

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Quotable New Orleans, Part 3

“Never Strain Gombo”

“Never strain gombo.”
-LAFCADIO HEARN

Although the spelling for “gumbo” may have changed since 1885, when Lafcadio Hearn penned these explicit instructions in his *La Cuisine Creole* (his collection of recipes “from leading chefs and noted Creole housewives”), the meaning is clear. One should never strain the fine ingredients that work together to make such an extraordinary final product. Today it might include the admonition, “neither should one use a blender nor a food processor”. Hearn even said that his book “partakes of the nature of its birthplace — New Orleans — which is cosmopolitan in its nature”. These three simple words of instruction, “Never strain gombo”, form a great quote and the ideal metaphor for the Crescent City.

Patrick Lafcadio Hearn (June 27, 1850 – September 26, 1904), also known by the Japanese name Koizumi Yakumo, was an international writer best known for his writings on Japan. Still, he spent a decade in New Orleans, beginning in 1877. During that time, Hearn’s writing significantly influenced the rest of the world’s notions about the city’s culture, customs, symbols, myths and, yes, its cuisine. Although he was born on the Greek Ionian island known as Lefkada (the origin of his unusual middle name, Lafcadio), he chronicled the Creole language, mores and cooking techniques as if he were born in raised in the Crescent City. On the subject of everything from the French Opera and cockroaches to Voodoo, Lafcadio Hearn had something interesting to say.

Later in life, he became a citizen of Japan and considered by its people to be one of the greatest Japanese writers of his time. In Ian Fleming’s 1964 James Bond novel *You Only Live Twice*, Bond responds to supervillain Ernst Stavro Blofeld’s remark of “Have you ever heard the Japanese expression *kiri-sute gomen?*” *Kiri-sute gomen* is an old

Japanese samurai expression having to do with the right to strike with a sword anyone of a lower class who compromised one's honor. Agent 007 parries with his nemesis by offering this retort, "Spare me the Lafcadio Hearn, Blofeld."

Lafcadio Hearn had no shortage of great retorts and quotes, such as the one he had for the New Orleans word for "that something extra" offered by local merchants (and others):

"Lagniappe c'est bitin qui bon. (Lagniappe c'est du bon butin.)
'Lagniappe is lawful booty.'"

In the past, I've provided quotes by other interesting people who've commented on New Orleans, "that indomitable municipality nestled in the river's crescent". Here are a few more:

"Unless you're broke or sick or blue-nosed, I don't see how you could have anything but a good time in New Orleans. 'Unique' is a word that cannot be qualified. It does not mean rare or uncommon; it means alone in the universe. By the standards of grammar and by the grace of God, New Orleans is the unique American place."

- CHARLES KURALT

"Where else can you find iniquity and antiquity so close together?"

- WALT DISNEY (referring to the city's Bourbon and Royal streets)

"By contrast, New Orleans is a warm and dreamy place, birthplace of jazz, lover of good food, and afternoon naps, America's most feminine city. Perhaps it's appropriate that the Saints' symbol, the fleur-de-lis, is a flower. It's love all the same, a devotion so intense that thousands of screaming fans turn out on Sundays to wildly cheer the team — and that's just at the airport after an away game."

- DOUGLAS McCOLLAM

"It ain't burnt, Rosemary, it's blackened."

- BUNNY MATTHEWS

"Thank God the French got here first.

Can you imagine what New Orleans might have been had the Pilgrims gotten off at Pilottown instead of Plymouth?

It's frightening . . . we might have been burning witches instead of cafe brulot; or preaching to the quadron beauties, instead of dancing with them; or spending eons eating boiled beef and potatoes, instead of ecrevisse Cardinal, or pompano en papillote, or gumbo."

- PHIL JOHNSON

"Only in the food of New Orleans is the Gallic influence unmistakable. Food is a major topic of conversation in New Orleans as in France, and the newcomer is overwhelmed with advice on what and where to eat."
- SARAH SEARIGHT

"In the small hours, a friend and I were wandering around the French quarter, when suddenly I heard a trumpet in the distance. I couldn't see anything but an excursion boat gliding through the mist back to port. Then the tune became more distinct. The boat was still far off. But in the bow I could see a Negro standing in the wind, holding a trumpet high and sending out the most brilliant notes I had ever heard. It was jazz. It was what I had been hoping to hear all through the night. I don't even know whether it was 'Tiger Rag' or 'Panama'. But it was Louis Armstrong descending from the sky like a god. The ship hugged the bank as if it were driven there by the powerful trumpet beats. I stayed absolutely still, just listening, until the boat dropped anchor.
-JACK TEAGARDEN (famous trombonist remembering his 1921 New Orleans visit)

"If it hadn't been for Jazz, there wouldn't be no rock and roll."
- LOUIS ARMSTRONG

A quote on Rock and Roll:

"It goes back further and borrows the steady beat of the drums of Congo Square — that going-on beat — and the Marching Bands' loud and blatant *yes!!* Rock and Roll puts them all together and makes a music so basic it's like the meat cleaver the butcher uses — before the cook uses the knife — before you use the sterling silver at the table on the meat that by then has been rolled up into a commercial filet mignon."
- LANGSTON HUGHES

Hughes believed Rock and Roll to be a combination of that steady beat from Congo Square, the "gut-bucket heartache" of the blues and the hope of "jubilees and stepped-up-Spirituals".

"It is impossible to capture the essence, tolerance, and spirit of south Louisiana in words and to try is to roll down a road of clichés, bouncing over beignets and beads and brass bands and it just is what it is.

It is home."
- CHRIS ROSE: *1 dead in attic*

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