

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Bon Ton and Bon Temps

"*Laissez les bon temps roulez!*" is that fanciful phrase whose roots can be found along the bayous of South Louisiana. Prominently planted in the Cajun lexicon, these words proclaim "Let the good times roll" and ideally describe the "*joie de vivre*" of New Orleans and its environs.

Hitting the national charts in 1950 was a recording by Clarence Garlow (who was born in Welsh, Louisiana, in Jefferson Davis Parish). Entitled "Bon Ton Roula", the song helped attract national attention to Cajun music recorded by black artists. Garlow later toured with zydeco pioneer Clifton Chenier and was mentor to blues guitarist Johnny Winter. Garlow even owned and operated the Bon Ton Drive-In Theatre in Beaumont, Texas.



Also in the 1950s, Alvin and Alzina Pierce came to New Orleans with cherished recipes their families had created while living in Lafourche and Terrebonne Parishes. They acquired ownership of the Bon Ton Café in 1953. What better name could there be than "Bon Ton" for such an eatery?

All of the above is true, but that's not exactly how it happened. The actual founder of "The Bon Ton" was saloon proprietor Edward Percival Prophet, born in England circa 1835, who was (according to the New Orleans *Picayune*) "a big-hearted, genial man." He ran other popular establishments, such as Sam's Restaurant and Oyster Saloon at 101 St. Charles and the Imperial Saloon at 134 Common.

The St. James Saloon was located at 42 Magazine Street, which the New Orleans *Times* described on September 12, 1875, as "one of the more popular resorts in the business center of the city." No where else in town could one find "more sumptuous luncheons, finer liquors, or more delicately compounded beverages" and "judging from public appreciations already manifested," the paper humorously mentioned that "a prophet" (i.e., Edward Prophet) is "not always without honor in his own country."

Two years later in 1877, Edward Prophet's "St. James Saloon" had a new name and a new location: "The Bon Ton" at 36 Magazine.

Removal of the St. James Saloon;
NOW THE
BON TON,
From 42 to 36 Magazine street,
Near Gravier, adjoining the Hotel.
no2 1t EDWARD PROPHET, Proprietor.

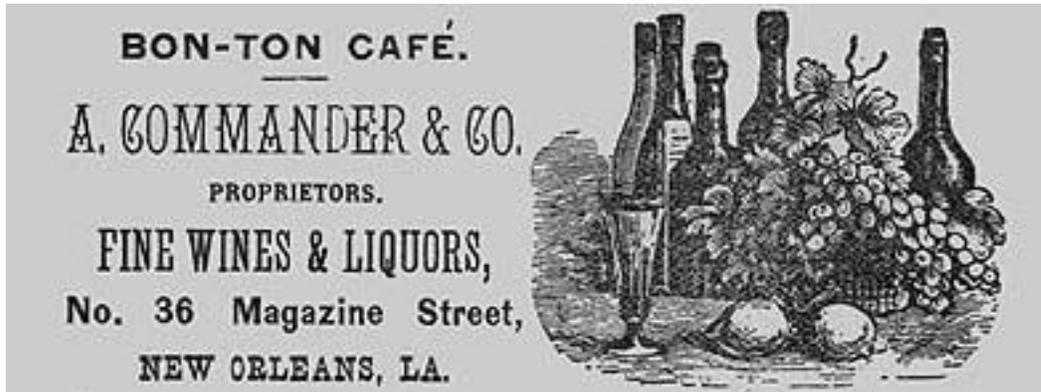
Ad for the Bon Ton, New Orleans Item, November 2, 1877

On November 5, 1877, a reporter for the New Orleans *Item* commented on how he had come upon "a large blackboard" with the words "Le Bon Ton." Unsure of what the words signified, "lo and behold," he found a "most handsomely fitted up little saloon" serving "fine wines and liquors," and a "sumptuous lunch" daily. He deemed it a "handsome little temple" that any "prophet would like to preside over."

Founded in 1877 - or earlier if you consider its existence as the "St. James Saloon" - that makes the Bon Ton the third oldest restaurant in New Orleans, following only Antoine's (the oldest) and Tujague's (the second oldest). Commander's can no longer claim being the third

oldest in the Crescent City, but it is interesting to note that the Bon Ton has a noteworthy Commander's connection.

Bon Ton founder Edward P. Prophet died March 14, 1890, at age 54. By 1889, Anthony Commander was the new proprietor of the Bon Ton when the elegant advertisement below for the Bon-Ton Café appeared in the *Business Guide of New Orleans and Vicinity* (Baltimore, 1889).



Just who was Anthony Commander? He was listed the previous year in the city directory as a bartender at the Sazerac Saloon (the same year, 1888, that Henry C. Ramos invented the Ramos Gin Fizz at his bar in Meyer's Restaurant).

The Commander family of New Orleans had its beginnings with the arrival of Pietro Camarda from Ustica in 1852. He and his wife Peppina (short for Josephine) were married in 1856, becoming (the more American-sounding) Mr. and Mrs. Peter Commander. Two of their three sons Emile, Anthony and Charles J. Commander would play an important role in the development of several fine New Orleans dining establishments.

