

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

“NO REAL FRENCH WORD for Pudding”

Bread pudding is the quintessential New Orleans dessert. It is served both in homes and in the finest restaurants, yet there are so many variations. Rum and Bourbon are frequent sauce additives. The Bon Ton Café drizzles theirs with its almost “wicked” whiskey sauce; the Palace Café offers “White Chocolate Bread Pudding”; Clancy’s features a delicious peach version; Café Reconcile does an incredible “Bananas Foster Bread Pudding”; and the late *Cordon Bleu*-trained cooking school teacher Lee Barnes graced hers with an Amaretto Sauce. Considering all the many wonderful examples, Lolis Eric Elie has aptly called this most representative of local after-dinner dishes “the gumbo of New Orleans desserts”. Almost every Crescent City dining establishment has its own embellished version, as do the many households whose kitchen recipe files are richly rooted in the city’s Creole cuisine. Susan Tucker links the “association of bread pudding with New Orleans” to the French culinary principle of “thrifty in the home and grand in the public spaces”.

But is bread pudding actually French? Even renowned French chef Jacques Pépin touts his recipe for British “Bread and Butter Pudding”.



Bread pudding: simply grand in the home and in public spaces

The *Picayune's Creole Cookbook* of 1901 states boldly, "WE HAVE NO REAL FRENCH WORD for Pudding. Puddings are essentially English in origin." The first sentence is only partially true. A few pages later, the *Picayune's Cookbook* provides its recipe for "*Pouding de Pain*" (French for "Bread Pudding") with the suggestion that it be served with "Hard or Lemon Sauce" or "add a little Sherry Wine". They are correct to a certain degree in that the French word "*pouding*" comes from the English "pudding", but the English word is probably derived from a French word very familiar to anyone who has ever been in South Louisiana: *boudin*.

The word "pudding" is believed to come from the French *boudin*, with its origins in the Latin *botellus*, meaning "small sausage" (referring to the Medieval European puddings with encased meats). Puddings in their infinite variety were at first savory, and (only over time) were they sweetened. Food historians generally agree that the first puddings prepared by early cooks were very similar to sausages, often boiled in special pudding bags or casings. Haggis, popular in Scotland, (by its nature and preparation), demonstrates the connection. It is possible, however, that "pudding" comes from a West Germanic stem *pud* meaning "to swell". The Low German *puddewurst* is "black pudding", yet *wurst* means sausage. So once again we're back to *boudin*.

But how did bread pudding come to be so identified with New Orleans? Even in some editions of the famous "Joy of Cooking" is the dish listed as "New Orleans Bread Pudding". *Saveur* writer Meryl Rosofsky, who describes the meringue-leavened bread pudding soufflé at Commander's Palace (concocted by Paul Prudhomme in 1980) as "whiskey-tinged and ethereal", asks the same question:

"Why is bread pudding so beloved, even defining, in New Orleans? It's not that the dish was invented here - that honor likely goes to clever medieval or even ancient cooks in Europe and the Middle East who had a surfeit of stale bread on their hands. But the dessert is the perfect embodiment of the twin Creole virtues of frugality and indulgence: day-old bread, too precious to waste, is bathed in a mixture of milk, eggs, and sugar, perhaps mixed with nuts and fruit, and baked into something sublime."

"Never even the smallest crust of stale bread is wasted in the true Creole or Cajun kitchens," explained Roy F. Guste, Jr. Lafcadio Hearn had the same idea in 1885 in his introduction to *La Cuisine Creole*, "The Creole housewife often makes delicious *morceaux* from things usually thrown away by the extravagant servant." In addition, "Economy and simplicity govern 'La Cuisine Creole'," asserted Hearn. With a modicum of fanfare, he presented his simple recipe:

"Butter some slices of bread, cut thin, and lay them in a dish, with currants and citron between; pour over it a quart of milk, with four well-beaten eggs, and sugar sufficient to sweeten to taste, and bake. Serve with sauce. It is easily made, and very nice. It is good hot or cold."

