

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Rah-Rahs, Rhonda, Rémoulade and Roux

Writing previously on topics of a sartorial nature, including shoes, the author failed to mention saddle oxfords (popularly known as rah-rahs). Let's tackle the oxford part first.

In 1815, five months after the Battle of New Orleans, Arthur Wellesley, the renowned Duke of Wellington, defeated Napoleon at Waterloo. The "Iron Duke" had attended Eton and New College, Oxford. It was at Oxford in 1640 that the university students began wearing a half boot. That evolved into a shoe, and today oxfords are defined as all lace-up shoes that do not rise above the ankle. Meanwhile, back in Belgium, Wellington would never have been successful had it not been for Prussian Field-Marshal Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher, who five years earlier had devised special laced footwear with six eyelets for his troops. The *Blucher* is one of two styles of oxford shoe. The other is the *Balmoral*.



Duke of Wellington and Field-Marshal von Blücher

Even the Duke got his shoemaker to modify an 18th century Hessian boot, having it cut closer around the leg. Men emulated the new style, which they fancied foppish and fashionable. By the 1850s the boots were rubberized, and these Wellington boots have continued to be popular (especially on Paddington Bear).

The "saddle" in saddle oxfords was the different colored saddle-shaped piece of leather stitched across the vamp (via the Old French *avanpie*, "before the foot"). Spalding introduced this as a racquet sports shoe in 1906 with the "saddle" as extra support. Alas, there was no support for it as a tennis or running shoe. But, as a stylish shoe for golfers and well-dressed gentlemen, it took hold. Silent film comedian Harold Lloyd, with his black horn-rims and straw boater, sported them in his movies.



Saddle oxfords worn by co-eds and by Harold Lloyd

In 1938, the jitterbug dance craze required flat shoes for young ladies to jump and jive. By the 50s all the co-eds were wearing them, and perhaps the first unisex fashion was born. Cheerleaders championed them, too, and that's when the rah-rah designation came along. It is not unusual to spy a well-dressed New Orleans gentleman sauntering along St. Charles in his blue cord suit and rah-rahs.

That youthful look would also work well for a contestant on *The Dating Game*, were it still on the air. The Crescent City appreciated the fact

that *The Dating Game* theme song, "Whipped Cream," was recorded by Herb Alpert (remember the album cover) and written by none other than New Orleans' own Allen Toussaint. Premiering in 1965, the show featured Jim Lange - often in a tacky tux - helping a bachelorette choose from three bachelors (or the other way around). Questions like "If I were hungry for a candy bar, which one would you be?" were not designed just to aid the decision process. A humorous, saucy response was what was really intended. Many guests on the show appeared before they became famous: Steve Martin, Tom Selleck and Michael Richards (before becoming "Cosmo Kramer" on *Seinfeld*).



The Dating Game, with music by New Orleans' own Allen Toussaint

New Orleans native Rhonda Shear was a bachelorette on the show three times! She had gotten her TV start as a solo dance performer on *The John Pela Show*. Winning three Miss Louisiana titles, Rhonda ran for Register of Conveyances and lost by only 135 votes. After beaucoup television performances and her own show, *Up All Night*, risqué Rhonda has made a successful career of being a sexy, saucy comedienne.

A 2012 article in *Forbes* magazine dubbed Rhonda "the queen of reinvention." Having "gone from the pages of Playboy, ... to comedy, to a multi-million dollar lingerie and bra line sold around the world," Rhonda was "nominated for the prestigious Stevie Award from the ABA for 'Most Innovative Company of the Year'. Shear Enterprises, located in Florida, had an explosive 72 million in yearly sales in 2011." Rhonda was credited in the article as "leading a new breed of executives in this country called, 'Boomerpreneurs', who reinvent their careers and redefine their lives after 40."



Boomerpreneur Rhonda Shear

That brings us to some other saucy Louisiana delights. “First you make a roux” is the opening line of so many local recipes. Gumbo and Crawfish Étouffée could not exist without it. The term comes to us from the French *buerre roux*, meaning browned butter. In the Middle Ages, poor people cooked with butter, while the rich used lard or oil. But by 1651, butter had arrived. That was the publication date of *Le Cuisinier Français* (The French Chef – before Julia assumed the title) by Francois Pierre (assuming the name of the illustrious chef to Henri IV, La Varenne). That cookbook helped establish France as the international arbiter of *haute cuisine*, and it was the first cookbook to describe a roux. Nearly half of La Varenne’s recipes called for it.



Preparing a roux

Made by slowly stirring and thickening flour and oil (or butter or fat) to varying degrees, roux comes in three varieties. These are used in three of the five or six mother sauces: brown roux for *Espagnole*, white for *Béchamel* and blonde for *Velouté*. In New Orleans it helps to have a fine old seasoned cast-iron skillet, and a good roux can be found simmering on any number of *rues* in the city.



Shrimp Rémoulade at Arnaud's

Most local diners would *rue* shrimp *sans rémoulade*. Mentioned in 1817 in the cookbook *Le Cuisinier Royale*, the instructions for *rémoulade* begin: "*Vous arrez plein un verre de moutarde que vous mettez dans un vase, afin de pouvoir la délayer; vous hacherez un peu d'échalotes ...*" Well, you get the idea, mustard (Creole in New Orleans) and shallots ... and a whole assortment of other good ingredients. It varies with every local recipe, but this piquant cold sauce must have at first employed horseradish. That's where the *rémoulade* comes from in French. Always savored as part of the *goûté* at Galatoire's, shrimp *rémoulade* is also quite popular served over fried green tomatoes (an extraordinary culinary combo first presented, it is claimed, at JoAnn Clevenger's wonderful Upperline Restaurant).



Toussaint's confection, Herb Alpert style

Cervantes wrote that hunger is the best sauce in the world, but he never dined in New Orleans. Nor did Don Quixote wear rah-rahs on a date with Rhonda, but what a great match-up for *The Dating Game!* "To dream the impossible dream!" And don't forget the "Whipped Cream".

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