

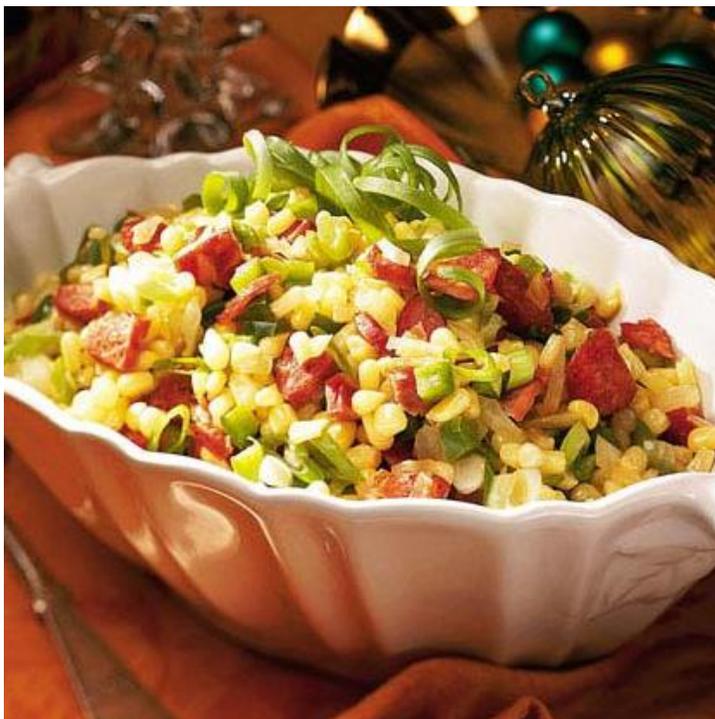
NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Corn Maque Choux

Maque choux (pronounced *mock shoo*) is a traditional dish of Cajun southern Louisiana prepared from fresh corn cut from the cob and stewed or braised in a pot, usually with onions and tomatoes, and often with the addition of green bell pepper, garlic and celery.



Maque choux, as it appeared in Southern Living, made with frozen shoepeg corn

A recipe for Maque choux appeared in *Dixie Roto Magazine*, the Sunday magazine supplement of the *Times-Picayune*, dated May 12, 1974:

“8 to 10 ears fresh corn
½ cup bacon grease
1 onion, minced

¼ cup chopped green pepper
4 fresh tomatoes, peeled and chopped
1 teaspoon sugar
salt and pepper to taste

Cut kernels of corn from cob, scraping latter to remove juice. Set aside. Saute onion and green pepper in bacon grease until soft. Add tomatoes, sugar, corn, and salt and pepper to taste. Cook slowly over low heat about 30 minutes, stirring occasionally. Serves 6.”

You may wish to use less bacon grease than recommended in the above recipe. And I prefer the dish prepared with white corn, although yellow corn is perfectly acceptable. Proponents of either white or yellow corn will swear that their choice is sweeter, but both camps are correct – in a way. Color of the kernel, in fact, is *not* an indication of sweetness. All corn sold today, regardless of color, may be one of three types: normal-sugar, sugar-enhanced or super-sweet (this one has almost three times the amount of sugar as the normal variety).

Shoepeg corn, especially popular in the South, is a cultivar of white sweet corn valued for its sweetness. Its kernels resemble wooden pegs used in shoemaking, hence its name.

The reader will notice that, in the above recipe, sautéing is involved in the cooking of the onion and green pepper in bacon grease. To *sauté* means “to fry quickly in a little hot fat”.

But sautéing is different from braising and stewing.

Braising is a two-step process in which the cook fries the food lightly and then stews it slowly in a closed container. From the French word, *braiser*, braising is a method that uses both moist and dry heats. Although historically bacon grease has been used for step one of the braising stage, other various combinations of butter, oil or cream may be substituted. Sometimes a little chicken stock or water may be added if so desired. Cayenne, Tabasco or other Louisiana favored hot sauces may kick the dish up a notch. Corn maque choux is a side dish *extraordinaire*, the perfect accompaniment to any meal, but it can also be a main course when either shrimp, crawfish, lump crabmeat, chicken or andouille sausage are included.

