

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Patois and Petticoats

Two words have a prominent position in the New Orleans lexicon, but *Patios* and *Patois* should never be confused. *Patios* are everywhere throughout the Crescent City, especially in the French Quarter. Often paved or bricked, these roofless inner courtyards are lushly landscaped and are ideal for entertaining. The word *patio* apparently comes from an Old Spanish word for pasture or from the Latin *pactum*, meaning agreement. This was perhaps because legal agreements were decided in open courtyards, or patios.

The Patio Planners, a *Vieux Carré* garden club, delights in their patios and hosts the Christmas caroling in Jackson Square each holiday season. Then there are patios that don't exactly fit the above definition, such as F & M Patio on Tchoupitoulas. There is a bit of green open space available, but only if one is dancing on the pool table (a tradition there). Once one starts acting like the locals, it isn't long before one is speaking in the vernacular. That's where *patois* comes in.

Patois is a form of language considered nonstandard which can refer to dialects, pidgins, creoles and other forms of native or local speech. But it is not usually deemed to be slang or jargon (occupational slang). Class distinctions come into play because the *patois*, not used in literature or public speaking, is a provincial form of speech. That is unless one is a Mardi Gras Indian, where many phrases of *Créole patois* have entered the vocabulary (especially in song). When native New Orleanians hear "Iko Iko" or Jockomo Fe Na Nay", it's music to the ear. K-Doe's "Te Ta Te Ta Ta", Jesse Hill's "Ooh Poo Pah Doo", the Meters' "Hey Pocky Way" or Lee Dorsey's "Ya Ya" are all familiar tunes.

Patois comes from the Old French *patoier*, meaning "to paw, or handle clumsily". This may arise from the concept of *patois* being a clumsy or awkward manner of speech. An alternative source may be the Latin *patria* for country (or homeland), since it is one's localized language.

Créole is still a term that conjures up confusion, mostly outside the Crescent. It derives from the Spanish *criollo*, a person native to a locality, which ultimately comes from the Latin *creare* (to create or beget). Creoles were therefore the offspring born in French Louisiana to European parents, usually French and Spanish. But not always. The mother of General P. G. T. Beauregard, the Great Creole, was a Reggio (descended from the Italian Dukes of Reggio and Modena). The d'Arensbourg family had Swedish and German roots. And today, descendants of some of these early native-born Europeans (who are of mixed race) are also called Creoles. There is Creole language, Creole culture and Creole cuisine.

This author is always delighted to read new explanations for *Créole*. One well-known culinary writer stated it was from an Old Spanish word "meaning a mixture of cultures or color such as in the word Crayola". He was perhaps unaware that "Crayola" as in Crayola® crayons ("created" by Binney & Smith), was coined by Alice Stead Binney (wife of Edwin Binney). She combined the French words for chalk, *craie* (crayon's root word) and oily, *oléagineux*.

The real Creole cuisine, however, is full of color. It has its origins in the Caribbean Islands, Senegal, France, Spain and even among the Native American people. How that came to be was the result of a "petticoat rebellion", a culinary *coup d'état*.

Soon after Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville, became governor of Louisiana, a contingent of about fifty young women (newly married) marched on Bienville's residence in protest. They were banging on their black cast iron skillets with metal spoons in order to make it known that they were fed up with the colony's existing limited diet. They wanted to prepare something fresh and original but were untrained in utilizing the region's fish, game, vegetables and herbs.

The Governor had just the solution, and through his management decision set up what was to become the first cooking school in America. Bienville enlisted the services of his housekeeper, Madame Langlois, who'd picked up a few pointers from the local Choctaw tribe. From her Native American neighbors she learned and passed on to the young wives how to powder sassafras to make *filé* for their *gombo* and how to grind corn and make hominy grits. Her cooking classes gave instruction on the use of bay leaves (from the Laurel tree) for seasoning and how to prepare fish, crawfish and wild game. By combining French traditional cooking with Native American ingredients and skills, Madame Langlois became the "Mother of Creole Cooking".

Cajun cuisine is a more rustic adaptation of indigenous Louisiana ingredients. There are still influences from Spain, Africa and from Native Americans. The Choctaws, Houmas and Chetimaches introduced the newly arrived Acadian settlers to local wildlife, seafood,

wild vegetation and cooking methods. Grillades, Jambalaya, sauce piquantes and fricasees are common Cajun "single pot" meals. German influences rounded out Cajun cuisine with their charcuterie, bringing forth excellent boudin, andouille, tasso and chaurice.

One later dish South Louisiana residents learned from the Attakapas Indians was *macque choux*, made with freshly shucked corn, seasoning and crawfish. There are other variations, but the name does not easily translate from French or Cajun French. It is a pidgin French-Native American blending of language, a *patois*, to create a truly great meal.

It is only fitting that today New Orleans has a fine restaurant in Uptown New Orleans named *Patois*. Whether for protesters in petticoats or present-day patio planners, the language of New Orleans is always fine food.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Patois and Petticoats"
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2008