In 1895, Anthony opened Delmonico on the corner of Erato and St. Charles Avenue (owned and operated today by Emeril Lagasse). Anthony's brother Emile had improved over time a turreted Victorian edifice on the corner of Washington and Coliseum that came to be known as "Commander's Palace". Not named for some bygone military leader, Commander's began as a saloon, spent some time as a bordello and is today an internationally acclaimed restaurant and the crown jewel of the Brennan family empire.

Meanwhile, back at the Bon Ton, a famous mixologist was making his mark in the first half of the twentieth century. Albert Martin invented the famous "Rum Ramsey" cocktail (still a specialty at the restaurant). The café today is located in the Natchez Building at 401 Magazine, but back then it was just a few doors down on Magazine across the street from the Board of Trade. The intrepid "Trader Vic" Bergeron (likely creator of the "Mai Tai") wrote that it "always gives me great pleasure

to mention the late Albert Martin of The Bon Ton Bar on Magazine Street". He added that "his rum cocktails were the finest obtainable and if one desired a true Ramos Fizz in New Orleans, Albert Martin was the only man" he knew "who could make it properly." A Tiki bar as far away as Perth, Australia (the Hula Bula), claims to offer "divine drinks prised from the brains of long dead Mixologists" including "Albert Martin of New Orleans' 'Bon Ton Bar'". It demonstrates just how far his fame has travelled.

Today the Bon Ton is in the able hands of Alvin and Alzina Pierce's nephew, Wayne Pierce, and his wife Debbie. Gumbo, jambalaya, crawfish *étouffée*, baked eggplant, turtle soup, onion rings and perfectly fried speckled trout are among the many offerings (seasoned, but with a reasoned touch). For dessert, the bread pudding with whiskey sauce is an almost wicked indulgence.

But the name "Bon Ton" has nothing to do with "Bon Temps", even though "good times" there are memorable. And Clarence Garlow simply misspelled "Bon Temps" when he made his recording. "Bon Ton" comes from the French for "good tone" and is defined as "a sophisticated manner or style" or "the proper thing to do". It is synonymous with "high society" and is "marked by an elegant or exclusive manner or quality" like the word "tony". The expression has been around for some time. There are many businesses around the country employing the name, including a national department store chain. None have quite the tradition of the New Orleans landmark.

Nor is there anything like the history of "Let The Good Times Roll" as a song title. Besides Garlow's rendition, there are three indelible pieces of music by that name ... and all have a New Orleans connection.

Lovin' Sam Theard (1904-1982) was a New Orleans born blues singer-songwriter famous for his composition "I'll Be Glad When You're Dead, You Rascal You", a big hit for Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway and countless others. He also composed "Let the Good Times Roll" for jazz saxophonist and singer Louis Jordan, whose 1946 recording reached #2 on the R&B chart.

"Hey, everybody, let's have some fun
You only live once
And when you're dead you're done, so
Let the good times roll ..."

Ray Charles performed a commanding version of this song as did B. B. King on his tribute album to Louis Jordan.

Most are familiar with the young New Orleans duo, Shirley and Lee (Shirley Mae Goodman and Leonard Lee) who scored big in 1956 with

Lee's composition "Let The Good Times Roll". This great rock & roll anthem reached #1 on the R&B chart and #20 on Billboard's Hot 100. Recorded at Cosimo Matassa's studio, the song rang out:



Shirley and Lee, pictured to the right of their 1956 hit record

"Feel so good ...
When you're home ...>
Come on, Baby ...
Rock me all night long ..."

Leonard Lee said the lyrics "just flowed in" after "playing a dance somewhere in Louisiana. Everybody was having such a good time ..."

Last (but not least) was Earl King's stellar "Come On (Let The Good Times Roll)". This 1960 recording for Imperial Records was first attempted as "Darling Honey Angel Child" on the Rex label earlier that year. Covered by Jimi Hendrix a few years later, the song begins:

"People talkin' but they just don't know,
What's in my heart, and why I love you so.
I love you baby like a miner loves gold.
Come on sugar, let the good times roll. Hey!"

We love our good times like the Saints love a goal. May we always "let the good times roll".

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Open:
Wed 4pm - 12am
Thu 4pm - 12am
Fri 4pm - 1am
Sat 6pm - 1am

HULA BULA BAR

Gruesome Grog
A Vanilla and Citrus explosion of flavour with 3 shades of Rum. Our take on The Captain's Grog from "The Captain's Inn" in California circa 1962.

MarTiki
A Golden Martini with our secret pineapple flavour. Comes from a recipe from Stephen Crane's "Lulu" in Beverly Hills circa 1953. Miss Katherine Hepburns favorite.

Scorpion Goblet
Trader Vics' classic has a Puerto Rican Rum and Brandy sling. A delicious and timeless combination based on the old Caribbean Planters Punch.

HOME
DRINKS
NIGHTS
DIRECTIONS
LINKS

Many more drinks available.
We specialise in Rare Top Shelf Rums
TIKI MUGS FOR SALE

Here at the HULA BULA BAR we offer a selection of divine drinks prised from the brains of long dead Mixologists such as Donn Beach aka "The Beachcomber", Victor Bergeron aka "Trader Vic," or Albert Martin of New Orleans' 'Bon Ton Bar'.

Hula Bula Bar of Perth, Australia, praises legendary mixologist Albert Martin of the Bon Ton.



The Bon Ton Café, third oldest restaurant in New Orleans (1877)

NED HÉMARD

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