

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Food Trucks of New Orleans

In *THE NEW YORK MIRROR: A WEEKLY JOURNAL, DEDICATED TO LITERATURE AND THE FINE ARTS*, Volume Sixteen, Number Forty-Eight, dated May 25, 1839, there is a report on an interesting bit of culinary history:

"A French baron has invented an omnibus cooking-shop, which travels about the streets for the purpose of feeding people at their doors!"

The same article of information appeared earlier that year (April 9) in *The Alexandria Gazette*, Alexandria, Virginia, with the caption:

"MOVING RESTAURAT."

MOVING RESTAURAT.—A French Baron has invented an omnibus cooking shop, which travels about the streets for the purpose of feeding people at their doors.

This is not a misspelling of restaurant, but an earlier alternate spelling.

The same article (*sans* caption) appeared later that year in the *Boston Saturday Morning Transcript* on June 8, 1839.

An omnibus, from the Latin meaning "for all," was a vehicle set up to carry many people. It was later shortened to simply "bus". Regarding an "omnibus cooking-shop," it must have been a vehicle that carried food "for all" – in other words, an early food truck.

It could also have been a pushcart or other movable food vehicle. History does not tell us more about this French baron, or who he was, or how successful he was with his idea. But the concept did not die.

In fact, the use of food pushcarts dates back much earlier. New Amsterdam (present day New York City) began the regulation of street vendors selling food from pushcarts in the year 1691.

In the years following the American Civil War, the nation witnessed a massive westward expansion. This created a large market for beef, especially in the state of Texas. Railroads did not reach all parts of the country, which meant that cattlemen would be on the road for months at a time. The necessity of feeding these men resulted in the creation of the chuckwagon, the forerunner of today's food truck. And for that we have to thank cattle herder Charles Goodnight (1836 – 1929), the "father of the Texas Panhandle."

In 1866, Goodnight realized efficiency was needed in cooking proper meals during the long cattle drives. He cleverly retrofitted a sturdy old United States Army wagon and installed interior drawers and shelving. He then stocked his newly created "meals on wheels" with utensils and tableware, spices and medical supplies, including quinine and castor oil. Heavy pots and pans were secured on the lower shelves while food consisting of dried beans, coffee, cornmeal and other easy-to-preserve food stuffs were stored inside. Meat included bacon, salt pork and beef, usually dried, salted or smoked. A water barrel was also an essential addition to the chuckwagon.



Rear of a chuckwagon for cattlemen

What about the "chuck" in chuckwagon? Chuck is Western U.S. slang for food, or provisions, which is what the chuckwagon provided. This is believed to come from beef chuck, i.e, the cut of beef between the neck and the shoulder blade. Chuck also means either a "piece of wood or meat," dating from the 1670s, probably a variant of *chock* (n.), meaning "block." According to the OED, *chock* and *chuck* appear to have been originally variants of the same word, which are now

somewhat differentiated. The American English *chuckwagon*, or *chuck wagon*, is from the earlier meat sense.

As mentioned earlier, pushcarts were used by various food vendors in the nation's major cities, especially large port cities such as New York and New Orleans.



Root beer vendor from the early 1840s

In 1872, the nation's first diner was set up in a converted horse-drawn freight wagon. Credit for the diner concept is given to Walter Scott of Providence, Rhode Island. He began serving prepared food from this nighttime lunch wagon, which was available to serve mill workers who were unable to find anything open that late.

In the 1890s, other lunch wagons rolled out again during the evenings. They catered to nighttime workers, which were a common sight in big cities like New York. "The Owl" was the most popular line of night lunch wagons, and although they were totally portable, many did such excellent business that they stayed put in a good location. During these years, while working the night shift at Detroit's Edison Illuminating Company, Henry Ford frequented "The Owl" Night Lunch Wagon. He purchased "The Owl" wagon for Greenfield Village in 1927, where it still operates today. Back in 1933, the menu included hot dogs, hamburgers, sweet milk, buttermilk, coffee and pop.



U.S. Postal Stamp of "The Owl" "The Owl" at Greenfield Village

During the first and second World Wars, the military on both sides of the conflict had "field kitchens" on wheels that could mobilize to feed hungry armies on the move.



WWII mobile German field kitchen

A familiar New Orleans mule-drawn food truck dates back to 1915, when Sam Cortese became the city's Roman Candy man. Sam understood he would have to find a way to make his Italian taffy at the same time as he rolled along the streets and sold it. That year, he went to a wheelwright named Tom Brinker and together they designed the wagon that is still in use today.



Mobile milk cart in front of La Louisiane, 1903



Sam Cortese's original 1915 Roman Candy Wagon

Another Crescent City food wagon (this one horse-drawn) from the early 1900s was owned by Matthew Antoine Desire Dekemel, better known as "Bugling Sam." Sam heralded the arrival of his waffle wagon by blowing a jazz tune on his Army bugle, such as the "Bugle Call Rag," and sold these powdered sugar-covered treats at the bargain price of four for only five cents.



Bugling Sam Dekemel's Waffle Wagon in New Orleans

The "Lucky Dog" hot dog carts had their beginnings in New Orleans in 1947, when when brothers Stephen and Erasmus Loyacano first wheeled one of their unique carts out onto the streets. Unlike the Oscar Mayer "Wienermobile," which made its debut in 1936, the "Lucky Dog" carts were multi-functional food carts. They not only advertised the product in an attention-grabbing way, the carts served as mobile kitchens where the dogs were cooked, dressed and served within steamed buns. The "Wienermobile," on the other hand, was solely for advertising and toured the United States for over 70 years. Created by Oscar Mayer's nephew, Carl G. Mayer, it has appeared on the streets of New Orleans for special events and holidays, like Mardi Gras.

