

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

From Butchers to Brunches

The French Market, a 300-foot long avenue of stalls, has always provided an abundant assortment of vegetables, poultry, fish, oysters, fruits, meat and dry goods to willing purchasers. There is an old saying that the French Market was begun by the Indians, built by the Spanish and run by the Italians. This is true, but it did have a French architect named Jacques Tannesse. The Spanish had erected a building on the site in 1791, which the Creoles called the *Halle des Boucheries*, or Butchers' Market. Destroyed in 1812, city surveyor Tannesse (in order to replace earlier buildings destroyed by hurricane and fire) redesigned an arcaded structure the following year. During the 1930s, the Works Progress Administration did additional major renovations.



Halle des Boucheries section of the French Market, 1890s

There were always numerous butchers working at the *Halle des Boucheries*, and one was named Philip Kettenring. His sister, Elizabeth, then only 22, came from Bavaria to New Orleans to visit him in 1853. She met and married another butcher named Louis Dutrey for whom she would cook a “second breakfast” after his early hard work at the market. He’d already consumed his first light breakfast at dawn. Fellow butchers would join him for the excellent fusion of Elizabeth’s German cooking skills and the local Creole cuisine. In 1863, she and Louis opened a coffee house on the corner of Old Levee and Madison (listed in the 1867 city directory as Louis Dutreuil’s Coffee House at 207 Old Levee Street), 823 Decatur Street today. Louis died in 1875 and on January 28, 1882, Elizabeth married another butcher (who doubled as Dutrey’s bartender, named Hypolite Begué. After becoming Madame Begué, and changing the establishment’s name to Begué’s Exchange, the business of the restaurant boomed and drew clientele from outside the limited French Market orbit.



Begué's Exchange in 1909

A second-floor dining room became the spot for her renowned “second breakfast,” which was served without a menu to thirty people, beginning promptly at 11 a.m. and continuing until 3 p.m. All manner of meats, fish, soup, wines and cheeses were included, plus French bread, of course. *Café noir* (black coffee) was served, into which a generous shot of brandy was poured and burned.

In 1885, the Cotton Centennial Exposition (held at what is today Audubon Park) attracted a truly international following to Begué’s

“French Market breakfast.” Travelers from all over the nation and the world dined there and returned home singing its praises. The selections were delectable and copious. 50 items plus wine was only \$1 in those days. It’s no wonder that “brunch” became a tradition in New Orleans.



Begué's Exchange, 823 Decatur, 1906

In time, Sunday meals attracted statesmen, businessmen, poets, scientists and intellectuals. Travelers wrote months in advance for reservations, and it was only logical that this nexus of notable cuisine was one of the first restaurants in New Orleans to install a telephone.

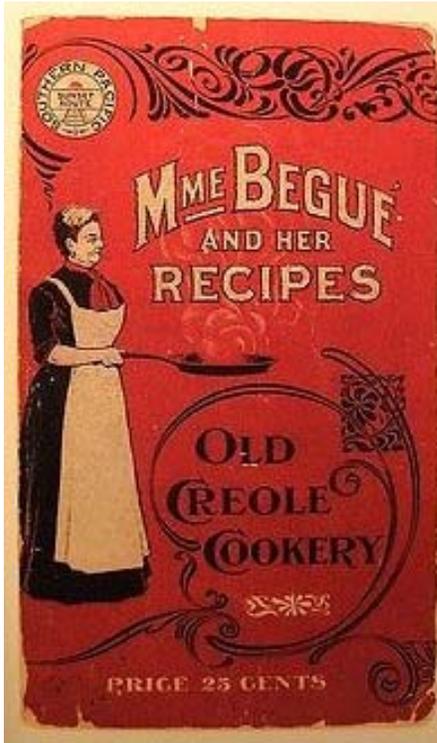
Madame Begué, as she is now universally known, had to be a great cook to feature liver as her signature dish. Her popular dining establishment would eventually be featured in the movies. Gary Cooper and Ingrid Bergman can be seen partaking of Begué's bounty in the 1945 romantic drama "Saratoga Trunk". Based on the novel by Edna Ferber, the motion picture revolves around the Creole daughter of an aristocratic family and a Texas gambler who join forces to seek justice from an unkind society.



Gary Cooper and Ingrid Bergman at Madame Begué's

Rheumatism slowed Madame Begué down a bit in her later years, compelling her to use crutches. Still she continued to supervise all the meals and their preparation. In 1900, the Southern Pacific Railroad published *Mme Begué and her Recipes Old Creole Cookery* as a travel reward and souvenir. It became one of the earlier New Orleans cookbooks published, and it included such dishes as her Jambalaya of Chicken, Daube à l'Italienne, Creole Gumbo, Turtle Soup and Chicken à la Creole. The measurements, cooking times and temperatures were geared to the best judgment of the cook since cooking was done over an open fire. In 1937 an updated version accommodated for the use of modern kitchen stoves.

Madame Begué died October 19, 1906, and her husband Hypolite (whose obit said he "occupied the seat at the head of the table at both the breakfasts and dinners for forty-five years") followed on April 4, 1917. One of their main competitors, Guillaume Tujague (also a butcher) had been serving seven-course meals on Old Levee Street from 1856 until he died in 1912. Over the years and through a series of ownership changes, Tujague's (run by the Castet and Guichet families) ended up in the old Begué's location at 823 Decatur, corner Madison (originally the site of an old Spanish arsenal).



Mme Begué's Recipes

Madame Begué in her kitchen

William Sidney Porter, the writer whose *nom de plume* was O. Henry, used to frequent Tujague's. The restaurant's bartender and later Tujague's owner Philip John Guichet won added fame by creating the grasshopper cocktail in a national cocktail contest in New York in 1928. And in 1982, the Guichet family heirs sold Tujague's to Stanford and Steven Latter. Steven, who eventually bought out his brother's share in the business, ran the restaurant until his death in 2013. There was a scare that the property might be sold and that Tujague's would be no more. But Steven's son, Mark Latter, worked things out and Tujague's is still operating today as New Orleans' second oldest restaurant. It continues to serve its renowned beef brisket, shrimp *rémolade* and "cap" bread.

In 2012, New Orleans food journalist and radio personality Poppy Tooker provided an updated foreword to Madame Begué's Cookery Book and recreated her most noteworthy creations by providing contemporary renditions of those original recipes.



Second floor dining at Madame Begué's famous restaurant, circa 1894

Humorously, Benny Grunch sings about a "Tujague's recipe for the crawfish they caught in Arabi" in his wonderfully indigenous idyll, "The 12 Yats of Christmas". Hypolite Begué, who took pleasure in showing his patrons the proper way the peel a crawfish, would be pleased.

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