

**NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA**  
*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*  
By Ned Hémard

### **Mouse Practice and Mirlitons**

“Mouse Practice” is a unique New Orleans creation that has absolutely nothing to do with computer proficiency. It has become so popular with its participants that it is conducted throughout the year, considering the fact that it was originally designed as a seasonal activity. A time of male camaraderie when certain gentlemen enjoy cigars on a Sunday afternoon, this gathering at a certain Uptown club would never have come about if it were not for Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky.

Over the years at Christmastime, several excellent performances of “The Nutcracker” have been presented in the Crescent City. This a relatively recent phenomenon in that this ballet was first performed in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1892. The first complete United States performance was by the San Francisco Ballet in 1944 followed by George Balanchine’s staging for the New York City Ballet ten years later. Performing the complete “Nutcracker” during the holiday season soon spread to the rest of the country, including New Orleans.

New Orleans moms were eager to have their little ones on the stage for such a production, and it just so happened that the first act required an entire army of mice. “The Nutcracker”, Clara’s gift from Herr Drosselmeyer, defends her by stabbing the Mouse King. This prompts all the little mouse soldiers to retreat from battle, taking their dead leader with them. All of this stage action requires stage practice, and the moms dutifully took their rodent stand-ins off to rehearsals. The dads, however, were either:

(a) just in the way and needed to be off somewhere. This is how the Greater Octavia Street Husbands’ Protective Association got started (to keep the men out of the kitchen while Thanksgiving meal preparation was under way).

Or they were:

(b) desirous of being no where near all that theatrical commotion. And single malt scotch seemed more appealing than music from the land of Vodka.

Either way, that's how "Mouse Practice" was born. When the dads did eventually attend the performance, they would have seen and heard the familiar "*Danse des Mirlitons*" in Act II. It seems peculiar that Tchaikovsky would have chosen a name so familiar on local menus. The mirliton (stuffed with bread crumbs, shrimp and pork) is, after all, a delicacy essential to New Orleans cuisine. So what could possibly be the connection?

*Sechium edule* is the Latin name for this edible plant first recorded by modern botanists in 1756. Referred variously as a fruit or vegetable, it belongs to the *Cucurbitaceae* (gourd) family along with melons, cucumbers and squash. The mirliton (pronounced MEL-it-awn in South Louisiana) is most often called chayote and was domesticated by the Aztecs in Mexico, who called it *chayotl*. Also known as tayota, sayote, chow-chow, choko, brionne and vegetable pear, a mirliton can range in weight from ½ to three pounds and has a pale green to greenish-white skin. The vine is a perennial, and in Barbados this author dined on sautéed cristophine, which is its name on that island paradise.

Merriam-Webster has the pronunciation all wrong for the New Orleans area (mir-l?-' ton) and states that the word is Louisiana French from circa 1909. But its history goes back much further. The chayote squash was first introduced to South Louisiana by *Los Isleños*, or Canary Islanders, who arrived between 1778 and 1783 during Spanish rule. They settled mostly in Orleans' neighboring parish, St. Bernard. Chef John Folse wrote, "It is hard to imagine any bayou garden being complete without a mirliton vine growing over an arbor. It is truly one of Louisiana's most versatile vegetables." But somehow Louisiana natives did not adopt its Spanish name but the French word for a toy reed flute or tube-shaped pastry, perhaps of imitative origin.

The French term "mirliton" appeared in 1745 (possibly from a popular song refrain) and was a kind of simple children's flute adorned with a spiral of paper. Such crude musical instruments were also known as penny trumpets and Timmy Talkers in England. Specifically, a mirliton is a musical device that modifies the sound of a person's voice by means of a vibrating membrane. The American kazoo is a perfect example. Such instruments have been used in Africa for centuries and, although flutes are typically tubular, they may also be globular like the primitive gourd flutes. It is said that an African American named Alabama Vest (with the help of a German clockmaker named Thaddeus von Clegg) invented the modern kazoo in Macon, Georgia, in the early 1840s. And New Orleans' Original Dixieland Jass Band's 1921 recording of "Crazy Blues" has a kazoo solo one might mistake

for that of a trombone.

Antoine Beauvilliers' "Art of French Cookery" in 1827 mentions a marzipan-like pastry dish known as *Mirlitons de Rouen* (first produced around 1800) and a similar *Mirlitons à la Parisienne* (both made with orange-flower water like the Middle-Eastern marzipan known as *lozina*). A mirliton is also a tube-shaped pastry imitative of a short toy flute. When Tchaikovsky called his movement the "*Danse des Mirlitons*", he was referring either to its flute duet or those reed pipes that the shepherdess dancers might have played to their flocks. But its real double meaning is perhaps all that marzipan amongst the other sweet delights in the Land of the Sugar Plum Fairy.

A hussar hat used during the Napoleonic Wars was called a mirliton since its streamer of cloth resembled the spiral of paper from the children's flute. A similar analogy made mirliton a nickname for a gold coin during Louis XV's reign. Its two cursive letters "L" overlapped like spiraling ribbons. "*Vers de mirliton*" is a French term for bad poetry (much as the kazoo might be dismissed as a low-class pseudomusical instrument – I heartily disagree!), and "Mirliton" was a clown-like charlatan in older French literature. "*Le Mirliton*" is the name of a famous cabaret in Paris opened in 1885 by entertainer Aristide Bruant. Toulouse-Lautrec created his advertising poster in 1893.

Since 1989, the Bywater Neighborhood Association in association with the Bywater Art Market holds its annual Mirliton Festival. Bywater boosters like Mary Cooper figured, "They have festivals in Louisiana for everything else, why not mirlitons?" Festival food, fun, art and music (with possible encounters with a future Tchaikovsky or Toulouse-Lautrec ) can be found each November at Mickey Markey Playground on Royal Street between New Orleans' two most ironically passionate parallel streets: Piety and Desire.

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