

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

400 Rabbits, a Pig and a Whistle

Pulque (pool-kay) is a somewhat milky, viscous liquid fermented from *aguamiel*, literally "honey water," a liquid extracted from the sap of certain types of *maguey* (*agave*) plants. *Agave Americana* (with its dagger-shaped leaves), also called a "century plant" in English, is native to Mexico. Tequila comes the *Agave tequilana*, the blue variety. Taxes on *pulque* were profitable, once providing the Spanish Crown with half its Mexican revenue.

In pre-Columbian Mexico, one of the names used for *pulque* was *centzontochtin*, a mouthful that translates as "400 rabbits" (indicating that there are at least 400 varied emotional states induced by alcohol: angry, foolish, belligerent, melancholy, boisterous, jealous, sleepy, amorous, joking, chatty, obnoxious, and so on). Some inebriates become loud, while others are quiet.

Back in the early 1800s, one could unleash these rabbits with a concoction offered at an establishment known as the *Café des Réfugiés*, considered by many to be New Orleans' first eatery.

French Minister in Louisiana Pierre-Clément de Laussat had opined, "Saint Domingue was, of all our colonies in the Antilles, the one whose mentality and customs influenced Louisiana the most." As a result of the 1790s slave rebellion in Saint Domingue (Haiti), hordes of *réfugiés* eventually poured into the city and needed a place to eat, drink and be merry.

It was at 514 St. Philip Street in the French Quarter that Pierre Hurtubise erected a brick building. The construction date is unclear, but by 1808 it was the original location of the famous *Café des Réfugiés* (with Jean-Baptiste Thiot as proprietor).

George Washington Cable in his story *Café des Exilés*, in *Old Creole Days*, described the atmosphere at the fabled tavern:

“The next evening Galahad Shaughnessy and Manuel Mazaro met at that ‘very different’ place, the Café des Réfugiés. There was much free talk going on about Texan annexation, about chances of war with Mexico, about San Domingan affairs, about Cuba and many et-ceteras. Galahad was in his usual gay mood. He strode about among a mixed company of Louisianais, Cubans, and Americans, keeping them in a great laugh”.



Café des Exilés, 1882 etching
Joseph Pennell (July 4, 1857 – April 23, 1926)

One of the potable attractions at the café was Monsieur Thiot's popular beverage, which he called *le petit goyave* (the little guava). New Orleans drink historian, Stanley Clisby Arthur, wrote that it was “brewed from the fermented juice of the fruit of the aguava or century plant”. Further described as “toting the kick of an army mule, it was the same liquor known in Mexico as “*pulque*”, he asserted. Pulque's alcohol content, however (dependent on the degree of fermentation), ranges from 2 to 8% (hardly mule-powerful).

Still *Le petit goyave* was an immense favorite with the coffee house's diverse patrons and became quite famous in its day. This “motley crew of swiggers” included *colons de Saint Domingue*, and other Caribbean exiles, *révolutionnaires*, Kaintock flatboatmen, filibusters, West Indian seafarers, pirates and smugglers. Both Jean and Pierre Lafitte were regulars, as was Dominique You and René Béluche. Also there were “all the other favorite figures of legendary and fabulous

writers”.

In 1833, Pierre Hurtubise, Jr., sold the building with its peculiar patio to Jean Louis Arnaud for \$16,100. This forced Thiot to relocate the *Café des Réfugiés* to a building in the 900 block of Decatur Street opposite the French Market. According to Stanley Clisby Arthur, the *Café des Réfugiés* was “frequented in the very old days by fugitives from the islands of the Antilles ... located at 287 Old Levee (now 921 Decatur street)”. This structure had been previously occupied by R. Revel's *Le Veau qui Tête* (The Suckling Calf) tavern, doing business there from 1821-1825 at what was then 58 *rue de La Levée* (Old Levee Street). *Le Veau qui Tête* is the name of a very early restaurant, originally a butcher's shop (founded in the sixteenth century), at the *Place du Châtelet* in Paris. It looks out over the Palmier Fountain, built in 1808 to pay homage to Napoleon's victory in Egypt.

Immediately adjoining the *Café des Réfugiés* on Decatur was the *Hôtel de la Marine*, owned in 1809 by Jean Noël Déstréhan and leased to Bernard Trémoulet (who later became best known for his *Trémoulet House* Hotel at the corner of St. Peter and *rue de La Levée*). Famous architect Benjamin Henry Boneval Latrobe (May 1, 1764 – September 3, 1820) left some picturesque impressions in his diary of the *Trémoulet*, including a January 1819 watercolor of a gentleman seated in a *Campeachy* chair. The *Hôtel de la Marine* was also frequented by the Lafitte brothers and was a popular rendezvous for the strange, adventurous and eclectic mix of characters that frequented the city's riverfront.

The first hotel of which there is a record in New Orleans was the *Hôtel d'Orleans*, built in 1799, by Samuel Moore. It was followed by the *Hôtel des Étrangers*, erected in 1812, and by the *Hôtel Trémoulet*. The Marquis de Lafayette lodged at the *Hôtel des Étrangers* during his visit to New Orleans in 1825, as did Napoleon's physician, Antommarchi, in 1834.

Café des Réfugiés host Jean-Baptiste Thiot, after a couple of years in his new Decatur Street location, decided to change the name of his establishment to (of all things) the *Pig and Whistle*. The most archetypal of British pub names, the *Pig and Whistle* was also the name of a cocktail concocted by Thiot. He decided to name his tavern after the drink.

So how did the pub name *Pig and Whistle* originate in England? Most etymologists propose that the *Pig* part derives from the name of a drinking vessel. This came by way of variously, *Peg* (a set of pins fixed at intervals in a drinking container), *Piggin* (a wooden drinking ladle), or the most obvious *Pig* (an earthenware pot or pitcher).

The *Whistle* could be wassail, the warmed, spiced punch often associated with Christmas. The term itself is a contraction of the Middle English phrase *wæs hæil*, meaning "be healthy". Historically, however, wassail drinks were more likely to be mulled beer or mead (like that which was drunk on Twelfth-night in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*). Then there's the story that servants were obliged to whistle when they were sent to the cellars for pints of beer, to prove that they weren't drinking the stock.

How New Orleans' first dining establishment evolved from being a rendezvous for Haitian refugees and rascals to the *Pig and Whistle* is as mysterious as the myriad of minions who braved a brew that populated their pates with the traits of 400 rabbits.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Café des Réfugiés"
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2010