorated, held in the fingers for easy consumption. It may consist of a cracker or a small, thin piece of bread, toast or puff pastry (known as *Vol-au-vent*, meaning “blown by the wind” in French), cut into various shapes and spread with meat, *foie gras*, caviar, anchovies, cheese, relish or some other savory topping.

The word comes from the Middle English *canape*, from Medieval Latin *canāpēum*, meaning mosquito net, from Latin *cōnōpēum*, from Greek *kōnōpeion*, for a bed with mosquito netting, from *kōnōps*, *kōnōp-*, meaning mosquito. One can see how the word canopy has evolved, as well. And *canapé* has come to mean couch by being a sort of sleeping sofa with a canopy or netting above.

Because they are often served at cocktail parties, *canapés* are often spicy or salty in order to encourage guests to imbibe more. The various toppings are the “canopy” above the base, traditionally slices of stale white bread (though other foods may be used), cut into thin shapes (like circles, triangles, rings, squares or strips) with a cutter or knife. These slices are then prepared by toasting, deep-frying or sautéing with the “canopy” often decoratively piped from a pastry bag. Even curled garnishes or wedges (vegetable or citrus) may be added. Other garnishes can range from scallions and fresh herbs to truffle oil or caviar. In between is a spread, which is very often cream cheese-based (especially in New Orleans).

At New Orleans parties, the *canapé* may be extremely intricate or quite simple. It is not unusual to see a slab of Philadelphia style cream cheese topped with red or green pepper jelly surrounded by a circle of crackers. Very often one sees the same offering but with New Orleans’ favorite Jamaican condiment, Pickapeppa Sauce, first made at Shooter’s Hill, Jamaica, in 1921. This delicious dark brown sauce floating atop a brick of cream cheese at first confuses visitors from out of town. Aged in oak barrels and flavored with cane vinegar, it is a unique blend of tomatoes, onions, sugar, mangoes, raisins, tamarinds, peppers and spices. To ensure the utmost quality, Pickapeppa’s fine ingredients are selected from seven countries around the world. And as the company states, “From cream cheese to crab dip to barbeque to baked bananas, Pickapeppa Sauce is the perfect choice to add smooth, sweet flavor to any dish.” And now Pickapeppa is available in a gingery, spicy or hot mango sauce.

Apart from cream cheese as a spread, Uptown and suburban hostesses alike enjoy serving two specialties from Langenstein’s grocery (both the Arabella Street and Metairie Road locations). Staples of the

cocktail scene are prepared dips/spreads known as "Le Popeye" and "Better Cheddar". The very French sounding "Le Popeye" (not to be confused with "Popeye" Doyle from *The French Connection*) is their wonderfully seasoned spinach dip. "Better Cheddar" is their white cheddar cheese spread that stay-at-home chefs have tried to duplicate. Besides the sharp white cheddar throughout, the dip is said to include Gouda, walnuts, green onions and garlic. A dash of Tabasco Sauce rounds out this excellent cracker topper.

Martin's Wine Cellar and Robért's Supermarkets have excellent spreads, as well.

There are so many other words in use today for appetizers or smaller food offerings. There are *hors d'œuvres* (literally "apart from the main work"), or food items served before the main courses of a meal. There are the Swedish *Smörgåsbord*, Italian *tartinis* and *antipasto*, British tea sandwiches (always great at "Windsor Court"), Spanish *tapas*, to name a few. And for *Dim Sum* in the Greater New Orleans area, there's "Royal China" and "Panda King".

Shooter's Hill, home of Pickapeppa Sauce, is in Manchester, Jamaica (named for the Duke of Manchester, Governor of Jamaica). The Duke married Lady Susan, daughter of Alexander Gordon, 4th Duke of Gordon, in 1793. They had five children. The Duchess caused quite a social scandal when she ran off with one of her footmen. Lady Jerningham commented on this saucy lady's foot fetish September 6, 1813: "The Duchess of Manchester is finally parted from her husband, her conduct becoming notoriously bad".

Maybe so, but the sauce is notoriously good!

## **NED HÉMARD**

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