

Artichokes in New Orleans

A wonderfully versatile and delicious thistle of the *Asteraceae* (daisy, or sunflower) family, and quite popular in the Crescent City, is the artichoke. Botanically speaking, I am referring to the globe artichoke (*Cynara cardunculus* var. *scolymus*), which has for centuries been cultivated as a food. In the 8th century BC, Homer mentioned it as a type of garden plant. In Sicily, varieties of artichokes were grown beginning in the classical period of the ancient Greeks (i.e., most of the 5th and 4th centuries BC). Consumed as food by the ancient Greeks (who called them *kaktos*) and Romans (who called the vegetable *carduus*), *artichoke* (as it is used in English), however, is Arabic in origin.



The Spanish *alcachofa* and French *artichaut* both come from the medieval Arabic *الخرشوف* *al-ḥaršūf*. The spread of artichoke cultivation itself, in Italy and southern France in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, can be traced along its way. The blossom of the thistle was

improved by the Arabs and passed from Naples to Florence in the year 1466, carried there by Filippo Strozzi the Elder, an Italian statesman, banker and father of twelve children. Some time around 1480 they made their way to Venice, mostly as a curiosity. But all through the 16th century, they were transported across France: to Avignon in 1532, to Cavaillon in 1541 as *carchofas*, from the Italian *carciofo*, and appearing at Chateauneuf du Pape in 1553 and Orange in 1554. Also during those years, the Dutch introduced them to England, where they grew in the garden of Henry VIII at Newhall in 1530. In the United States, the Spanish introduced them to California, while the French cultivated them in Louisiana.



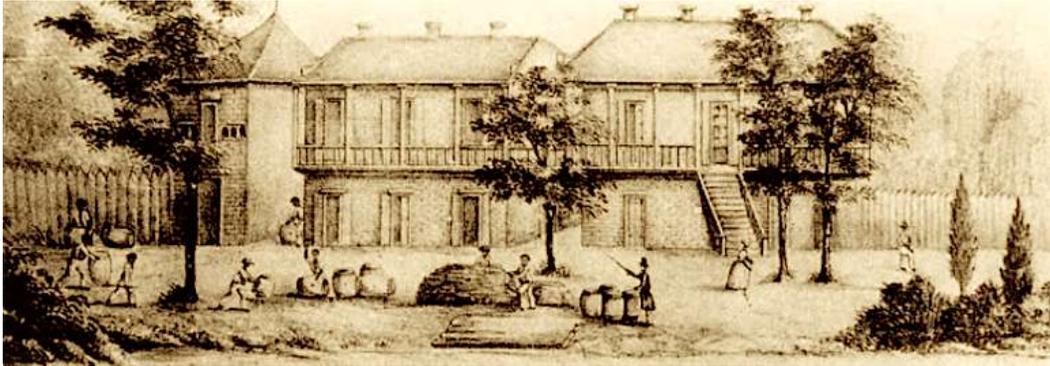
The introduction of artichokes by the French in Louisiana was quite early, just a handful of years after the founding of New Orleans, so we did not have to wait for our Sicilian immigrants to bring them to our dining tables.

We know from the correspondence of the Chevalier Jean-Charles Pradel to his family in France that he actively grew artichokes in his plantation parterre garden on the west bank of the river facing the *Place d'Armes*. The plantation was known as *Mon Plaisir*. By March 15, 1753, Pradel, who began his colonial life as a military officer, produced a daily output of two to three dozen fresh artichokes, which he sold in the New Orleans market at 6 *sols* 3 *deniers* each. He proudly proclaimed: "They are as large as a saucer and much finer than those of France."

According to *The Commerce of Louisiana During The French Regime, 1699-1763*, by N. M. Miller Surrey, German farmers "on ordinary market days and on fête days" were bringing artichokes to New Orleans as early as the 1740s, along with "fine apples, peaches, pears,

figs, sweet potatoes, melons of all kinds," as well as "large cabbages, salad plants, herbs, all of which were finer than those grown in France."

New Orleans food writer Pableaux Johnson claims there was an artichoke plantation where the city's Warehouse District now stands.



Mon Plaisir, from an 1850 lithograph, once the plantation of Jean-Charles Pradel, later the home of entrepreneur John McDonogh

An article in the *Picayune*, dated May 20, 1843, attempted to reach a decision as to what should be the ideal dressing for artichokes, "drawn butter" or a preparation of oil and other ingredients, stating, "The point in dispute has been the propriety of using mustard and cayenne pepper in making a dressing for artichokes." A special "Court" convened at "the dinner table of the St. Charles Exchange" to entertain arguments and "comprehensive experiments" to determine the ideal infused mixture for this "delicious esculent". Perhaps you are unaware (I was) that an "esculent" is defined as "something, especially a vegetable, fit to be eaten".