As for the name, maque choux sounds decidedly French, but its etymology, you will learn, is much more complicated. It is believed to be a cultural amalgam of Creole and Native American origin, a French reconstruction of an Indian word (or words) – and not local Indians, at that.

The man responsible for unearthing this word origin mystery was Dr. William Alexander Read (1869 – 1962), renowned etymologist and longtime head of the English Department at LSU.

Through his long and distinguished career, Dr. Read uncovered numerous examples of words and place names that were thought to be French in origin but were actually reconstructed Indian words or phrases, made to sound French.

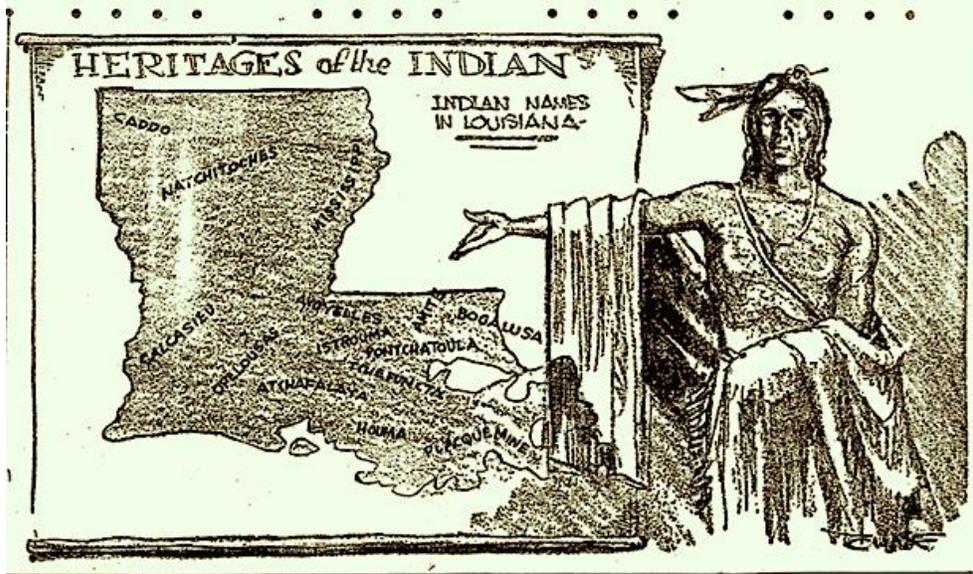


*Dr. William Alexander Read, Ph.D.,
Professor of English Language and Literature
LSU, circa 1916*

Amite, for example, the name of a river and the Louisiana town, was long thought to come from *amitie*, meaning friendship, specifically the amity between the French settlers and the local Indians. Instead, Dr. Read determined that in all probability it was corrupted by the early French explorers from the Choctaw adjective *himmita*, meaning “young”.

Calcasieu surely sounds French and has been erroneously identified with the French *quelque chose*, meaning “something”, or *quelque choux* for “some cabbages”. These cabbages, or *choux*, have nothing to do, by the way, with *maque choux*. Dr. Read discovered that

Calcasieu was originally from the Atakapa Indian word *katkosh*, meaning eagle, and *yok*, meaning "to cry", ergo "Crying Eagle". This was the name of an Atakapa chief, so the French colonists applied the name to the local river. Later the parish was so named.



From an article on Dr. Read and Louisiana place names, New Orleans Item-Tribune, February 2, 1930

