

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Redfish Court Bouillon

Long before Paul Prudhomme ever blackened a redfish, or Ralph Brennan opened the "Redfish Grill", there was *court bouillon*.

Court bouillon or *court-bouillon* is a seasoned aromatic liquid (could be a vegetable broth or fish stock with herbs) used for poaching, usually fish, shellfish or other seafood. This method of quick-cooking may also be used for poaching vegetables, eggs or meats. A definition from *Larousse Gastronomique*, "*liquide aromatisé dans lequel on fait cuire poissons ou crustacés,*" emphasizes *les poissons* (fish) *ou crustacés* (shellfish, such as shrimp).



Redfish Court Bouillon

This sophisticated preparation sounds as if it were fit for a king or queen, or at least worthy of being served at some royal "court". But the "court" in *court bouillon* has a much different meaning. It comes from the French word *court* for "short," originating from the Latin *curtus* for "cut short" + *bouillon* for "broth," from *bouillir*, meaning "to boil". Translators called *court bouillon* "short broth". The English word "curt" (meaning rudely blunt and brief; abrupt, as "a curt reply") has the same Latin origin.

Court bouillon, therefore, is a "briefly boiled liquid" employed in the preparation of a quick meal. The term has been around since at least the seventeenth century. François Pierre de la Varenne (1615 – 1678) authored *Le Cuisinier françois* (1651), the founding text of all modern French cuisine. He mentioned numerous *court-bouillons*, as shown below:

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de la neige, qui est faite de vos blancs foïet-
rez, & les faites cuire devant le feu un plat
derriere.

Table du second de Poisson.

Turbots au court-bouillon.	I
Barbuës au court-bouillon.	2
Vives rôties sur le gril.	3
Soles frites.	4
Saumon au court-bouillon.	5
Esturgeon au court-bouillon.	6
Grenost en castrolle.	7
Bescart au court-bouillon.	8
Marsoüin au court-bouillon.	9
Marsoüin en ragouft.	10
Limandes frites en ragouft.	11
Louxtre de Mer au court-bouillon.	12
Louxtre de Mer sur le gril.	13
Raye frite.	14
Tanches au court-bouillon.	15
Alose au court-bouillon.	16

La Varenne's motto in food was "*Santé, modération, raffinement* (health, moderation, refinement)". He is said to have received his initial training in the kitchens of the French king Henri IV, married at the time to his second wife, Marie de' Medici.

In May 1685, *court bouillon* was referenced in an English cookery book as "*courbolion*", using basically the same ingredients used in France for several centuries: salt, water, white wine, vegetable aromatics (the *mirepoix* of chopped onions, carrots and celery), and flavored with black pepper and a *bouquet garni*. Creole and Cajun chefs change this up by adding tomatoes, cayenne, bay leaves and the "Trinity" of chopped onions, bell pepper and celery (the Louisiana version of *mirepoix*), and they add a little flour to make a *roux*.

Redfish or snapper need not be the main ingredient. In Provence, cod poached in a *court bouillon* is a classic French mainstay.



Reds in the ice chest

Although no royal court exists in the etymology of *court bouillon*, the *Picayune's Creole Cookbook* of 1901 bestows regal credentials when it states:

"THOSE KINGS of the New Orleans French Market, the Red Snapper and the Redfish, are used in making the pride and glory of the New Orleans *cuisines*, a good *Courtbouillon*. More generally and with finer results the Redfish or *Poisson Rouge* is used. This Fish may always be known by the single spot on the tail. The old Creoles have a tradition that this was the fish that the Apostles brought to the Savior when he performed the great miracle of the loaves and the fishes. They hand down the quaint legend that the Savior took up this fish between his fingers and blessed it, and it was ever after a marked fish in the waters, the imprint of the Lord's fingers having remained on the spot where He held up the fish and blessed it and offered it to His Father. They hold the Redfish in reverent veneration, and never fail to tell the

little children when cooking it:

'Those are the marks of the Lord's hand.'

Although this is a great story told to Creole children through the years, the actual redfish (*Sciaenops ocellatus*), also known as the red drum, channel bass or spottail bass, uses the distinctive black eyespot on its tail as a form of protective camouflage. It is the most distinguishing mark on the upper part of its tail base. Having multiple black spots is not unusual for redfish, but having no spots at all is extremely rare. Biologists are certain that the black spot near this great game fish's tail helps fool predators into attacking its tail instead of its head, allowing the *Poisson Rouge* to escape more easily. As a redfish with multiple spots grows older, it appears to lose any excess spots.

When we're not dining on reds, the adult red drum (in the summer and fall months) feeds on shrimp, crabs, and sand dollars, while (in the spring and winter months) the red's diet consists of croakers, menhaden, pinfish, mullets, bottom-dwelling sea robins, lizardfish, flounder and spot (another type of croaker).

Louis Armstrong, in his autobiography, offered "*cubie yon*" as his pronunciation of the delectable redfish dish. Most New Orleanians and many folks from South Louisiana emit a similar variation, something akin to "*coo bee yawn*", with the first syllable accentuated and the final "n" hardly noticeable. That is because French words ending in an "n" usually mark the nasalisation of the previous vowel, but the "n" is not itself pronounced. A nasal vowel is a sound made by expelling air through the mouth and nose without obstruction of the lips, tongue or throat.



Chef Louis Eustache Ude, The French Cook

Another Louis, French Chef Louis Eustache Ude, was all the rage in England during the 1820s. His book, *The French Cook, A System Of Fashionable And Economical Cookery Adapted To The Use Of English Families* provided an early recipe for "*Court Bouillon for Fish au bleu*":

"Take two of each of the following roots: carrots, onions, roots of parsley, leaves of ditto, thyme, bay-leaves, mace, cloves, spices, which fry in butter without their getting too much colour. Then pour into it two bottles of white and a bottle of red wine with salt ..."

Well, you get the idea. The *Picayune's Creole Cookbook* of 1901 described two versions, *Courtbouillon a la Creole* and *Courtbouillon a la E'spagnole* (Spanish Courtbouillon). The *Picayune's "Creole"* recipe ingredients are as follows:

6 Fine Slices of Redfish, or Red Snapper, Equal to 3 Pounds

2 Tablespoonfuls of Lard

2 Tablespoonfuls of Flour

12 Well-Mashed Allspice

3 Sprigs Each of Thyme, Parsley and Sweet Marjoram

3 Bay Leaves

A Large Onion

A Clove of Garlic

6 Large Fresh Tomatoes, Skinned and Chopped

A Quart of Water

A Glassful of Claret (Optional)

The Juice of a Lemon

Salt and Cayenne to Taste

Today there are numerous variations on Redfish *Court Bouillon*. Both John Besh and Commander's Palace Executive Chef Tory McPhail prefer a mixture of local seafood delicacies for their *court bouillons*, such as a combination of redfish filets, shrimp and oysters. Blue crab, mussels or clams are sometimes substituted. Some New Orleans chefs add succulent Creole tomatoes to their mixtures, while John Besh recommends the Beefsteak variety.

These chef's extraordinary culinary creations are "spot on," just like those beautiful reds that inhabit our Gulf waters and connecting estuaries.

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