

Let Them Eat *Brioche*

Brioche is a type of French bread with a rich and tender crumb. It has a dark, golden and flaky crust from an egg wash applied after proofing. *Brioche* dough often appears in recipes for New Orleans styled king cakes, where it is often fashioned in a *couronne* shape (or that of a crown). What follows is the story of how two important crowns were lost.



A French brioche known as a couronne

“Let them eat cake” is the traditional translation of the French phrase commonly attributed to Marie Antoinette, Queen of France and Navarre, upon learning that the peasants had no bread to eat. Although commonly attributed to young *Dauphine de France*, there is no record of these words ever being spoken by her. The quote appeared in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions*, a purportedly autobiographical work completed in 1769. Rousseau ascribed these words to an anonymous “great princess”, and no other source for this anecdote is known. Marie Antoinette was only 13, however, and not yet married to Louis-Auguste, the *Dauphin* and future Louis XVI, King of France and Navarre. Furthermore, Rousseau had used the phrase in

a letter dated 1737, long before his *Confessions*, and eighteen years before Marie Antoinette was born.



"Marie Antoinette" provides cake at the Krewe of Cork

These are the words that Rousseau actually wrote concerning the words of the princess:

"Enfin je me rappelai le pis-aller d'une grande princesse à qui l'on disait que les paysans n'avaient pas de pain, et qui répondit: 'Qu'ils mangent de la brioche.'"

“Finally I recalled the last resort of a great princess who was told that the peasants had no bread, and who responded: ‘Let them eat brioche.’”



NOMA's portrait of Marie Antoinette by Élisabeth-Louise Vigée Lebrun

And although Marie Antoinette never uttered “Let them eat cake,” what she really didn’t say (at least according to Rousseau) was “Let them eat *brioche*.” *Brioche* is considered a luxury bread. Highly enriched with eggs and butter (*brioche* dough also contains flour, milk, yeast, salt, and sometimes some sugar), it was clearly representative of the naïve and blasé attitude an oblivious princess might have toward the hunger of her people.

The Queen's well-known English-language biographer, Lady Antonia Fraser wrote that "Let them eat cake" was uttered one-hundred years earlier by Marie-Thérèse, the wife of the Sun King, Louis XIV. Fraser wrote, "It was a callous and ignorant statement and she, Marie Antoinette, was neither." In addition, Fraser points out, Marie Antoinette was a generous patroness of charity and moved by the plight of the poor when it was brought to her attention, thus making such a statement out-of-character. A letter home to her family revealed a caring Marie Antoinette:

"It is quite certain that in seeing the people who treat us so well despite their own misfortune, we are more obliged than ever to work hard for their happiness. The King seems to understand this truth."



The traditional moist brioche McKenzie's king cake, with no filling inside, sprinkled with colored sugar, now offered by Tastee Donuts

Initially charmed by her beauty and personality, the French people generally came to dislike Marie Antoinette, accusing the Austrian Archduchess (she was the daughter of the Empress Maria Theresa and Emperor Francis I) of being recklessly extravagant, promiscuous and sympathizing with France's enemies. In fact, many anti-royalists so believed (albeit incorrectly) that it was the Queen who had single-

handedly ruined France's finances that they nicknamed her *Madame Déficit*. They issued numerous *libelles* (political pamphlets damaging to the *Ancien Régime*).

The *Petit Trianon*, a small château on the grounds of Versailles, became associated with Marie Antoinette's perceived profligacy. It was rumored that she plastered its walls with gold and diamonds. But a much larger problem, however, was the debt incurred by France during the Seven Years' War, still unpaid. It was further exacerbated by Louis XVI's helping the rebellious North American colonies in their war with France's rival, Great Britain. Not long after, France had its own revolution.



In 1867 the Empress Eugénie, wife of Napoleon III, converted the Petit Trianon into a museum dedicated to the memory of Marie Antoinette.

At the height of the French Revolution, Louis XVI was deposed and the royal family was imprisoned. Nine months after her husband visited the guillotine, Marie Antoinette was tried, convicted of treason, her hair was cut off and she was driven through Paris in an open cart, wearing a simple white dress. She met the same fate as her husband on October 16, 1793, at the *Place de la Révolution* (present-day *Place de la Concorde*). Her last words were, "Pardon me Sir, I meant not to do it", to Royal Executioner Charles-Henri Sanson, whose foot she had accidentally stepped on as she approached the guillotine.

