

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Food of the Gods: Ambrosia and Nectar Soda

It has been determined that design flaws in the levee system surrounding New Orleans represented its “Achilles’ heel”, or fatal weakness, after Katrina’s powerful assault. The two most popular explanations for the creation of the Achilles myth come from classical antiquity.

Achilles’ mother, Thetis, dipped her baby son in the river Styx in order to make him invulnerable wherever the waters touched him. Only trouble is she held him by the heel with her thumb and forefinger, thus missing that area that would later prove his downfall. Another version making Achilles almost immortal has his mother employing the Phoenician custom of rubbing his body with ambrosia and holding him over a fire every night. Once again she missed the heel.



Thetis dipping Achilles into the River Styx, from the painting by Antoine Borel Rogat

So what is this ambrosia? In Greek mythology it is the food (and sometimes the drink) of the gods, often providing immortality upon those that consume it. The other sustenance up on Mount Olympus is nectar, which Homer sets forth as the divine drink and ambrosia the food. In "The Odyssey", nectar and ambrosia are depicted as quite sweet smelling, and in this epic poem Calypso spreads "a table with ambrosia" and mixes "the rosy-red nectar". Circe later tells Odysseus that ambrosia is carried up to the gods on the wings of doves.



Creole Creamery's Nectar Ice Cream Soda

Most believe the word ambrosia to be derived from the Greek prefix *a-* ("not") and *mbrotos* meaning ("mortal"). But other classical scholars think ambrosia has a "fragrant" origin rather than immortal one, and hence a connection to amber. Amber stems from the old Arabic word *anbargis* or *ambergris* meaning an oily perfumed secretion from the intestines of a sperm whale. Melville mentions ambergris in "Moby Dick". This precious substance, actually used in making perfumes, is created synthetically today. But since it floats on water and is washed up on beaches, just like the honey-colored fossil resin of tree sap

millions of years old, the ancients may have confused the two. One classical scholar posits that both ambrosia and nectar were types of honey, and honey's healing powers may have conferred a kind of immortality. But does this mean that Achilles may have been honey-roasted?

And all of this brings us back to a deeply religious city, which is nevertheless mindful of sin and forgiveness. New Orleans also can't get enough of gods, nymphs, muses and other assorted sub-deities. They dominate its street nomenclature and its rich carnival culture. It is only appropriate that the food and liquid refreshments of the gods are also prevalent in a metropolis famous for its culinary skills.

HOTELS, SALOONS, ETC.

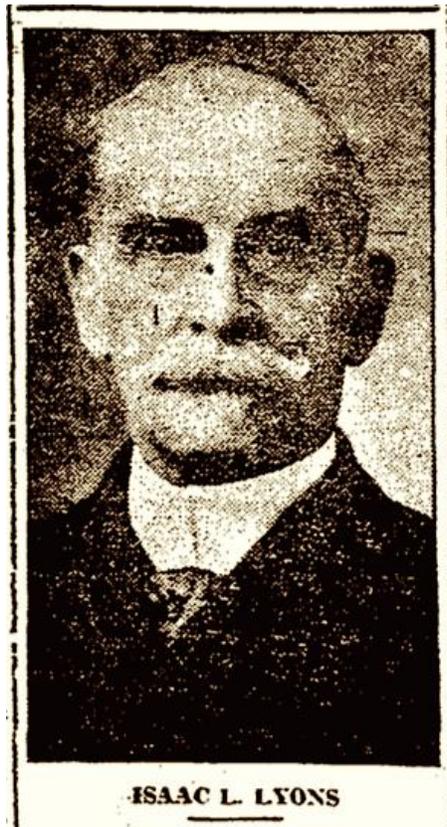
KENNEDY'S SALOON,
72 CAMP STREET,

**HAVING BEEN RENOVATED AND REFITTED, IS NOW OPEN FOR
THE SUMMER. ALWAYS ON HAND FRESH PASTRY,
COOL SODA and MEAD and MINERAL WATERS,
and AMBROSIA OF NECTAR,
ICED TEA and HAM SANDWICHES.**

Kennedy's Saloon on Camp Street offered "Ambrosia of Nectar" in this ad in the New Orleans Times, April 11, 1875

The Crescent City has produced a fine array of sparkling beverages such as Big Shot, Dr. Nut (the favorite of Ignatius Reilly in "A Confederacy of Dunces"), Barq's and others. Coca-Cola tried to compete with its "Rex" Root Beer but ended up buying the entire Barq's enterprise from John E. Koerner, III (Carnival's "Rex" in 2008). But another great New Orleans classic came on the scene in the late 1880s when a local pharmacist and decorated Civil War veteran, Isaac L. Lyons, concocted the ingredients for making a Nectar Soda. His wholesale pharmaceutical company (founded 1866) was located on the corner of Camp and Gravier Streets rising eight stories high.

