

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Lenten Observances

After having been bestowed with beautiful parades and bombarded by an unrelenting barrage of beads, New Orleans natives bid farewell to Carnival and to meat as Ash Wednesday begins the Lenten Season.

Most inhabitants of the Crescent City believe Carnival comes from the Latin expression *carne vale*, which means “farewell to meat” or its dual meaning “farewell to the flesh”. In a city with excellent cuisine (as well as those other temptations), the etymology makes perfect sense. Another interpretation of Carnival as the last days when one could eat meat before the fasting of Lent is the Italian phrase *carne levare*, meaning “to remove meat” in anticipation of its Lenten prohibition. A more obscure theory is that Carnival comes from the Latin *carrus navalis* (ship cart) for the cart in a religious procession that first honored the god Apollo. There’s always been excitement “Live at the Apollo”.

After that lengthy farewell, many find the annual application of ashes to the forehead quite welcome. The Latin term for Lent is *quadragesima*, meaning the “fortieth”, since there are forty days in Lent before Easter (the Sundays aren’t counted because they are mini-Easter feasts along the way, celebrating Jesus’ victory over sin and death). In French the term for Lent is *carême*, also the name of one of France’s greatest chefs.

In New Orleans, even the talk of Lent returns to food, and (in all things culinary) Mariè-Antonin Carême was the *crème* of the crop. He gained fame for his *pièces montées*, elaborate architectural centerpieces of sugar and pastry. Tested by Talleyrand, he baked Napoleon’s wedding cake. He wowed his later employer (the future George IV of England) at Brighton’s Royal Pavilion, created dazzling masterpieces for Russia’s Czar Alexander and served gold-flecked soufflés for banker James Mayer Rothschild. Carême also designed the standard chef’s hat (the *toque*) and came up with the classification of the famous “mother sauces” (not to be confused with Louisiana’s “mother roux”).

Oh yes, Lent. Well, back in medieval times English speaking people replaced the Latin term with their own. The English word Lent is derived from the Germanic root for spring. In Old English it was *lencten*, and the Anglo-Saxon word for March was *lenct* (usually the month immediately before Easter).

As for the forty days, they represent the time Jesus spent in the desert tempted by Satan (not to mention other numerous Biblical references). It could also be the reason why there are phorty phunny phellows, although they have the order turned around. These Carnival revelers call themselves the Phunny Phorty Phellows. They’re phunny that way.

For Catholics and others that observe Lent, the Lenten Season is a time for the practice of justice in the form of prayer (justice toward God), fasting (justice towards oneself) and charity or almsgiving (justice toward one’s neighbor). But with the bountiful seafood available in New Orleans, it is difficult to see how Lenten fasting is much of a local sacrifice. Nowhere else on the planet is substituting meat for seafood more pleasurable.

One must pity Kansans fasting on frozen fish sticks fantasizing about Oz, but “down in New Orleans where the blues was born” *les fruits de mers* are everywhere ... and outstandingly delectable.

Wonderful memories abound of Friday nights out at West End when all Fridays used to be fast days, not just during Lent. While parents were still fiddling with their boiled crabs, the young ones (having finished their trout sandwiches) loved to ride on the white mechanical steed at Swanson's (only five cents). Maybe Fontana's was one's choice, or dining out over the water at Fitzgerald's. Some kept it simple at Maggie and Smitty's, sittin' under the overhang sippin' Dixie Beers. For tradition and great fried flounder dishes, Bruning's was the favorite. Sadly, Hurricane Katrina was the *coup de grâce* for the West End seafood restaurants.

Outside of Louisiana, there were special dispensations over the years. Medieval clergyman and chronicler Gerald of Wales (Giraldus Cambrensis), who lived most of his life in the twelfth century, wrote of "great and religious persons" who classified beaver tails as "fish". Covered by a scalloped skin, they superficially resembled the anatomy of fish (and were probably considered a delicacy by the clergy).

Back in the early 1800s, a missionary priest in Michigan named Father Gabriel Richard allowed his flock of French-Canadian trappers to eat muskrat during Lent (reasoning that the mammal lives in the water). Bishop Kenneth Povish later wrote, "anyone who could eat muskrat was doing penance worthy of the greatest saints."

It is said that even Louisianians were granted a Lenten dispensation so they could eat *poule d'eau*. Commonly spelled pulldoo, the American coot (or water hen) has such a diet that it was considered more fish than fowl.

St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* provided the legal foundation for these fasting technicalities. He wrote that meat, eggs and dairy products afforded greater pleasure and nourishment as food (than fish) to the human body "so that from their consumption there results a greater surplus available for seminal matter, which when abundant becomes a great incentive to lust." Guess he didn't hear the one about "Eat oysters. Love longer."

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