

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Like Red Beans on Rice

“New Orleans is like a gumbo.”

Gumbo is a stew or soup (depending on the thickness) emblematic of Louisiana Creole cuisine yet popular across the United States, but especially along the Gulf Coast and the South. This Louisiana comfort food has been described (like its people) as the result of the “melting of various Louisiana cultures”. But that would not be technically correct. All of the ingredients work together to make the exquisite finished product, but one should never put a *gumbo* through a blender.

Gumbo is based on a French *bouillabaisse*, seasoned with an abbreviated Spanish *sofrito* (which locals call the “Holy Trinity”), often includes the *filé* (or sassafras) flavoring of Native Americans and is thickened with *roux* and the okra of West Africa. And *Gumbo* (Bantu for okra) is fantastic over rice.

Sofrito in Latin American cuisine is a sauce of tomatoes, roasted bell peppers, garlic, onions and herbs. Cooked very slowly, in Haiti it is referred to as *Epis*. In Cuba it is the base for beans, rice dishes and stews like *ropa vieja* (meat dish meaning old clothes).

In any event, the people in New Orleans are indeed like a *gumbo*, each person with his own talent and unique flavor.

“I love you once. I love you twice. I love you better than red beans and rice.”

That’s a whole lot of love. Red beans and rice is another symbolic New Orleans comfort food, traditionally cooked on Mondays with red kidney beans or small red beans, the sautéed “Trinity” (of bell pepper, onions and celery), some spices (thyme, salt, pepper, cayenne pepper and bay leaf) and pork bones left over from Sunday dinner. This dish is simmered slowly with diced ham (or pickle meat) along with sausage and served over rice accompanied by French bread. *Andouille* sausage, *chaurice* and *tasso* are frequent additives, as well. Tabasco

or Louisiana hot sauce is great for heightening the experience, and many find adding vinegar a necessary ritual.

Red beans are the usual Monday fare in the Crescent City because it was customarily washday. The fires were already ablaze for wash kettles, and the red beans took their time getting creamy by cooking all day in ham hocks and sausage, so they didn't have to be so closely watched while the women were busy scrubbing clothes.

Other Latin American countries have similar dishes. Red beans and rice in Central America is known as *arroz con habichuelas*. *Platillo Moros y Cristianos* (Moors and Christians) is Cuba's version of the rice and beans found throughout the Caribbean and in South America. But in Cuba the beans are black beans.

Wynton Marsalis has talked about New Orleans' affinity with these cultures, musically and in their similar cuisines. He has described New Orleans as being a hub for all kinds of music, because "we have tributaries from the Caribbean" and other points south. He said:

"It's like red beans and rice. Once you get to a certain point south, red beans and rice and barbecued chicken, you safe. And you can go all the way to Argentina with dat. And people won't say, 'What is dis?' ... Damned good red beans! And for some reason in our culture we like to separate things."

The point he was making is that people have so much more in common than what separates them.

Not just on Mondays, red beans and rice is served at large events like tailgating and Super Bowl soirées and Mardi Gras parade parties. Like *gumbo*, one can find it at almost any festival or fair in the New Orleans area, since it's easy to cook in large quantities. Jackson, Mississippi, however, has usurped the Red Beans and Rice Festival, one of its most anticipated fall events. New Orleans does have the Tremé Creole Gumbo Festival and the Bridge City Gumbo Festival just across the river.

Haitian *émigrés* wending their way from Saint Domingue to New Orleans brought beans with them from the Caribbean. Once a staple of city cuisine, Creole chefs in French Quarter kitchens created a meal that would become a vernacular dish. Not just because it's talked about every day but that it has become part of local expressions and slang.

"I would jump all over that like red beans on rice."

Julie Smith's *New Orleans Mourning* won the 1991 Edgar Award for best mystery novel. It's Mardi Gras in New Orleans, and post-deb rookie female beat cop Skip Langdon is investigating the murder of

Rex, King of Carnival. A review of the book describes the plot:

"So when the King of Carnival at Mardi Gras, a political up-and-comer named Chauncey St. Amant, is murdered by a gun-toting Dolly Parton look-alike and Skip's put on temporary homicide detail, she's all over it like red beans on rice."

In other words, she was really on the case.

"Let's stay on Warner like red beans on rice."

This was posted as an online comment to a January 10, 2010, blog on "New Orleans Saints players react to facing Arizona Cardinals next week".

"She was all over him like red beans on rice!"

Or "He was all over her like red beans on rice!" In any case, he or she was really making some "romantic" moves on the other.

And tribute must be made to that self-taught soul food restaurateur famous for his red beans and rice, who died at age 89 (appropriately) on a Monday in 1994. Clarence "Buster" Holmes, whose bar and restaurant was on the corner of Orleans and Burgundy streets, described the process:

"I put in all the seasonings - onions, garlic, bell peppers - at once and let the whole thing cook down. And I never put any meat grease in my beans."

This jovial man with a Creole drawl had a great local following that grew into an international one, renowned for his down-home hospitality as well as his heaped-on high servings. Chef Buster's generous plates were not expensive and he often fed the homeless for free. He also cooked for President Lyndon Johnson at the White House. When reviewed by the New York Times, he already had among his fans Woody Allen, Vincent Price and New Orleans' own Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong.

Whether one gets his red beans and rice "over by his mama 'n' 'em," Popeye's, downtown eateries like the Commerce Restaurant and Mother's, his favorite neighborhood café or from a Blue Runner can, one can only state that this tale will also end as did the missives of the city's beloved jazz musician. Louis Armstrong signed his letters:

"Red beans and ricely yours,"

NED HÉMARD

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