New Orleanians remember with fondness sipping this splendid elixir made by combining Lyons' cerise pink syrup flavored with vanilla and almond, a vanilla ice cream scoop and some seltzer from behind their favorite K & B drugstore counter. This went on for nearly a century until Katz & Besthoff closed its last soda fountain. This author recalls the tall ice tea spoons for scooping, the circular chrome barstools for spinning and the straws for shooting the paper wrappers at friends.



Captain I. L. Lyons, Purveyor of Pink Perfection

There were other purveyors of this uniquely New Orleans syrup through the years, including Charles Dennery (whose bakery supply company began in 1894 – its chocolate fudge sauce was also a big hit) and Fuerst and Kremer on Canal Street. City sno-ball stands like Hanson's on Tchoupitoulas recognized how incredible this syrup was on this icy confection. It is still a Big Easy favorite, and today the soda is being canned and marketed as "Mardi Gras in your Mouth". The gods would be pleased.

Another New Orleans favorite is a type of fruit salad dessert known as ambrosia. Richard and Rima Collin have recorded their recipe for "New Orleans Ambrosia", a dish they describe as a "simple 19th century dessert made with fresh oranges, grated coconut and confectioner's sugar". The oranges are layered in between the sugar and coconut and then chilled. One may recall Richard Collin and his "Platonic dishes" from his salad days as New Orleans' "Underground Gourmet". Some recipes for such a Southern favorite as "ambrosia" even add bananas (or pineapples and mandarins), whipped cream and mini-marshmallows to the mix. Also look for maraschino cherries, either throughout the mixture and/or on top.



Ambrosia fruit salad dessert close-up

Stanley Clisby Arthur wrote in his "Famous New Orleans Drinks" of the Ambrosia Cocktail at Arnaud's Restaurant. It is a champagne cocktail blended with cognac, applejack, cointreau and lemon juice. "Count Arnaud" Cazenave, the proprietor back then, claimed "that the ambrosia he brews is one the lovely Hebe might well have served Juno, Jupiter, Gannymede, and the balance of the Olympic crowd."

It is unlikely that fruit or alcoholic ambrosia cocktails are to be found at Club Ambrosia on Chef Menteur Highway or along the route of the Krewe of Ambrosia that rolls in Thibodaux during Carnival season. But on one's Odyssey down to Bayou Lafourche, there may be a few Abita Ambers in evidence along the parade route. This popular deep golden lager (brewed by the Abita Brewing Company across the lake) continues to prove that when in and around New Orleans, although the elevation is not high, one is atop the Mount Olympus of outstanding food and drink.

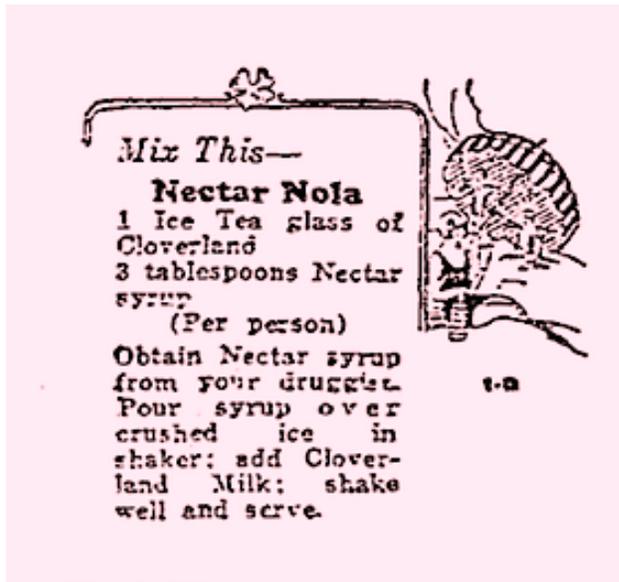
P. S. The article above was one I wrote back in 2008, an enchanting tale of how South Carolina native I. L. Lyons created the first nectar syrup in New Orleans. It soon became the essential ingredient of the Nectar Soda, a distinctly New Orleans concoction, which was for generations a popular mainstay at drugstore soda fountains all over town, such as the ones at K & B drug stores (founded 1905).



Captain Lyons' entry into the pharmaceutical trade began with his purchase of the retail drug store run by the Adams Brothers on the corner of Gravier and Encampment streets. They had operated their business for about forty-five years prior to its acquisition by Lyons. Back in those days, Encampment Street (the Camp Street of today) was the main artery for travel between the Crescent City and the plantations above the city on both sides of the river. This was just one factor that grew the business. Over time, it expanded into a wholesale pharmaceutical company, providing everything from thermos bottles to fireworks, and from surgical instruments to that special nectar syrup, a blend of simple syrup, flavored by extracts of almond and vanilla, and tinted by red food coloring.