The ultimate decision of the "Court" was to "let gentlemen use simply oil, salt, black pepper and a very little vinegar in making a dressing for artichokes."

A reply to this article from a correspondent in England appeared in the August 3rd, 1843, issue of the *Picayune*, and the writer (and his dinner companions across the Atlantic) opted for an "insinuation of mustard" and backed up that opinion with the writings of famed lawyer, epicure and gastronome, Brillat-Savarin in his "*Physiologie du goût*" ("The Physiology of Taste"). Savarin believed that we humans distinguish ourselves from the other creatures of the earth by using food not simply for nourishment, but also as an art form. He famously wrote: "Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are." And this

one: "The discovery of a new dish does more for human happiness than the discovery of a star."



Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1755 – 1826)

Thomas Jefferson, who brought mustard seeds to Monticello from France, once went hunting with Savarin, according to this 1843 article. Savarin shot a fine wild turkey. Jefferson found it difficult to have a conversation and relate anecdotes of the Revolution to Savarin, since the Frenchman (in a culinary reverie) was thinking how he should dress his turkey.

And, of course, the correct dipping sauce for one's artichokes often required a specially designed artichoke plate. These plates often represented the plant in an artistic fashion, usually with a cleverly placed dipping well to hold the desired blend of sauce ingredients. One can't go wrong with Worcestershire sauce and butter. A set of

antique French majolica artichoke/ asparagus plates from France (shown below) date from the late 1800s or early 1900s.



In 1845, the *Picayune* printed an affirmation of New Orleans as a reliable artichoke source. The city of Charleston, South Carolina, looked to the Crescent City for certain “luxuries of the garden” for the tables of their citizens.

Charleston is hard upon New Orleans for early luxuries from the garden. Artichokes and strawberries are already upon the tables of their citizens.

The Picayune, April 3, 1845

It must be noted that the Jerusalem artichoke, also known as the sunchoke, is neither an artichoke (although its edible tuber does have an artichoke-like flavor), nor does it have anything to do with Jerusalem. It is really a type of sunflower, which Italian settlers in the

United States called *girasole*, the Italian word for sunflower (both plants are members of the genus *Helianthus*). Since it tasted like an artichoke, and *girasole* sounded a lot like "Jerusalem", the name Jerusalem artichoke came into general use.



Artichokes for sale, photo by Ned Hémard

You might wonder, "Is it a fruit or vegetable?" Botanically, the edible globe artichoke is actually a flower but could also be classified as a vegetable by the way it is consumed. In a *Picayune* article dated January 4, 1845, it was considered a fruit with a Sicilian origin.

In New Orleans today, artichokes are consumed in many and varied ways. Take, for example, the stuffed artichoke.

One can find these delicious stuffed artichokes all over town, from Liuzza's on Bienville to Frankie and Johnny's on Tchoupitoulas, from Dorignac's to the Bucktown seafood markets and restaurants. Local housewives often prepare these a dozen or more at a time to serve their families and, as a sideline, to ours. Stuffed with herbs, garlic, Parmesan cheese and breadcrumbs, then drizzled with olive oil, one has to agree that this succulent dish is an excellent example of the Sicilian influence on New Orleans cuisine. Trouble is, "in-the-know" locals of Sicilian heritage say this type of preparation did not come from the mother country. Sicilian-born Irene DiPietro of Irene's

Restaurant says that seasoned breadcrumb stuffed artichokes in Sicily are like Italian meatballs, a dish that actually originated on this side of the Atlantic.



The ubiquitous New Orleans stuffed artichoke

The preparation involves pulling back the leaves of the artichoke and using one's finger to gently pull open the center. The inner tender yellow artichoke leaves are removed, and a small metal spoon is used to scoop away the inner fuzz, known as the choke. The finished product's ample and flavorful stuffing can be removed with a fork or scraped from the leaves with one's teeth.

But where did the original recipe come from? Not from *The Picayune's Creole Cook Book*, published in 1901, which contained six artichoke recipes. Stuffed Artichokes "a la Barigoule," which contain garlic, ham and mushrooms is one of the recipes, but contains no breadcrumbs.

