

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Oyster Dressing and Oyster Patties

Stuffing in the Middle Ages was known as *farce* (beginning somewhere around the year 1390), from the Latin *farcire* (and French *farcir*) meaning to stuff. What we think of as the humorous *farce* was originally a brief, lighthearted play “stuffed in between” lengthy religious productions to entertain the audience and keep it from becoming bored.

Forcemeat (first used in 1688) and *farce* were also frequently used terms for a spiced chopped meat mixture. In New Orleans, *The Picayune's Creole Cook Book*, first published in 1901, features recipes for seven types of “Forecemeats,” in the form of “*Quenelles*”. A *quenelle* is a mixture of meat or creamed fish, usually combined with breadcrumbs in a light egg binding and is derived from the German *knödel* (meaning noodle or dumpling).



Stuffing or Dressing?

The earliest documented mention of stuffings is in the Roman cookbook, *Apicius, De Re Coquinaria* (on the Subject of Cooking), compiled (it is believed) in the late 4th or early 5th century AD. But the actual term *stuffing* first appears in print in English in 1538. After the year 1880, Victorian sensibilities were somewhat offended by the term *stuffing*, and it then began being referred to as *dressing*.

Today, the terms *stuffing* and *dressing* are said to be interchangeable, with *stuffing* being more popular in the South and East sections of the United States. Still, I've always called it "oyster dressing," and in *The Picayune's Creole Cook Book*, there is a recipe for both "Oyster Dressing" and "Oyster Stuffing for Poultry." Even *The Picayune* couldn't quite settle on "Dressing" or "Stuffing" as the preferred designation.



The Picayune's "Weather Prophet," who made his début in 1894, serving what appears to be Thanksgiving Dinner

Oysters, it was determined long ago, were ideal for stuffing. European cookbooks of the seventeenth century were including ways to prepare oyster dressing. Stuffing featuring moist, delicious oysters also dates back to American colonial days. Some Southerners prefer pecan, rice

or cornbread stuffing, but oysters have been a favored base ingredient in dressing for hundreds of years. Always the traditional choice for Thanksgiving, oyster dressing has always been popular in New Orleans.

The Picayune's Creole Cook Book's "Thanksgiving Menu" features "Turkey Stuffed with Chestnuts," while its "more Economical Thanksgiving Dinner" calls for "Roast Turkey" with "Oyster Stuffing" – not "oyster dressing".

Served as *hors d'oeuvres* over the holidays or on other festive occasions, oyster patties are another New Orleans favorite. They are alternatively known as *oyster bouches*, or *bouchées*, as well as oyster *vol-au-vents*. The shells are spooned in with a delicious filling of oysters and mushrooms and warmed in the oven until extremely hot. One must carefully avoid burning the roof of one's mouth when first biting into one, but that's how the delicious filling must be prepared.

We know that *bouche* is French for mouth, as in *amuse-bouche*, one of those tantalizing appetizers not ordered from the menu, but delivered at the chef's whim. *Bou-chée*, on the other hand, is a small patty shell usually containing a creamed filling. In French, it means literally, a mouthful, from the Old French *buchiee*, from the Vulgar Latin *buccata*, from the Latin *bucca*, meaning cheek, or mouth. The word's earliest known use was in 1846.

An article in the *New York Herald*, dated August 24, 1891, explains "French Terms on the Bill of Fare that Puzzle the Hungry Yankee and Compel Him to Call for Beans". Included are "the small oyster patties known to the cook as *bouchées aux huitres*, or 'mouthful' of oysters." *The Picayune's Creole Cook Book* calls oyster patties "*Petites Bouchees d'Huitres*". In the front of the cook book is an "Explanation of French Terms Used in Cooking and Serving Dishes". "A Bouchee," it is explained, "indicates a mouthful, and is from the French *bouche*, the mouth. It is applied in cooking to all very thin, small patties or cakes, as *Bouchees d'Huitres*, *Bouchees a la Reine*, etc."

"Oyster Bouche" was on the menu at Schaumburg's at 829 Canal Street in November of 1917. The entire dinner was only 75 cents. Chef Paul Prudhomme calls his oyster patties "Oyster Bouchees". Tom Fitzmorris refers to them as "Creole Oyster *Vol-au-vents*". *Vol-au-vent* is French for "windblown" so as to describe the pastry's lightness. The term indicates a small hollow case of puff pastry that may also have a lid that is replaced after filling. There are large and small patty shells, and most New Orleanians remember the "ain't dere no more" McKenzie's as the place to go for oyster patty shells.

In 1986, Donald Entringer, McKenzie's Pastry Shoppes' President and son of company founder Daniel Entringer, explained the difficulty in

making certain types of baked pastry items: "Patty shells (used for party snacks like oyster patties) are hard to make. We're one of the few bakers in the nation that makes fresh ones."

PATTY SHELLS

for all occasions

Individual	
Size	Each 9c
Cocktail Size,	
Open	Doz. 50c
Closed	
Cocktail	Doz. 44c



McKenzie's ad from 1956

Individual patty shells at McKenzie's were only 9 cents in 1954 and 1956. Open cocktail size were 50 cents a dozen and 44 cents for the closed variety. Cocktail size prices in 1961 had gone up to 54 cents/46 cents, while the medium size patties were 96 cents a dozen and the large \$1.20. Sadly McKenzie's closed its doors in 2000.

