From Restaurants to Restaurants

“Restore — the original meaning of restaurant. Restaurants were originally more than just a place to find a meal; they existed to soothe and bolster the weary soul with comfort and indulgence.”

- JoAnn Clevenger of The Upperline, award winning restaurateur

JoAnn Clevenger, at the door of her restaurant, The Upperline

Why is it that someone who owns or manages a restaurant is known as a restaurateur and not a restauranteur? Surely this question must have crossed your mind. Read on, dear reader, and the answer will be made apparent.

Since food has always been cited as one of the top three basic survival needs, it’s difficult to imagine that, before the mid-eighteenth century, restaurants did not exist. Oh, there were places to eat (like inns, taverns, saloons, cafés, exchanges and oyster houses, but food was not their main focus. In New Orleans The exchanges, coffee houses and oyster houses were places to conduct business, and potable spirits were very much in evidence. In New Orleans, these were in existence well before restaurants ever came into being – and (in the early days)
some were called restaurats.

Restaurant is a word first used in France in the sixteenth century to describe a rich, highly flavored restorative soup used as an antidote for fatigue. History tells us that a Monsieur Boulanger (his first name is not known) opened the world’s very first restaurant in Paris in 1765. To avoid paying dues to the local guilds, so the story goes, he served a single dish - sheep’s feet simmered in a white sauce. Since it was a type of soup and there was no soupmakers’ guild, he was able to avoid paying the dues. The guilds sued, yet Boulanger prevailed in court. Allegedly, his sign proclaimed, “Boulanger débite des restaurants divins,” (“Boulanger sells restoratives fit for the gods.”) These restoratives were rich broths then considered capable of restoring one’s health and, as JoAnn Clevenger, stated earlier, one’s “weary soul with comfort and indulgence.” The word restaurant, used today throughout the world, actually comes from the French verb restaurer, meaning “to restore or refresh.”

According to historian Rebecca Spang, however, who teaches in London, there’s no evidence for the Boulanger story. After an in-depth, thorough investigation of contemporary sources (guild records, notarized documents and court proceedings), she said: “These legends just get passed on by hearsay and then spiral out of control.”

It’s not that something similar did not happen, and Spang has found evidence for another creator of the modern restaurant circa 1766: Mathurin Roze de Chantoiseau, “a figure so perfectly emblematic of his time,” she wrote, “that he almost seems like an invention himself.” He, too, referred to himself in that way, and, before long restaurants sprung up far and wide. Boulanger’s place, if it truly did exist, was in all likelihood a pretty simple affair. *Larousse Gastronomique* credits the Grande Taverne de Londres on the Rue de Richelieu, founded by Antoine Beauvilliers, former chef of the Count of Provence (the future King Louis XVIII), which first opened in 1786, as the “first Parisian restaurant worthy of the name” for its varied menu and individual table ambiance.

Philip Hyman, who has worked with *Patrimoine Culinaire* for over a decade, characterizes Miss Spang as “a little hasty.” The 1782 reference to Boulanger, he said, “in *The Private Life of the French in Other Times* is very significant and is made by a near contemporary.”

Responsible for the rise of restaurants, too, was the French Revolution. Culinary critic and eye-witness, Grimod de La Reynière, advanced
three reasons why restaurants emerged in France as heads met the guillotine:

1) The rage for English fashions, including the taking of meals in taverns;

2) the influx of large numbers of revolutionary deputies from the provinces;

3) and cooks seeking re-employment after the break-up of the aristocratic households.

Before long, these unemployed cooks of the aristocracy started up more and more restaurants, in France and in other countries. And some of the trappings of aristocracy, such as linen napkins and tablecloths, cutlery and fine china were now available to a whole new strata of society. Sometimes they were called RESTAURATS, and one of the earliest in the United States was called a RESTORATOR. Julien's Restorator, opened in July 1793, was a Boston restaurant established by French-born Jean Baptiste Gilbert Payplat, called Julien, a refugee from the French Revolution. He acquired the nickname “Prince of Soups.”
Another “RESTORATOR” named “SIMONET” emerged in Philadelphia, as featured in the *Aurora General Advertiser* dated December 21, 1797. His “repasts” included “COLD PIES, BRIOCHES, MERINGUES, TOURTES D’ENTREMETS,” as well as “OYSTER PIES.” *Tourtes d’entremets*, by the way, are dessert pies.

*Julien’s “RESTORATOR”, Boston, Massachusetts*

*Offerings from “BOSTON RESTORATOR”, Julien*

*Philadelphia “RESTORATOR”, from a 1797 ad*
Back in the early days of nineteenth-century New Orleans, there were a number of drinking and dining establishments. There was the Café des Réfugiés (Jean-Baptiste Thiot, proprietor) on Rue St. Philippe and R. Revel’s Le Veau qui Tête on Old Levee Street (now Decatur), as well as the Old Absinthe House on Bourbon, which, built in 1806, operated for its first forty years as a sort of early “corner grocery,” or épicerie, bartering in food, tobacco and Spanish liquor. In 1815, its ground floor was converted into a saloon known as “Alei’s Coffee House”. On March 22, 1819, an advertisement in the Orleans Gazette and Commercial Advertiser announced perhaps the Crescent City’s first dining establishment actually called “a RESTAURANT”, the Museum Coffee-House on the “Corner of Jefferson and Levee streets, adjoining the Government House,” (today the corner of Wilkinson and Decatur).

