

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Bisques and Biscuits

The word biscuit (from the Middle French *bescuit*) is derived from the Latin words *bis* (twice) and *coquere, coctus* (to cook, cooked). The crustaceans in a French bisque are twice-cooked, as well, first *sautéed* lightly in their shells, then simmered in a mixture of wine and aromatic ingredients (before being strained), followed by the addition of cream. But in New Orleans, things are different.



CRAYFISH BISQUE A LA CREOLE

Wash the cray-fishes, boil and drain them. Separate the heads from the tails. Clean out some of the heads, allowing two or three heads to each person. Peel the tails. Chop up a part of them, add to them some bread, onions, salt, black pepper and an egg or two. With this dressing, stuff the heads that you have cleaned out. Chop the claws and the parts adhering to them. Fry a little garlic, onions, ham, one turnip, one carrot, and a little flour; add some water, the chopped claws, a few tomatoes, thyme, sweet bay, parsley and a little rice stirring often to avoid scorching. When well boiled, strain through a colander. After straining, put back to the fire and season to taste. Put the stuffed heads into the oven until brown. When ready to serve, put them and the tails in a soup dish and pour the soup over them. Before serving, add a little butter and nutmeg, stirring until the butter is melted.

First of all, the etymology of the word bisque (meaning that cream-laden Gallic variety) is thought to have originated from *Biscay*, as in the Bay of Biscay (and not from the same roots as biscuit). On some medieval maps, the Bay of Biscay is designated as *El Mar del los Vascos* (the Basque Sea). It's that seafood-rich body of water nestled between Spain and France.

Secondly, the classical French culinary traditions of bisque preparation have been superseded by South Louisiana's dark roux-based soup, brimming with butter, but devoid of the cream as in the European variety. And like a prize in a box of Cracker Jack, our local version has flavorful stuffing encased in each crawfish head (the large red thorax shell), unsuccessfully hiding in our bowl.

The famed international writer Lafcadio Hearn, who spent a decade in New Orleans, wrote about stuffing the heads and preparing the bisque "A LA CREOLE" back in 1885 in his popular *La Cuisine Créole*, a fine collection of culinary recipes from leading New Orleans Creole chefs and housewives. You'll notice in the recipe above, he spelled crawfish "cray-fishes". Crawfish is our preferred local pronunciation. And while not mentioning the roux by name, he instructed the reader to "fry a little garlic, onions" along with other ingredients and "a little flour"

while adding "some water". This is what makes New Orleans crawfish bisque so different from its parent soup across the Atlantic.

New Orleans master chef Poppy Tooker, proponent of the "Eat It to Save It" psychology of preserving historic local dishes, is fearful that crawfish bisque could become an endangered recipe. She blames the "time and effort" involved, computing the handling of "each tiny crawfish head" to "a minimum of seven times":

- (1) Putting "them into the boiling pot".
- (2) Pulling "the head from the tail".
- (3) Thoroughly washing the head and leaving it to dry.
- (4) Stuffing the head.
- (5) Rolling each stuffed head in flour and dotting with butter.
- (6) Arranging the stuffed heads on a baking sheet and browning them in the oven.
- (7) The payoff. "After simmering in the bisque, you grab each head from your bowl, scooping out the stuffing. Voila, the great reward is finally yours."

European bisque is different in other ways. It is also often a method of extracting every bit of flavor from imperfect crustaceans, ones not good enough to send to market. We don't have that problem in New Orleans. In European bisques, the shells are pulverized to a fine paste and added to thicken the liquid. Julia Child once commented (in a very high voice), "Do not wash anything off until the soup is done because you will be using the same utensils repeatedly and you don't want any marvelous tidbits of flavor losing themselves down the drain."

Panem biscoctum is the Latin phrase for twice-baked bread. This explains how biscuits were originally cooked in a twofold process: first baked, and then dried out in a low oven. The Middle English word *bisquite* came into English in the 14th century. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, it was spelled *bisket* from the 16th to the 18th century, and the current spelling is "a senseless adoption of the modern French spelling, without the French pronunciation".

In the United Kingdom, the twice-baked item that would eventually be called a biscuit is a small (and usually sweet) product that would be called either a cookie or a cracker in the United States. The American biscuit is soft and flaky, similar to a scone, and it thrives in the South. Country gravy or jam is often an additive. Although yeast may be

used as a leavening agent in the preparation of the Southern American biscuit, it is often replaced or supplemented with baking soda or baking powder. And it's baked only once.

Here's the reason. When Europeans began to emigrate to the United States, the Dutch (around 1703) adopted the word *koekje*, a diminutive of cake, to have a similar meaning for a hard, baked item. Biscuit and *koekje* (cookie) began to clash as words. After the Revolutionary War, the word cookie became the word of choice in the new United States to signify a hard, twice-baked product.

Cookies (or biscuits in the UK) have been around through the centuries. The inspiration for fortune cookies dates back to the time when Chinese soldiers slipped rice paper messages into moon cakes to help the coordination of their defense against Mongolian invaders. King Richard the Lionheart of England left for the Third Crusade with *biskit of muslin*, a mixed corn compound of barley, bean flour and rye. Hardtack (or hard tack) is a simple, long-lasting type of cracker or biscuit, made from flour, water, and sometimes salt. It was and is used in the absence of perishable foods, commonly during long sea voyages and military campaigns. British sailors applied "hard" to the slang word for food, "tack". Biscuits remained a vital part of the Royal Navy sailor's diet until the introduction of canned foods. In Italy today, *biscotto* refers to any type of hard twice-baked biscuit.

We keep our cookies in a cookie jar, but the British use what they call biscuit barrels.



A British biscuit barrel

Seafood bisque is traditionally served from a tureen in a low two-handled cup on a saucer or in a mug. Tureens may be ceramic (either the glazed earthenware called *faïence* or porcelain) or silver, and customarily they stand on a platter or tray produced *en suite*. This brings us to another type of porcelain.

Bisque porcelain is pottery that has been fired but not yet glazed. It is unglazed, white ceramic ware. Bisque (often called "biscuit" ware) is earthenware that is porous and readily absorbs water. Vitreous ware and bone china are almost non-porous even in the biscuit state. Bisque firing reaches a temperature of at least 1000°C, although higher heat is not uncommon. This firing results in permanent

chemical and physical changes in the bisque ware. These changes result in a much harder and more resilient article, which can still be porous. Bisque porcelain is also used in the making of bisque dolls, especially in the 19th century.

For all you golfers out there, you must know that a "mulligan" is a "do-over" shot. According to tradition, "mulligans" are allowed only on the first tee shot (one per round) and should not be taken at any time of the golfer's choice. There are many origin stories for the "mulligan", too numerous to repeat. But did you know that an advantage allowed an inferior player in certain other games, such as a free point in tennis, an extra turn in croquet, or even an additional stroke in golf is known as a "bisque"?

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