But long before McKenzie's, New Orleans' French expatriate Monsieur Mannessier was the purveyor of his famous "oyster bouches":

Auguste Mannessier, who came to the New Orleans from Paris in 1847, operated a popular confectionery that offered the city "its first ice cream in molds," and he "was also the owner of the first ice cream wagons that ever traveled the streets of New Orleans, dispensing the frozen ice by retail as well as wholesale." So wrote the *Picayune* in 1914, upon the shop's closing. For nearly seventy years Mannessier's shop operated at a few different locations, including a branch at Spanish Fort and West End, but their primary location was 175 Royal Street (and later 701 Royal). Besides his coffee of "country-wide renown," the paper reported that his "pastry was about the best and his oyster bouches were famous."

A Belgian baker once commented that his establishment makes its "mini bouchees" by following the traditional French "*pate feuilletée*" method. The pastry dough is repeatedly folded and rolled, which produces a pastry of many layers.

Nowadays, one can find large oyster patty shells by Pepperidge Farm

in the freezer section of most grocery stores. For fresh, one can place an overnight delivery order with several New Orleans bakeries, including Gambino's, Swiss Confectionery or Haydel's. Haydel's states, "The pattie shell, also known as a vol-au-vent, is an old New Orleans favorite that is prepared from our 'made from scratch' recipe," while Swiss offers "baked pastry shells for your savory dishes".



Haydel's pattie shells

A highly acclaimed 19th-century opera singer, Adelina Patti (1843 – 1919), born in Madrid to Italian parents, had an unusual connection with the oyster patty. She was a huge sensation in the music capitals of Europe and America, especially New Orleans. The song "Sweet Adeline" was named for her, and composer Giuseppe Verdi called her a "stupendous artist". The famous *cantatrice* made numerous appearances at New Orleans' French Opera House. Sisters Carlotta and Amalia Patti were also singers.

"Poularde Adelina Patti" was not the only dish named for the operatic star. In 1860, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* reported the excitement of her appearance there at the Melodeon: "There are PATTI hats, PATTI neckties, PATTI segars (sic), PATTI head-dresses, PATTI bracelets, PATTI cakes, oyster PATTIES, &c., &c. Go and hear PATTI."



*Adelina Patti - Did she ever try an Oyster Patti?
1862 Portrait by Franz Winterhalter*

Adelina's brother Carlo, violinist, became an orchestra leader in New Orleans while only twenty years old, in 1862. In December 1919, fire destroyed the French Opera House and all its treasures — sets, costumes and scores. Adelina died earlier the same year.

A word of caution must be offered in connection with the cooking of stuffing within an animal's body cavity. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) believes this can present potential food safety issues. What happens, you see, is that while the meat reaches a safe temperature, the undercooked stuffing inside can still harbor bacteria. Alternatively, if you cook the meat until the stuffing reaches a safe temperature, the meat outside may be overcooked. For turkeys, the USDA recommends cooking the stuffing, or dressing, separately from the bird.

Since 1876, New Orleanians have found the P & J Oyster Company as a great source for their holiday oysters. P & J (that stands for Popich & Jurisich) is the oldest business of its kind in the United States. Oysters are purchased for oyster dressing, patties and oyster stew (actually a delicious soup of milk or cream, butter, green onions, celery, pepper and, of course, plump oysters and the accompanying oyster liquor).

The miniature oyster patty recipe below is an amalgam of recipes, including *The Picayune's* and McKenzie's. McKenzie's distributed fliers to its customers with recipes on how to fill the bakery's patty shells.

Ingredients

3 to 4 dozen Louisiana oysters (be sure to reserve the oyster liquor)

1/2 stick of butter (or 3 tablespoons of bacon drippings)

1/2 cup chopped canned mushrooms and juice (optional)

1 garlic clove, finely minced

2 bunches green onions, finely chopped (or one grated onion)

2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley

2 tablespoons heavy cream

2 tablespoons flour

1/4 cup oyster liquor (some regular water may be added)

1/2 teaspoon dried thyme leaves

1/4 teaspoon lemon juice

Dash of cayenne pepper or Tabasco Sauce

Salt and black pepper to taste

3 dozen miniature puff pastry patty shells

Preparation

Finely chop the oysters and mushrooms and set aside after having first strained the oysters over a bowl to remove any grit. Don't forget to reserve the oyster liquor. Preheat oven to 375 degrees. *Sauté* onions in butter over medium heat; add garlic and cook until tender, 4-5 minutes. Add flour in slowly until smooth. Add oysters, mushrooms, cream, oyster liquor, thyme, parsley and cayenne; cook an additional 6-8 minutes. Remove mixture from heat; add lemon juice and salt and pepper to taste. Place patty shells on a baking sheet. Spoon mixture into three dozen patty shells and bake until pastry shells are golden brown and contents bubbly hot, 5-8 minutes. Cool just a little before serving. Enjoy.



Other recipes add finely chopped celery and use mushroom soup to make the preparation a little easier.

Have a Happy Thanksgiving, and May the Farce be with you.

NED HÉMARD

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