

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Barbecue and Buccaneers**

Asking my son this past Saturday, "What'd you have for lunch?", his reply was: "Thirty tickets of pork!"

That was a sure tip-off that he'd been to "Hogs For The Cause," an annual fundraising event that drew record crowds this year despite torrential downpours the Friday night before. Founded in 2008 by Rene Louapre and Becker Hall as a means of recreating traditional Southern pig roasts, a way to enjoy food and drink in City Park with friends, and to help four-year old Ben Sarrat, Jr., diagnosed with an incurable brain tumor. Since then, "Hogs" has grown tremendously.

In 2013, 15,000 pork-loving patrons attended with over seventy-five teams competing in categories such as Whole Hog, Ribs, Porkpourri and Shoulder. Oh, and they've booked great bands and artists, too, like the Radiators, Dr. John, Trombone Shorty, Marcia Ball and others to entertain the crowds. There were ninety teams in 2014 that cooked over four tons of pork. Today the event raises a substantial amount of money to assist families struggling with the financial burdens of caring for a child battling brain cancer.

New Orleans has once again become the host of a fun, yet charitable, festival. But how did the original *barbecue* originate? For the answer, we must take a step back in time to the age of pirates dominating the sea lanes of the Caribbean.

There are numerous names for these marauders of the sea. Pirates, privateers and buccaneers come immediately to mind. The term *buccaneer* is today used generally as a synonym for *pirate*, yet in the past buccaneers were privateers who found Spanish ships and their cargo a welcome target in the Caribbean Sea during the late 17th century. Often these corsairs (another synonym) sailed under letters of marque, government licenses authorizing them to attack and capture enemy vessels.

Our local buccaneers of note, Jean and Pierre Laffite (along with Domnique You and Renato Beluche), are remembered in history as heroes of the Battle of New Orleans. Two movies (one a remake) have been made that vividly depict the events connected to the Laffites of Baratavia and the historic Battle of New Orleans, each entitled *The Buccaneer*. Before their role in aiding Major General Andrew Jackson, the Laffites were labeled "banditti" for selling and auctioning contraband goods below New Orleans. Especially audacious was what happened after Governor Claiborne placed a \$500 reward for the capture of Jean Laffite. Within two days, handbills were posted all over the city offering a handsome reward for the arrest of the governor. After the victory at Chalmette, Jackson commended the Baratavian brigands for their "courage and fidelity" and obtained for them a full pardon.



*Anonymous portrait of Jean Laffite, Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas*

The Arawaks were indigenous peoples of the Caribbean, and the term *buccaneer* derives from the Arawak word *buccan*, a wooden frame for smoking meat, usually manatee. Manatee, really?

From Arawaks slow-roasting manatees on a *buccan*, the word in French became *boucane*. And from that the name *boucanier* evolved for French hunters who used these wooden frames to smoke meat from feral pigs and cattle on the Island of Hispaniola (modern day Haiti and the Dominican Republic). In time, English speaking people anglicised the word *boucanier* to *buccaneer*. Manatee, really? Each to his own taste. After all, sailors homesick for the ladies saw misty manatees below the surface of the water and mistook them for mermaids.



*How could they mistake a manatee for a mermaid?*

English colonists in Jamaica began to spread the use of the term *buccaneers* as another name for pirates. Its usage became universally adopted in the year 1684 with the first published English translation of Alexandre Exquemelin's book *The Buccaneers of America*. Viewed from London by those in positions of power, buccaneering was an excellent low-budget means of wreaking havoc on England's rival, Spain. The English crown, therefore, licensed these buccaneers with those letters of marque, legalizing their piratical operations in return for a share of the booty.

The word *barbecue* has an amazingly similar etymology as the word *buccaneer*. Most etymologists believe that *barbecue* derives from the word *barabicu*, found in the language of the Taíno (Arawakan people who occupied the Greater Antilles and the Bahamas) and the Timucua of Florida. Translated as "sacred fire pit," *barabicu* entered European languages in the form *barbacoa*. The word *barbacoa* (very close to the modern *barbecue*) made its way from Caribbean dialects into Spanish, Portuguese, then French and English. *Barbacoa* first appeared in print in Spain in the 1526. The first recorded use of the word in the English language was not in 1697 by English sea captain, naturalist, and

occasional buccaneer William Dampier, as cited in the Oxford English Dictionary, but in 1672 by writer John Lederer in its present form, *barbecue*, following the author's travels in the American southeast. Lexicographer Samuel Johnson defined barbecue in his 1756 dictionary as "a term for dressing a whole hog" (attestation to Pope) or "a hog dressed whole".

