

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

About Trout

Particularly speckled trout, what is it that makes this fish among the top ten species for recreational fishing in the United States? According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (the government agency within the Department of Commerce that monitors these things, along with hurricanes), recreational fishermen in Louisiana harvest more than six million speckled trout each year. The fish we know and love as the speckled trout (in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast) is also known as the spotted seatrout, or *Cynoscion nebulosus*. Louisiana fisherman, of course, call them "specs" for short.

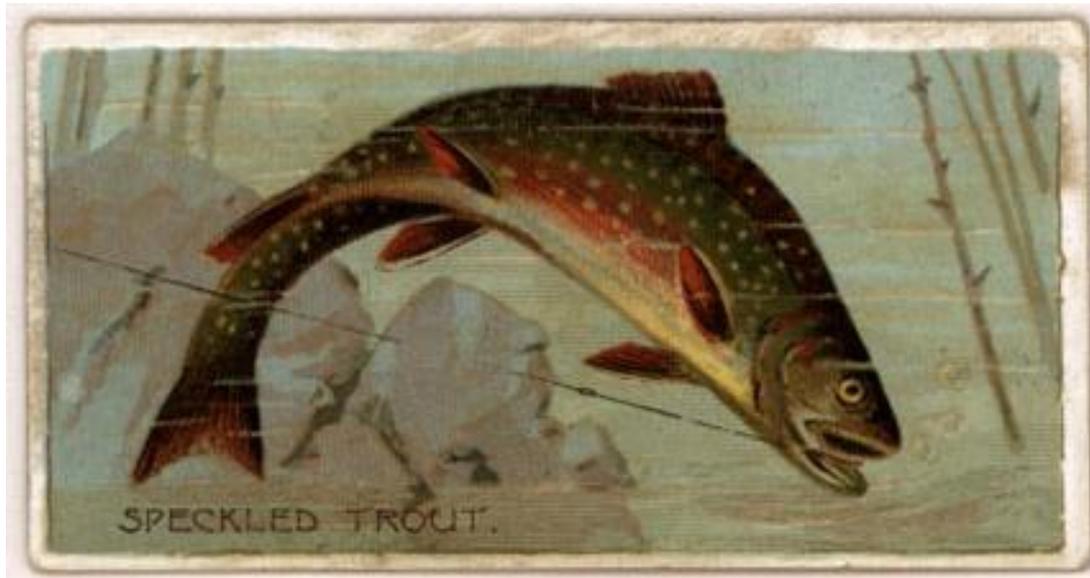


Ice chest full of spotted seatrout, or "specs"

The speckled trout, however, is not a member of the trout family (*Salmonidae*) like the brook trout, but part of the drum family (*Sciaenidae*). This common estuarine fish is extremely popular for commercial and especially recreational fishing in southern and southeastern U. S. coastal waters. Adults reach 19-25 inches in length and weigh from 1-4 pounds.

Like all members of the drum family, mature male "specs" make a "drumming" sound that attracts females during their long spawning season (spring through summer).

The brook trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*), shown below on a Duke's cigarette card, also known as a speckled trout, is in the *Salmonidae* family of fish. This inland stream trout is more specifically a char, of the genus *Salvelinus*.



The speckled trout enjoyed in New Orleans (the Gulf Coast variety) may be caught on lures, but the most common bait is shrimp. Young "specs" eat large quantities of shrimp and other crustaceans, shifting their diets toward small fish as they grow larger.

There's nothing better than fried or broiled speckled trout at home or served at one's favorite restaurant. Local trout is popular in family restaurants, as well as New Orleans' finest dining establishments, although it is not as available as in the past. This was not due to any love lost between the dining public and this delectable fish, but because it became more difficult for restaurants to obtain. In the late 1980s, the state legislature passed laws imposing a short season and limited the commercial catch of speckled trout to less than one percent of the total. Speckled trout can only be caught with a rod and reel and not with nets (nor even on a boat that carries such a net). There are also regulations as to size and number for both commercial and recreational fishermen.

Many of us have eaten at West End before Katrina finished off so many lakefront seafood eateries. In my youth, I looked forward to an open-faced "trout sandwich" from Swanson's on Fridays. For others, the ideal spot may have been Bruning's or Fitzgerald's.

Galatoire's signature dish for years has been Trout *Marguery*, brought to the restaurant by chef Constant Hippolyte Prouet who "Creolized" the dish with indigenous ingredients (like gulf shrimp instead of mussels). Over the top, both a Béchamel and Hollandaise sauce is amply employed. *The New Orleans City Guide* (1938), compiled by the Federal Writers Project of the WPA, reported, "Galatoire's excels in its Marguery sauce, served usually with *filet de truite*."

