

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Market Commentary

New Orleans natives have always enjoyed shopping for a wide assortment of comestibles at the city's old and colorful French Market in the *Vieux Carré*. The Indians traded goods and foodstuffs there first, along the Mississippi, back in colonial times. In the latter years of the eighteenth century, Spanish officials (aware of the need to regulate hours, prices and sanitary practices) consolidated the butcher stalls in a shaded area on the site of the present *Café du Monde* near the *Plaza de Armas* (Jackson Square). Locals called this place the *Halle des Boucheries* (or simply the "Meat Market"), but not the "French Market" until the 1850s.

This may have been because the Quarter was in the "French" part of town, or because many of the aproned butchers were of French ancestry. And although the Spanish built the structures (the first in 1811 by Arsène Lacarriere Latour and rebuilt by Jacques Tannesse in 1813 after a hurricane the year before), the architects were French. Continually repaired and altered, Tannesse's arcaded building still stands.

The crowds took it all in, the diversity of people (both sellers and buyers), the enticing aromas and the huge selection to choose from. John Pintard (1759 – 1844) was considered one of New York's most prosperous merchants, but in 1792 he lost his fortune after engaging with William Duer in Alexander Hamilton's scheme to fund the national debt. In 1801 Pintard visited New Orleans and filed a very favorable report on the thriving colony, which was instrumental in convincing Thomas Jefferson to purchase the Louisiana Territory. Eighty vessels visited New Orleans that year from the United States, six from England, forty-three from the British West Indies, two from France, four from the French West Indies, fifteen from Cuba and twenty-nine from the Spanish mainland colonies. Pintard wrote:

"Market hours commence at 6 & are mostly over by 8. Very few people go to the market in person. All is bought by domestics, especially the females, who seem to be the chief buyers & sellers of the place."

Europeans, Indians and Africans adopted some of each other's foodways.

Creole cooks incorporated such native Louisiana ingredients as *filé* (sassafras) for *gumbo* and such foods as maize, beans, squash, wild rice, fruits and nuts into their diet. French settlers learned from the Indians how to prepare corn dishes, like the Choctaw *tanfula*, called *sagamité* by the French. Africans knew how to grow and prepare corn, also, and they introduced okra and rice cultivation to the area. Indian, white, slave and free black hunters also sold game in the market, which Pintard described as "in the greatest plenty & reasonable - Wild ducks, Teal, Geese, English Snipes, Rabbits & Squirrels abound."

Benjamin Henry Latrobe (1764 – 1820), British-born American architect best known for his design of the United States Capitol, had completed New Orleans' first waterworks quite nearby on Ursulines and Levee streets. (Levee Street is today's Decatur Street.) Known as the "Father of American Architecture", Latrobe wrote in 1819 of his experiences in the market. Here's what he viewed "Along the levee, as far as the eye could reach to the west":

"White men and women, and of all hues of brown, and of all classes of faces, from round Yankees to grizzly and lean Spaniards, black negroes and negresses," as well as "half naked" Indians, "mulattoes" and "quadroons of all shades", women dressed in the most flaring yellow and scarlet gowns, the men capped and hatted. Their wares consisted of as many kinds as their faces. Innumerable wild ducks, oysters, poultry of all kinds, fish, bananas, piles of oranges, sugarcane, sweet and Irish potatoes, corn in the car and husked, apples, carrots, and all sorts of other roots, eggs, trinkets, tinware, dry goods, in fact of more and odder things to be sold in that manner and place than I can enumerate."

He continued, "I cannot suppose that my eye took in less than five hundred sellers and buyers, all of whom appeared to strain their voices to exceed each other in loudness."

Lafacadio Hearn (1850 – 1904) would later convey a similar thought:

"A man might here study the world," he wrote. "Every race that the world boasts is here, and a good many races that are nowhere else."

The old French Market was the first place that famed naturalist John James Audubon (1785 – 1851) visited upon his arrival in the Crescent City by keelboat in 1821 (just three years after Latrobe's comments). It was the year before the *Marché aux Legumes*, or "Vegetable Market," was added in 1822 on the stretch between St. Philip and Ursulines. Audubon gleefully recorded in his journal the great array of wildfowl and domestic birds available for sale there. He excitedly noted his surprise at finding "a Barred Owl, cleaned and exposed, for sale at twenty-five cents."

He, like so many writers before and after, could not fail to remark on the obvious mix of ethnicities inhabiting or visiting the market. "When passing

through the stalls, he noticed, "we were surrounded by a population of Negroes, mulattos, and quadroons, some talking French, others a *patois* of Spanish and French, others a mixture of French and English, or English translated from French, and with a French accent."