The word *barbacoa* describes a cooking grill for meat (very similar to the *buccan*), consisting of a wooden platform resting on sticks. This process traditionally involved digging a hole in the ground and placing the meat (often a whole goat) with a pot beneath it to collect the juices for a hearty broth.



*Fish and alligator (but no manatees) on this barbacoa, from a 1583 engraving based on a 1564 painting by Jacques LeMoyne, a French explorer in Florida.*

Today, barbecue (barbeque, BBQ, B-B-Que or Bar-B-Q) is popular all over the United States - and the world. In Australia, one can enjoy "shrimp on the barbie". The word *barbecue* can refer to the apparatus used for grilling or smoking meat, poultry or fish, or the actual food prepared in this manner. It can also denote the event ("Let's have a barbecue,") or a type of flavor (barbecue potato chips).



*The Joint's new home on Mazant Street in the Bywater*

Charcoal is the usual fuel for barbecue, although gas or propane is also used. In the United States, barbecue is a uniquely Southern institution, and cities like Memphis proudly claim to offer the best there is. Since 1977, Memphis has hosted the Memphis In May International Festival, with the World Championship Barbecue Cooking Contest added the following year. There numerous barbecue teams compete each year for the championship title. But New Orleans has some mouth-watering barbecue, as well.

Pete Breen and Jenny Tice brought some bodacious barbecue to New Orleans when they opened "The Joint" at 801 Poland Avenue in the Bywater. Working his way to New Orleans from Washington and Lee, Pete had honed his barbecue skills by throwing backyard barbecues that just got better and better. In the winter of 2003-2004, Pete bought a smoker and starting to slowly cook pulled pork in larger, delicious quantities. It naturally followed that he and Jenny should open a barbecue "joint", and they did (in 2004) – to great acclaim. One can choose the beef brisket, ribs, chicken or pulled pork, each rubbed and smoked for hours on end. Top them off with either or both great barbecue sauces, homemade from scratch, one vinegar-based and the other more traditional. Jenny has mastered the great sides, including incredible baked beans, coleslaw and mac and cheese. In 2012, "The Joint" moved to larger quarters at 701 Mazant, corner Royal Street, now with a cocktail bar and wine list. The jukebox is still amazing, abundant with local favorites. Pete and Jenny's motto for "The Joint" is "always smokin'".

Saucy's on Magazine Street is another great barbecue spot and features a delicious brisket quesadilla, dubbed "the wrapadilla" at local musical events like the YLC's Wednesdays at Lafayette Square concert series. They have outstanding sauces and "smoked beans", made up of a variety of beans.

And while the meat is smokin' slowly ...

Jean Laffite and his brother, Pierre, spelled their last name Laffite, but documents written in English at the time used "Lafitte". "Lafitte," therefore, is seen as the most commonly used spelling, including numerous places named for the famous Baratarian Buccaneer.

The order of mammals to which manatees (also known as sea cows) belong, *Sirenia*, is derived from the sirens of Greek mythology. Once again, this originates from the legendary tale concerning lonely sailors mistaking these less-than-svelte life forms for mermaids.

And, as for William Dampier (1651 – 1715), this English explorer, adventurer and intermittent buccaneer was the first person in history to circumnavigate the world three times. Not only was Dampier pardoned for his youthful piratical activity, he was placed in command of his own vessel on an exploratory voyage to Australia. He set out in 1683 on a privateering expedition from Panama, crossing the Pacific to the Philippines, China and Australia before eventually reaching the British Isles again in 1691. He is also cited countless times in the OED, notably on words such as *barbecue*, *avocado*, *chopsticks*, *posse*, *snapper*, *cashew*, *soy sauce*, *breadfruit*, *thunder-cloud*, *tortilla*, *swampy* and *sub-species*. He did not necessarily coin these words, but his use of them in his writings is the first known example in the English language.

Speaking of *sub-species*, Charles Darwin called Dampier's writings to be "a mine" of information, and he felt such an affinity with the famed buccaneer that he referred to him in his diary as "old Dampier".



*"Old Dampier" wrote of barbecue in 1697.*

In New Orleans, we even love to char-grill oysters (our unique form of barbecue). Tommy Cvitanovich of Drago's is credited with this creation, a take-off on an already popular grilled red fish dish. Drago's calls it "charbroiling" the oysters. Butter, garlic, black pepper, parsley, oregano, along with grated Parmesan and Romano cheese, how can such toppings not please the palate?

Like all things of exceptional value, the recipe has been pirated. And just like those days gone by when the people of New Orleans flocked to buy hot items from the Brothers Laffite, there are fantastic offerings all around (from pork to oysters) provided by modern day barbecue buccaneers.

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