A stuffed artichoke recipe, very much like it is prepared today in New Orleans, appeared in the *Picayune* in 1926:

STUFFED ARTICHOKEs
Take large sized artichokes, cut off stem end, making the bottom flat, so they will stand in pan or pot. Cut one or one-half inch off the top, also remove a few of the outer leaves; spread the leaves apart and fill with stuffing made of bread crumbs, a little chopped parsley, onion, garlic and a little grated cheese. Mix well together with some butter and olive oil.
For baking put in pot with about a quarter of an inch of water or broth. Bake about twenty minutes.
For boiled artichokes stuff with same filling. place in pot, fill with enough water so the artichokes will stand about one or one-half inch above. Boil very slowly for about twenty minutes, watching so the water does not boil over into the artichokes.

Recipe for Stuffed Artichokes, Times-Picayune, April 17, 1926

Eleven recipes for artichokes in all were featured in the article: A la Jeanette (filled with meat or chicken and peppers); "Saute in Sauce (great oil and Worcestershire Sauce combo); Stewed; Boiled; Combination Salad; Artichoke Omelet; Dry Saute (still cooked in olive oil or butter); A La Lyonnaise (cooked in a saucepan with olive oil, garlic, etc.); Stuffed; Fried; and Raw Artichoke Salad.

Other favorite preparations much enjoyed by New Orleanians include the Italian salad, for years called the Wop Salad with little offense taken. Today, however, for the most part that name has all but faded away, with the exception of Rocky & Carlo's in Chalmette. R & O's does a wonderful Italian salad that includes marinated artichoke hearts. These hearts are available at the grocery in jars or cans and

can be used in many other dishes, such as hot spinach artichoke dip or Oyster Artichoke Soup. The original version of this soup was the creation of the late Chef Warren LeRuth, and is today a staple on many a New Orleans restaurant menu from Emeril's Delmonico to Mandina's.

Crabmeat Yvonne at Galatoire's is an artichoke entrée hard to resist. After removing the heart bottoms, they are sautéed with lump crabmeat, *meunière* butter, mushrooms and scallions. This outstanding dish is named for Justin Galatoire's elegant daughter, who devoted decades of her life as front cashier and later as president of this historic French Quarter restaurant. Crawfish Yvonne is an alternate presentation.

Commander's Palace does a spectacular "Oyster and Absinthe Dome", which includes oysters, artichokes, bacon and cream (with a splash of absinthe or pastis) in a ramekin beneath a puff pastry topping.

Houston's Restaurant at 1755 St. Charles Avenue offers a popular seasonal dish: perfectly grilled artichokes accompanied by a piquant remoulade dipping sauce. The Houston's location was once the site of Higgins Industries, which built the Landing Craft Mechanized Personnel (LCVP), which revolutionized Allied amphibious landings at Normandy and other beaches during World War II.

New Orleanians certainly eat its share of artichokes, but why aren't more artichokes grown in Louisiana today? This was a result of competition from California, once interstate commerce made their artichokes more readily available. But how are all things artichoke, one might ask, back in Italy?

This April 2018, an unusual controversy emerged within Rome's Jewish community, which is deeply embroiled in a standoff with Israel's Chief Rabbinate after he made a kosher-related declaration. The Eternal City's cherished dish of *carciofi alla giudia* (deep-fried whole artichoke), he declared (because it is impossible to clean properly), was not kosher.

But Rome's Jewish community is not readily accepting this decision without standing up for this centuries-old favorite. They argue that rabbis of the past must have determined that Roman artichokes were impervious to insects and worms, and thus kosher.

"We've been eating this dish prepared this way for 600 years,"

explained Umberto Pavoncello, of *Nonna Betta*, a kosher restaurant in Rome's Jewish Ghetto.



Carciofi alla giudia, crisp delicacies of Roman-Jewish cuisine

How this will all turn out, we don't know, but *Tomorrow is Another Day*.

That was, by the way, a tentative title for Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*. Instead, her choice finally came from the first line of the third stanza of the poem, *Non Sum Qualis Eram Bonae sub Regno Cynarae* ("I am not as I was in the reign of good Cynara") by Ernest Dowson (1867 – 1900):

"I have forgot much, Cynara! gone with the wind,
Flung roses, roses riotously with the throng,
Dancing, to put thy pale, lost lilies out of mind;
But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
Yea, all the time, because the dance was long:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion."

Dowson's Cynara (taken from a poem by the Roman poet Horace) represents a lost or faded love who has become a constant obsession.

But, who was this Cynara? The reader might deduce from the artichoke's earlier botanical description that *Cynara* is the genus of the *Asteraceae* family, a name which comes from the Greek *kynara*, which means "artichoke". Just as "Daisy" can be a woman's name, so can "Cynara".

As for the delectable artichoke, there is little doubt that it will ever

become a faded love.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Artichokes in New Orleans"
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