Such were the sights, sounds and smells amid the vendors' stands, fish and other shellfish, leafy vegetables spread out on canvas or palmetto leaves, and all manner of fowl. These sensory charms made the market something of a tourist destination for both Americans and Europeans. Sir Charles Lyell (1797 – 1875), a British lawyer and foremost geologist of his day, visited the market in 1846. He penned these words:

"There were stalls where hot coffee was selling in white china cups, reminding us of Paris. Among other articles exposed for sale were brooms made of palmetto leaves, and wagon loads of the dried Spanish moss, or *Tillandsia*".

In the old days, there were also cheese mongers and candy makers. Pralines were sold, as were *calas* ("*Calas, bels calas tout chauds!*"), deep fried rice cakes. And perhaps strangest of all, one could buy *estomac mulâtre* (a gingerbread treat known as "The Mulatto's Stomach," also known as "Stage Planks").

1875's French Market was the setting for Edna Ferber's "Saratoga Trunk", where in the beautiful Creole, Clio Dulaine (Ingrid Berman), is attracted to the handsome Clint Maroon (Gary Cooper). They also dine across the street at Madame Bégué's.

By the late 1880s, things were much less romantic. The *Guide to New Orleans* issued at the Cotton Centennial Exposition in Audubon Park described the dirt and disrepair:

"From the ceiling hang endless ropes of spider's webs, numberless flies, and incalculable dirt."

Still, it was alive with people and much photographed by all who visited. By 1890, 15,000 Italians inhabited the city. Many thrived in the French Market as fruit and vegetable vendors, surrounded by hanging garlic. Joseph Vaccaro, born in Contessa Entellina, Sicily, began selling from a basket. He and his brothers (with Salvador D'Antoni) began importing bananas from Honduras and grew the business into the Standard Fruit and Steamship Company (owning numerous banana plantations in Central America), now Dole Food Company. Sicilian truck farmers from neighboring parishes brought in Creole tomatoes, artichokes and fava beans. Hunters would bring in everything from bears and raccoons to songbirds. And *Isleño* fishermen – and those from Croatia – would market oysters, shrimp and a wide array of fish.

The French Market would eventually have five primary components. The "Fruit Market" took up the triangle later occupied by the memorable coffee

stand "Morning Call". By the Great Depression, the French Market was in terrible shape. WPA workers rebuilt the buildings almost beyond previous recognition, but at least the tenants continued operating as fishmongers, butchers and fruit sellers until the 1970s. Then the City removed much of the food from the premises, adding enclosed gift shops, specialty stores and restaurants. "Morning Call," where kids were oft times driven in their pajamas for *beignets*, moved to Metairie, and a golden equestrienne *Jeanne d'Arc* moved in its place. Now imported trinkets are hawked in the former Farmers Market wholesale area, going full circle to the early days when Choctaw hunters and farmers traded with the Creoles for mere trifles.

Today, what the people of New Orleans have always done is hip again. It's green and fresh. Farmers markets abound in different locations and on different days around the metro area. But this is nothing new. While public markets were common in many American cities, more markets operated in New Orleans for much longer than the remainder of the nation's cities. And they didn't include just the French Market.

They had names like Memory (3125 Tulane); Keller (1802 Magnolia); LeBreton (1403 North Dorgenois); Lautenschlaeger (1930 Burgundy Street, John A. Lautenschlaeger was a grocer and city councilman); St. Roch (at St. Roch and St. Claude Avenues, still serving *gumbo* until Katrina); C. N. Maestri (at Orleans and Broad); Rocheblave Market (203 North Rocheblave); Prytania; Tremé; and Suburban (to name a few). These markets were not only the economic dynamos in their neighborhoods, but they were the cultural meeting places for community interaction - and for so many diverse groups of people. Speaking multiple languages, those who ran these markets saw them evolve into corner grocery stores.

Let's hope the *Crescent City Farmers Market* and Carrollton's community based *Hollygrove Market & Farm* keep alive the original market spirit, the quality of the produce and other food products and the entrepreneurial zeal of its participants. Shoppers today yearn for everything from green produce, homemade preserves and yard fresh eggs to fresh strawberries and organic chicken. The corner markets and roving street vendors used to offer all this, as did the marvelous place New Orleanians call the old French Market.

NED HÉMARD

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Ingredients for "Stage Planks" from *The Picayune's Creole Cookbook* (1901), gingerbread made without butter and eggs:

1 Cup of Molasses, 1 Cup of Sour Milk,

1 Tablespoon of Ground Ginger,

1 Gill* of Lard, 3 Cups of Flour,

1 Teaspoonful of Baking Soda.

* unit of measurement for volume equal to a quarter of a pint

In *Louisiana's Fabulous Foods* by Lady Henriques Hardy and Raymond J. Martinez, the "Stage Planks" recipe calls for:

2 cups molasses, ½ cup sugar, 1 cup Oleo or Crisco, 1 cup sugar, 2 teaspoons baking powder, 1 cup milk, 3 ½ cups sifted flour and 1 teaspoon each of ginger, cinnamon, cloves and salt.