An earlier local cookbook (by a few months), *The Creole Cookery Book* by the Christian Woman's Exchange, includes "boiled milk", as well as "flour, nutmeg, and 1 lb. of raisins". The sauce recommended by the thirty-two ladies of the Exchange contains "sifted sugar" and a whole "wineglass of brandy". They add, "Delicious" after the "brandy".

Caroline Merrick Jones (along with Natalie Scott) in the *Gourmet Guide to New Orleans* (first printed in 1933), offered a "Bread Pudding au Chocolat", made with "scalded milk", chocolate squares and "stale bread crumbs".

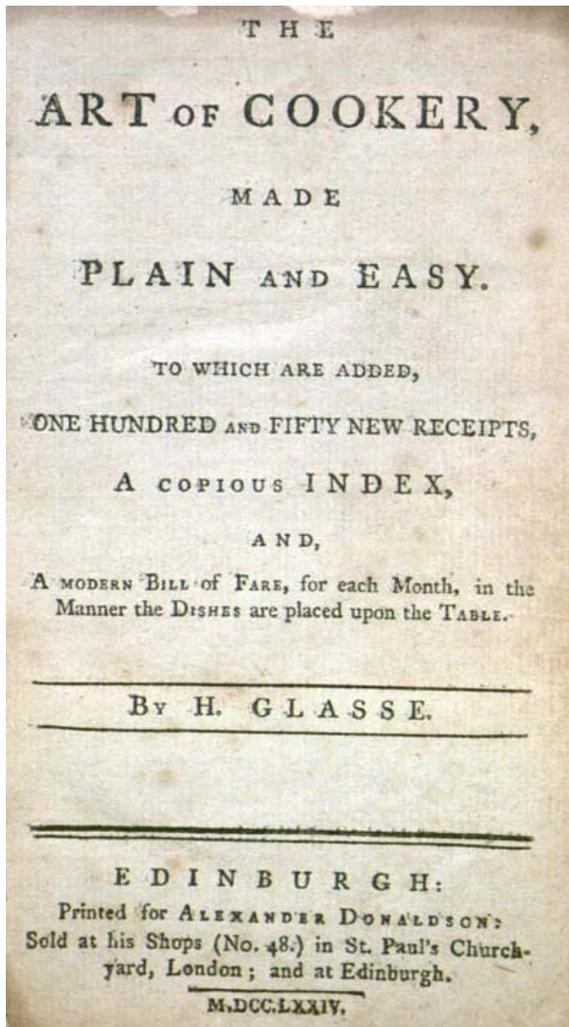


Sliced in wedges or squares, bread pudding is always delectable

Bread pudding was popular in the United States before the "Creole" cookbooks of New Orleans emerged, and on both sides of the Mason Dixon Line. Civil war soldiers often found it necessary to substitute crackers for bread, and sugar was difficult to come by, especially for soldiers of the Confederacy. According to William C. Davis in *A Taste for War: The Culinary History of the Blue and the Gray*, "Often the only sweetener available was watermelon juice, not easy to obtain when by 1863 a single watermelon sold for \$40.00 in the camps."

The earliest British bread and butter puddings were called "white-pot"

and were made with either marrow or butter. One of the earliest recipes for a pudding of this type was recorded by John Nott in 1723. Except for the marrow, all the familiar elements were mentioned: bread, eggs, butter, raisins cream and nutmeg. The famous 18th century English cookery writer Hannah Glasse (1708 – 1770), in *The Art of Cookery, Made Plain and Easy*, offered her bread pudding recipe in 1747:



1747 pudding "receipt" within

"Cut off all the crust of a Penny white loaf and slice it thin into a quart of new milk, set it over a chafingdish of coals, till the bread has soaked up all the milk, then put in a piece of sweet butter, stir it round, let it stand till cold, or you may boil your milk, and pour over your bread, and cover it up close, does full as well; then take the Yolks of six eggs, the whites of three, and beat them up, with a little rosewater, and nutmeg, a little salt, and sugar, and if you choose it, mix all well together, and boil it half an hour."