Trout *Marguery* started off as Sole *Marguery* in Paris, named for its creator Jean-Nicolas Marguery. His restaurant (founded c. 1860) was located right next door to *Le Théâtre du Gymnase* on the *Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle*.



335. PARIS (10^e) — Théâtre du Gymnase. J. H.

The theatre's playwrights included Balzac, Alexandre Dumas (*père et fils*), George Sand and Victorien Sardou (Antoine's created Eggs *Sardou* in his honor).

After a trip to Paris, "Diamond Jim" Brady (the railroad business magnate with an enormous appetite) stated that the *Marguery* sauce was "so exquisite that it would have made a Turkish towel edible".

Restaurants in New York like Rector's on Broadway didn't want to lose this big eater's business. Charles Rector's pulled his son George out of law school because Brady "was the 'best twelve' customers Rector's had" and sent him "to Paris to learn the art of blending this sauce, so that Brady could be served with 'Filet of Sole Marguery'."

Two core dishes of New Orleans cuisine, the best selling entrées Trout *Meunière* and Trout *Meunière Amandine*, have an interesting origin. *Meunière* means "in the style of the miller's wife" because the fish is dusted lightly with mill-ground flour. These mills were located on streams, which is also where the fish were caught.

George Sand, who grew up in the province of Berry, France, even wrote about one of these mills where trout were caught in the novel, *Le Meunier d'Angibault* (1845), or *The Miller of Angibault*:

"Trout cost me nothing from the Vauvre, and to-day is Sunday, when I always fish all the morning."



The actual mill at Angibault, where the "Meunier" fished

George Sand, to those readers familiar with French literature, was a woman author and memoirist who used a male *nom de plume*. Her theories were considered scandalous in her day, especially the manner in which she applied them in her novels. Her fiction secured for her, in the pantheon of French literature, a place second only to Victor Hugo. Coincidentally, her first name was *Amandine*, but she went by the name Aurore.

In 1822 Aurore married Baron Casimir Dudevant. After a time, she tired of her somewhat insensitive husband and sought first a platonic friendship with a young magistrate, Aurélien de Sèze, who loved philosophy and literature. Later she would have a much publicized

romantic affair with the composer, Frédéric Chopin, among others. Her early novels are love stories in which her romantic idealism is revealed in realistic settings. Later, her published works expressed her socialist views. She also began smoking cigarettes in public and sporting men's clothing — which brought her reputation into question at that time. She justified the men's clothing as being far sturdier and less expensive than that of women.



George Sand (1804 – 1876) Frédéric Chopin (1810 – 1849)

A platonic love, of course, is not of a sexual nature but one that inspires the mind and soul. This ultimate state of being prompted the "New Orleans Underground Gourmet," the late Richard Collin, in the 1970s to give the designation "platonic dish" only to the very best the city had to offer. Galatoire's Trout *Meunière Amandine* and Trout *Marguery* were both proclaimed "platonic dishes".

Most of the classic New Orleans restaurants serve Trout *Meunière* or *Amandine*, such as Commander's, Arnaud's and Galatoire's. When Chef Paul Prudhomme headed up the kitchen at Commander's Palace, he introduced trout with locally grown pecans instead of almonds. It, too, was an excellent creation. The dish known as Trout Pontchartrain adds crabmeat as a topping, as does Trout Nancy (prepared with lump crabmeat, lemon butter and capers). The Bon Ton prepares an incredible fried speckled trout. Try it with their signature Alzina Sauce.

Amandine is a culinary term used to indicate a garnish of almonds (usually toasted sliced or slivered). That which is to be garnished is usually cooked with butter and seasonings, then sprinkled with the flavorful nuts. Galatoire's claims their Trout *Meunière Amandine* is

requested more than any other dish. But in other parts of the country, one may see *Amandine* misspelled *Almondine* in a number of American cookbooks.

For those of you interested in all things platonic, you might be surprised to learn that the very first "platonic fish" was the philosopher Socrates himself. Plato's *Meno* is a Socratic dialogue in which the two main characters, Socrates and Meno, discuss human virtue: what it is, and whether or not it can be taught. Tired of arguing at the end of this dialogue, Meno calls Socrates a torpedo fish.

"Both my mind and my tongue are numb," says Meno.

Torpedo was the Roman name for electric rays, derived from the Latin *torpere* meaning "to be numb". These rays are known for being capable of delivering a numbing electric shock to stun prey or for self-defense.

The projectile propelled from a submarine also gets its name from these familiar rays known to people of classical antiquity. The southern stingray found in the Gulf of Mexico, however, does not sting one electrically — but by a venom-coated serrated barb on its tail.

George Sand wrote:

"Life resembles a novel more often than novels resemble life."

But her most widely quoted line is:

"There is only one happiness in life, to love and be loved."

And since before I can remember, I have loved trout. I know many New Orleanians share this same sentiment.

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