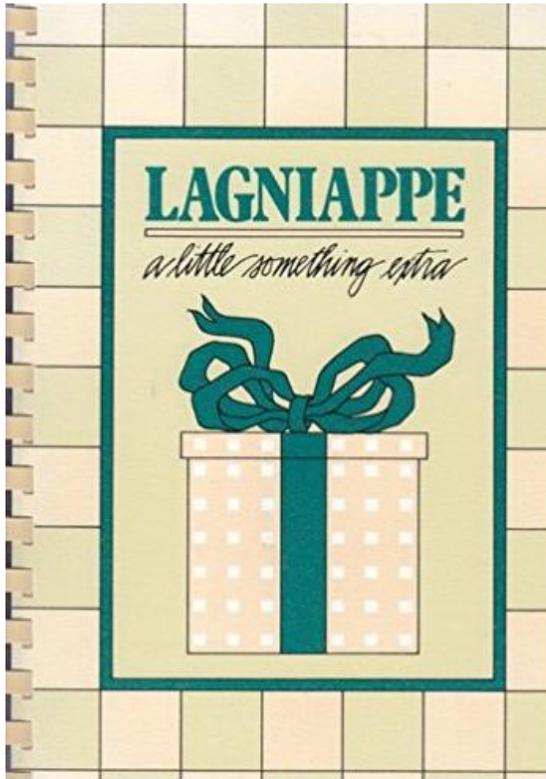
And then there's Plaquemine, the name of the town in Iberville Parish, as well as Plaquemines, the parish. These names came into the Creole French vocabulary via the Mobilian Indian dialect. An explanation appeared in the writings of Jean Bernard Bossu (1720 – 1792), a captain in the French navy, adventurer and explorer. He arrived in New Orleans in early April 1751, and soon set out to explore the Mississippi River and surrounding areas. He wrote of his experience dining with the Indians on bears' claws, beavers' tails, and a kind of bread, which they called "pliakimine". That bread, explained Dr. Read "was made from persimmons." Plaquemine(s) is once again a French interpretation of the original Native American dialect.

I'm quite sure, dear reader, maque choux is more appetizing than bears' claws, beavers' tails or persimmon bread, and I realize I have held out explaining Dr. Read's etymology of this delectable dish.

Dr. Read discussed "Louisiana Words and Their Origin" in an article in the Baton Rouge *Advocate*, dated August 8, 1937. Here it is revealed that the "appetizing dish" maque choux has its origins in the Andes, like potatoes, tomatoes and lagniappe.

Lagniappe, "that interesting word used to designate the trifling gift presented to a customer by a merchant; or, by extension, any kind of gratuity that may be regarded as thrown in for good measure," explained Dr. Read, is from the Kechuan (or Quechuan) Indian dialect,

which is the language of the Inca Empire, now widely spoken throughout the Andes highlands from southern Colombia to Chile. The Spanish term *la ñapa* comes from the Quechuan word *yapa*, or *yapay*, (meaning "to increase or to add").



Lagniappe, the Beaumont, Texas, Junior League Cookbook
Also the name of the Friday entertainment section of the *Times-Picayune*, as well as a Jazz Fest stage

Dr. Read's opinion is that maque choux comes from the "Aymara" language. *Mockcchi*, or *muccu*, meaning *maíz mascado* in Spanish, or mashed maize, or corn, in English, is the source. "The final syllable of 'maquechou' may be due to confusion with French 'chou,' Dr. Read says." The Aymara people are an indigenous nation in the Andes, with many living today in Chile, Peru and Bolivia.

Dr. Read, commenting on the subject back in 1937, pointed out that the term "maque choux" was used in the following Louisiana towns: Donaldsonville, French Settlement, Lafayette, Loreauville, Marksville, New Iberia and Natchitoches. Since that time, its fame has spread throughout the state and around the world.

The dish with an Andean birthright and a French-sounding name, maque choux is a South Louisiana favorite and, if you haven't tried it, one worth sampling.

Upon his death in 1962, Dr. Read was extolled by "Pie" Dufour in his column as "an internationally known philologist" and "an expert on

Southern dialects and an authority on Indian place names in Louisiana, Alabama and Florida." Before joining LSU in 1902, he revealed, Dr. Read received his bachelor of arts at King College in Tennessee, attended UVA, then on to Germany and the University of Göttingen and the University of Heidelberg, which conferred upon him his Ph.D. degree in 1897. He then taught at Johns Hopkins and the University of Arkansas, in the years before LSU.

"Pie" advocated preserving Dr. Read's memory. His "invaluable" writings, he wrote, "belong in every library, public, private or educational institution." His scholarship is indeed of inestimable value.

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