The syrup was used in numerous ways:

- 1) Mixed with seltzer water, it became a Nectar Soda.
- 2) With a little cream added to the above mixture, *voilà*, you had a Nectar Cream Soda.
- 3) With ice cream (and usually a cherry on top) added to the syrup and seltzer mixture, the result was a Nectar Ice Cream Soda.
- 4) With milk, especially milk from the Cloverland Dairy on Carrollton Avenue, you had a Nectar Nola:



Recipe for a Nectar Nola, Times-Picayune, July 19, 1927

And it wasn't long before this nectar flavoring became the key ingredient of the ever-popular nectar sno-ball, and it eventually made its way into New Orleans-style bottled red cream sodas, known locally as "Red Drink". Barq's, as every New Orleans native knows, excels in "Red Drink". Liz Williams, director of New Orleans' Southern Food and Beverage Museum (SOFAB), received SOS emails from countless post-Hurricane Katrina exiles craving their "Red Drink" fix. The soft drink drinking diaspora just couldn't find it in other parts of the country.

But was Captain Lyons the very first to create "nectar syrup"? I offer some alternative possibilities. The first alternative is one described as "delicious nectar syrup" provided by "William Bogel, Esq.", also the owner of a "wholesale and retail drug store," once located at the corner of Chartres and Customhouse streets in New Orleans. Customhouse Street is the Iberville Street of today. We do know that Bogel's concoction was "delicious" (at least according to the newspaper blurb below), but we don't know if it was almond/vanilla flavored like Lyons' recipe. We also know that it was being offered to customers in New Orleans in 1858.

We have to thank William Bogel, Esq., for a supply of his delicious nectar syrup, which really surpasses anything in the syrup line we have ever tasted. Our friend Bogel, so long and favorably known in this community, has purchased the wholesale and retail drug store, corner of Chartres and Customhouse street, New Orleans. His business qualifications, polite and gentlemanly deportment, cannot fail to procure that patronage which one so deserving merits.

*Appearing in The Daily Advocate of Baton Rouge,
June 16, 1858*

A year earlier, Adams & Fay's Drug Store of Sandusky, Ohio, promoted "SODA WITH NECTAR SYRUP" in a series of advertisements, beginning as early as July 2, 1857, appearing in the *Sandusky Register*.

Something New.
SODA WITH NECTAR SYRUP—a most delicious and wholesome drink—at ADAMS & FAY'S Drug Store, 152 Water street. Call and satisfy yourselves.

Once again, we have no idea how the "nectar syrup" of Sandusky, Ohio, was flavored.

In 1856, Beach (whether a person or an establishment), "corner Chartres and Customhouse streets" (same address as William Bogel's establishment mentioned above) dealt "out the most delicious drafts which ever pleased the palate." His "nectar soda" was described as "a treat" and is the earliest mention of the phrase "nectar soda" in an American newspaper I have been able to find: July 1, 1856, in the New Orleans *Daily Creole*. It would appear that Beach sold his drug store to Mr. Bogel two years later and perhaps his "nectar soda" recipe, as well.

BEACH'S NECTAR.—Beach, corner Chartres and Customhouse streets, deals out the most delicious drafts which ever pleased the palate. His nectar soda is a treat worth a long walk to enjoy, and we find it is appreciated, for the fountain is never idle.

That is true, with one exception. Only one day earlier, on June 30, 1856, the phrase "delicious nectar soda" appeared in a Philadelphia newspaper ad extolling the virtues of Dr. Smith's "rich combinations of flavors." Miles away and just one day!

The important thing to remember is that it was Lyons' concoction that caught on locally, and its popularity was contagious and long lasting. Nectar Sodas were not just available at the corner K & Bs (which were sold to Rite-Aid in 1997), but also at the many other soda fountain counters throughout New Orleans.

In the 60s and 70s, with the closure of so many drug store soda fountains, there was a lull in Nectar Soda availability. Fortunately, when Häagen-Dazs shops were operated locally and on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, they offered excellent Nectar Ice Cream Sodas with the Lyons/K & B recipe. Today a great version can be had at either of the two Creole Creamery shops, on Prytania Street Uptown and on Vicksburg Street in Lakeview.

Even over a century after Lyons prepared his first nectar syrup, a local dreamer named Susan Dunham remembered:

"One of my grandmother's favorite things to make for her grandchildren was nectar sodas. She made the syrup herself from the Lyons recipe," Dunham said.

In 1999 Dunham decided to revive Nectar Soda on a commercial basis, and became president of the Nectar Soda Company in Mandeville, Louisiana, after having tracked down the recipe from some of Lyons' ancestors. Sydney J. Besthoff of K & B drug stores was delighted with the news but, sadly, Susan Wood Dunham died October 24, 2012, at age 58.

Today, a Nectar Soda Ice Cream is available in supermarkets, produced by the New Orleans Ice Cream Company.



For New Orleanians, this and all the other many “delicious” treats enhanced by the so-called “nectar” flavor are indeed “Food of the Gods”.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
“Food of the Gods: Ambrosia and Nectar Soda”
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2008 and 2017