The Loyacano brothers once considered franchising their carts, but gave up the idea, selling the business, *Lucky Dogs Novelty Carts, Incorporated*, to Doug Talbot and Peter Briant circa 1970.

This famous fleet of restaurants on wheels became even more famous when it was transformed by New Orleans author John Kennedy Toole into "Paradise Vendors" in *A Confederacy of Dunces*. The book's slovenly anti-hero Ignatius J. Reilly found employment for a short while as a vendor of these delectable delicacies.



Dunces earned Toole a posthumous Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1981, and the “Lucky Dog” carts have continued to capture the popular imagination. In 1998 New Orleans author Jerry Strahan wrote a delightfully humorous book covering his years of experience as Lucky Dog vendor and manager entitled *Managing Ignatius: The Lunacy of Lucky Dogs and Life in the Quarter*.

Another favorite New Orleans food item sold by food cart over the years was Manuel’s Hot Tamales. Manuel Hernandez began selling his tamales in 1932 and operated his kerosene-lit handcart at the corner of Carrollton Avenue and Canal Street. Manuel’s tamales were also a favorite of John Kennedy Toole, but Manuel’s tamales were not the first in town. Miguel José Rodriguez de Vega, better known as Llallo (Yayo), was the earliest tamale vendor in the New Orleans area, beginning in 1925 at West End Park by Lake Pontchartrain. Miguel sold his homemade tamales from carts, which were transported on two wheels with two extended wooden handles used to elevate the wagon from its two support legs. Like Manuel’s carts, each of Miguel’s had a sliding top which provided access to one, or the other, of two compartment wells, each storing a heated pot of tightly packaged hot tamales. An ample supply of used newspapers provided insulation for the pots, as well as wrapping paper for the purchased tamales. Each cart had a Coleman lantern, both to light up the service area and to provide a welcome beacon to hungry customers.



Manuel's Hot Tamales

Later versions of the food truck were mobile canteens which came into widespread use in the late 1950s. These mobile canteens were created under the auspices of the U.S. Army and operated on stateside army bases. Ice cream trucks were selling frozen treats throughout the 1950s, and "Good Humor" was the first. The company's founder created the frozen ice cream bar in 1920 and later put together a fleet of twelve street vending trucks outfitted with freezers and bells from which to sell his creation. The first bells came from his son's bobsled. "Good Humor" bars have since been marketed out of everything from tricycles to push carts to ice cream trucks. And you may be wondering what was the name of that song the "Popsicle Man" played as he came down the street. The name of the song is *Red Wing* (1907).

Modern day food trucks, known over the years as catering trucks, mobile canteens, mobile kitchens, taco trucks or roach coaches, both transport and sell food. New Orleans has many, and the cuisine is varied and wonderful.





Taceaux Loceaux, which features a colorful "Day of the Dead" Last Supper on the side of the truck, was launched in 2010 at a time when modern day food trucks were still something novel. Operated by Alex and Maribeth del Castillo, the festive food truck offers not only delicious tacos, but also "Seoul Man" Korean style chicken and "Messin' with Texas" brisket.

When New Orleans' own Ellen DeGeneres had Katrina survivor Dianna Beasley on her show, she discovered Ms. Beasley wanted to start a healthy food truck operation in New Orleans. Ellen called her friends at Shutterfly and they bought Dianna her dream truck.



I had the privilege of chatting with Ms. Beasley over some quinoa this past Mardi Gras. It was tastefully prepared.

Food Drunk has earned its culinary chops with some truly unique creations, such as seared Ahi tuna, duck fat fries and the king cake burger, made from freshly ground Angus brisket and cheddar cheese on a brioche bun with purple, green and gold icing. P. J. Haines, who runs the innovative food truck, had years of experience catering movies before he launched Food Drunk, the name taken from a quote by Thomas Edison complaining about our nation's gluttony and sloth.



The Diva Dawg food truck features gourmet Creole hot dogs on sweet and savory brioche buns, along with *Étouffée* Fries and Praline Candy Shakes.

These are just a small sampling of the many and diverse food trucks operating in the Crescent City. It was only natural, in such an environment, that a movie about food trucks would be filmed (at least partially) in New Orleans. That movie was *Chef* (2014), produced, written, directed and starring Jon Favreau.

Favreau plays Carl, the head chef of a top-notch restaurant in Brentwood, California. The restaurant owner wants him to stick to tired "classics" rather than innovative new dishes. Not realizing he has gone public, Favreau's character has a Twitter meltdown over a critic's review that goes viral, destroying Carl's professional credibility. He is encouraged to refurbish a run-down food truck in which he rediscovers the true chef within.

Carl, his son, and a devoted friend and co-worker, drive the food truck across the country back to Los Angeles, serving delicious Cuban sandwiches along the way. Social media helps spread the word, and the truck becomes successful in New Orleans and Austin, Texas, where the daily specials include local favorites such as po-boys and barbecued brisket. The food is flavored with a Latin and New Orleans soundtrack that fits beautifully.

Favreau saw New Orleans, with its return from Katrina, as the perfect backdrop for a chef's comeback from adversity. Here's what he had to say about New Orleans:

"Happiness in the face of unhappy circumstances to me is extremely

heroic. To me, that's what's so fascinating and uplifting about New Orleans. That city never has it easy, yet it always has the most fun."

To him, "celebration and happiness is a choice and a not result of circumstances. And," what's more, he said, "I think that's an inspiring note."



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