The Old Absinthe House, photographed in 1903

“This establishment,” i.e., the “Museum Coffee-House,” it was reported, in addition to having on view “4,000 Curious and Interesting Objects” in glass cases “will shortly comprehend a RESTAURANT, a TABLE D’HÔTE, and sufficient rooms to accommodate a great number of gentlemen.” As you probably already know, “TABLE D’HÔTE” is a French loan phrase that literally means “the host’s table” and refers to a restaurant meal offered at a prix fixe (fixed price) with few if any choices. Think the opposite of à la carte.
1819 ad, perhaps the first use of the word restaurant in New Orleans

Soon, the city had a number of RESTAURATS and RESTAURANTS. On April 13, 1825, the New Orleans newspaper Argus called the “Café Cosmopolitan” a “Restaurat”, and the “Restaurat Louisianais” was advertised in the New Orleans Abeille (Bee) on June 16, 1829. Camp Street had a few RESTAURATS in the 1830s and 1840s.

Antoine & Marion’s RESTAURAT, at 98 Camp, was advertised in the Picayune, September 16, 1838.
The new RESTAURAT advertised above, however, must have had some start-up problems, since someone complained twelve days later, September 28th, in the Daily Picayune, that they had an impudent waiter who grossly insulted two gentlemen patrons.

"Genteel people would do well to avoid the new Restaurat, 98 Camp street, where they have an impudent waiter. We know of two gentlemen who were imposed on and grossly insulted by him last night. Don’t patronize the concern."

Some early restaurants were known “victualing places” and also “ordinaries”. Ordinary is an archaic British term for a meal provided at a fixed time and price at an inn - or the inn providing this service.

This ad in the New Orleans Abeille (Bee), October 27, 1831, placed by the “Café de Paris”, corner of Orleans and Bourbon streets, promoted its “ORDINARY” offering “Beef and oyster soup, gombeau [sic],” and other restorative fare.

An ad in the November 24, 1840, issue of the Picayune, shown below, announced a newly opened “Restaurat” at 97 Chartres, between Conti
and Bienville streets. Run by A. Lafon, it was called the “UNITED STATES RESTAURAT.”

A couple of ads below from the Picayune, dated September 8, 1844, demonstrate “RESTAURAT” was used instead of “RESTAURANT.”
Since there were so many restaurats in the early days of restaurants, it is not difficult to understand why someone who operates a restaurant is a restaurateur, and why the "n" is missing.

As for the way most restaurants operate today, there was actually a bit of “Russian influence” back in the early nineteenth century. Russian Ambassador in Paris, Prince Alexander Borisovich Kurakin (1752 – 1818), is credited with introducing to France what is known as service à la russe (French, “service in the Russian style”), in which
dishes are served sequentially and individually. This replaced the previous *service à la française* (French, “service in the French style”), a type of presentation in which all the food is brought out at one time, often in an impressive display. The Russian mode of presentation soon caught on in England and is the style in which most modern Western restaurants now serve food (with some modifications).

Another big change was *à la carte*, where diners were given a choice. Two brothers from Switzerland, John and Peter Delmonico, opened the original Delmonico’s in New York 1827, and it appeared in a list of restaurants in 1830. Nephew Lorenzo joined them in 1831. The restaurant provided Gotham diners with the first business lunch, the first *à la carte* menu (no *prix fixe* or set dinner time) and the first separate wine list. Ordering *à la carte*, where patrons are given the opportunity to select any of the separately priced menu items available, contrasts with the fixed price *table d'hôte*, defined earlier.

The U.S. restaurant industry’s 2018 figures for food and drink sales totalled almost $800 billion. In 2016, there were one million restaurants, or one for every 310 persons in the U.S. In the 1970s, there was only one restaurant for every 7,500 people. Today the average American eats out five to six times a week, and restaurant workers are 10% of the nation’s workforce.

The world has come a long way since the ancient Greeks and Romans served food from *thermoplia* (singular *thermopolium*), small L-shaped food counter bars in which large storage vessels were sunk, containing either hot or cold food. In the ruins of Pompeii, 158 *thermoplia* with a service counter have been uncovered throughout the town area.

JoAnn Clevenger of the *Upperline* is a James Beard Award Finalist for Best Restaurateur, “a working restaurateur who sets high national
standards in restaurant operations and entrepreneurship.” Today, New Orleans restaurant patrons are able to experience service à la russe or order à la carte from the Upperline, or any of the city’s three oldest restaurants, Antoine’s (Est. 1840), Tujague’s (Est. 1856) or the Bon Ton (Est. 1877).

Despite having numerous restaurats in New Orleans in the early years of the nineteenth century, only the restaurant spelling survives, yet there are still skilled restaurateurs “to soothe and bolster the weary soul”.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
“From Restaurats to Restaurants”
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