Pudding may be British, but Frenchmen must have their bread. Don't tell them "Let them eat cake" and hope for a happy result. In October 1798 Denis François was lynched by an angry mob for not opening his

bakery shop. Since then, in order to ensure the French capital's ample supply of baguettes, Parisian bakers are required to take their holidays either in July or August – under rules dating back to the French Revolution.

Unlike traditional French baguettes, New Orleans "French" bread is different from those found in Parisian *boulangeries*. It has a fragile yet crisp crust with a light and air-pocketed interior. When this local bread is combined with the bread pudding's custard base, the result is also light and airy – neither dense nor heavy as if other bread were used. For many, the final product is ambrosial.

The divine dessert's evolution from a humble home recipe to a cherished presence on restaurant menus is guided time and again by the numerous creative chefs that have orchestrated this classic's ascension to new and commanding heights. New ideas are always popping up. For example:

The Uptown restaurant *Patois* gives bread pudding a Mardi Gras twist, combining *brioche* with King Cake in an unforgettable seasonal creation adorned with gold nonpareils and sprinkled with green and purple luster dust. A string of Mardi Gras beads is festively fashioned of white chocolate, while Ponchatoula strawberry compote and Creole cream cheese ice cream finish off this colorful Carnival concoction.

The *Boucherie* on Jeannette Street in Carrollton makes their bread pudding with, believe it or not, Krispy Kreme doughnuts and pound cake, augmented by a caramel sauce of rum and brown sugar.

And in 2008, "Best in Show" was awarded to Ye Olde College Inn for its "Bread Pudding Po-Boy" at the annual Oak Street Po-Boy Festival. The winning entry was an entire loaf of bread fashioned into bread pudding, and somehow fried. Only in New Orleans.



Bread pudding is popular all over the world in one form or another. In his *Le Guide Culinaire*, the highly-esteemed French chef Auguste Escoffier provided four different recipes for bread pudding – one English, one French, one German and one Scotch. In Canada, maple syrup is a key ingredient. In one area of Germany, black bread is used to make *Schwarzbrot pudding* (black bread pudding). The Egyptian name for the dessert is *Om Ali*, which means "Ali's mother". In Hong Kong, bread pudding is served most often with vanilla cream dressing. Hungarians bake theirs topped with whipped egg whites. The Spanish word for pudding has become the similar-sounding *budín*, so that there is "*Budín de Pan*" in Peru and "*Budín Puertorriqueño*" in Puerto Rico.

Leah Chase, herself a New Orleans treasure, makes her celebrated bread pudding at *Dooky Chase* with a topping of praline liqueur, with ice cream on the side. Austin Leslie also had his tantalizing recipe. The city's Creoles of color are masters at creating their own wonderful variations of bread pudding.

The late Ethel McNeal (born in Greenwood, Mississippi) was, for me, the most wonderful cook. Her bread pudding wedges were abundant with raisins and petite pieces of apple throughout. African-American Creole cooks often added fruit, and frequently canned fruit cocktail, to their puddings. *L'il Dizzy's Café* on Esplanade, specializing in soul

food, is headed by Wayne Baquet, a member of one of the great Creole restaurateur families in New Orleans. Baked into their delicious bread pudding are small juicy “fruit cocktail” sections of peach and pear, with the occasional chopped-up maraschino cherry mixed in.

So there you have it, an English pudding made with French bread (that isn't really French), and today a decidedly New Orleans favorite. And although the *Picayune* taught us there is “NO REAL FRENCH WORD for Pudding”, we learn that the French word *pouding* came from the English word pudding which probably came from the French word *boudin*.

The word dessert, however, *did* originate from the French. Its etymology begins with *desservir*, meaning “to clean the table”, and in New Orleans – whenever a new and exciting variation of bread pudding comes along – it's almost always a case of “cleaning one's plate”.

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