Sanson had executed her husband months before, as well as what would amount to more than three thousand people. Years later it is said, Napoleon Bonaparte asked Sanson how he could still sleep after so many executions. Sanson's reply was, "If emperors, kings and dictators can sleep well, why shouldn't an executioner?"

In New Orleans, the two French monarchs can be seen in grander, happier times. The New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA) has on permanent exhibit the large and splendid portrait of Marie Antoinette by Élisabeth-Louise Vigée Lebrun, which was commissioned by the King's younger brother, the Comte d'Artois. Also on display at the museum is the impressive painting of a resplendent King Louis XVI, painted by the King's official portraitist, Antoine-François Callet.



Also at NOMA, the New Orleans Museum of Art, a portrait of Louis XVI, by Antoine-François Callet, oil on canvas

The word *brioche* first appeared in written form in 1404, apparently

from a traditional Norman recipe. The word comes from the Old Norman French verb "*brier*" (an old form of "broyer"), then used in the sense of "to knead dough with a wooden roller". Despite its French origin, *brioche* is considered a *viennoiserie* (French for Viennese specialty). Favorite *viennoiseries* include *croissants*, *pain au lait*, *pain aux raisins* and *pain au chocolat*. Less rich versions of *brioche* are sometimes used in savoury meat dishes, most commonly stuffed with *foie gras*. Speaking of *viennoiseries*, Marie Antoinette was born in Vienna, too.

Back in 2010, when this article first appeared, New Orleans was also home to the St. Louis Hotel at 730 Rue Bienville in the French Quarter, where one could dine at its elegant Louis XVI, *Restaurant Française*. Originally completed in 1837 as the residence to James Walters Zacharie, a merchant prince and famous host, this building was purchased in the late 1800s by philanthropist Amaron Ledoux. Mr. and Mrs. Louis Bézaudun leased the property in 1881 as the site of a hotel and restaurant. Guests from Rod Stewart to Richard Burton have dined at the Louis XVI, including sports artist Leroy Neiman, who presented the owners with a sketch of the kitchen on the back of a menu.

According to the *Times-Picayune*, "...when classical French cooking and atmospheric refinement are the subjects at hand, the combination at Louis XVI is unbeatable."

And the St. Louis Hotel advertised what they called their "sister property", the St. Ann/Marie Antoinette Hotel at 717 Rue Conti in the *Vieux Carré*. Namesake Marie Antoinette was not actually the "sister" of Louis XVI, but his spouse and Queen.

For *le petit déjeuner* (breakfast) at the Louis XVI, if you wanted *brioche*, you would have been out of luck. A modern Marie Antoinette might have said:

"Let them eat Belgian waffles," "Let them eat English muffins," "Let them eat bagels with cream cheese," or "Let them eat buttered milk biscuits."

All of the above were on the menu, but no *brioche* in sight.

In 2011 the St. Louis Hotel was renamed the Hotel Mazarin in honor of Cardinal Jules Mazarin of France, Italian cardinal, statesman and Chief

Minister to Kings Louis XIII and Louis XIV. He was a great collector of jewels, particularly diamonds, and was an avid reader. The Marie Antoinette is now a boutique hotel, the Hotel Le Marais, which is named for the historic aristocratic district in Paris, noted for its many outstanding buildings of historic and architectural importance.



Cardinal Mazarin

Le Marais, Paris, France

Earlier this month, February 1, 2018, coming on the heels of its being named a recipient of the coveted James Beard Foundation America's Classics award, the Dong Phuong Vietnamese Bakery in New Orleans East announced that its king cakes would be sold only at its New Orleans East location. No longer would they be available at auxiliary stores.

Amid reports of the cakes being scalped, i.e., hawked for higher prices, the owners of the bakery/restaurant decided to enact a per person limit at retail. There had been rumors of king cake buyers engaged in fisticuffs over these Carnival favorites. Dong Phuong's classic cinnamon king cake is offered at \$14, and flavored versions go for \$16.

As a result of the James Beard announcement and sales only at Dong Phuong's Chef Menteur Highway location, long lines have been observed stretching out in front of the popular bakery.



Not just popular for its king cakes, Dong Phuong's Bakery has some of the best French bread in the Crescent City.



Dong Phuong king cake with baby on top

What Marie Antoinette should have said was, "Let them eat king cake!"

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Let Them Eat *Brioche*"
Ned Hémard
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