

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Reinvigorated

Back in the summer of '62, President John F. Kennedy wrote to the American people about "the importance of physical fitness to our national strength, the subtle but undeniable relationship of physical vigor to our capacity to undertake the enormous efforts of mind and courage and will which are the price of maintaining the peace and insuring the continued flourishing of our civilization". He also made the point "that physical vigor and health are essential accompaniments to the qualities of intellect and spirit on which a nation is built".

And the country just loved the way JFK pronounced the word "vigor".

Back in those youthful days, that pep talk inspired this author to attempt many additional sit-ups to keep civilization flourishing. This vigor frequently transformed itself into youthful hunger. Sometimes, however (though not often in New Orleans), cuisine is lacking in vitality and in need of some extra zip. It isn't just the body that needs reinvigorating, but bland food that lacks soul.

That brings to mind a culinary creation that carries the name that is the embodiment of the word "reinvigoration", and that designation is *ravigote*. *Ravigoter* in French is an alteration of the obsolete Old French *ravigorer*, meaning to add new vigor (*vigueur*). *Ravigoté* connotes "reinvigorated" or in the New Orleans vernacular, "jazzed up".

Ravigote is a classic French sauce that may be served either warm or cold. It is cut with white wine vinegar (making it lightly acidic) and usually seasoned with chopped herbs, capers and minced onions or shallots. In its heated form, it is based upon a *velouté* (one of master chef Mariè-Antonin Carême's mother sauces). The French word *velouté* is the adjectival form of *velour*, meaning velvety.

Nowadays, though not in its classical form, *ravigote* sauce substitutes Dijon mustard for the vinegar (or uses some variation of vinegar, Creole mustard and whipping cream in combination). In its cold

presentation, it is a type of vinaigrette. It is usually served with crabmeat in numerous fine New Orleans restaurants. Presidential visitors have sung its praises.

In European establishments it is served on poached or boiled mild flavored fish, fowl, eggs or meats. The tradition there is serving it on *tête de veau*, hogs head cheese, *pâté*, jellied hare or calves' brains. Parisian chef Jean-Pierre Vigato embellishes his *tête de veau* (calf's head) with a Dijon vinaigrette *ravigote* sauce of capers, chives, hard-boiled eggs and cornichons (those crisp, tart tiny gherkins that usually accompany *pâtés*, smoked meats and fish). Crescent City connoisseurs prefer ample lump crabmeat from the Gulf for their *ravigote* to these other exotic parts.

Crabmeat *Ravigote* makes an exquisite appearance served atop Creole tomatoes. Emeril Lagasse prepares his *ravigote* by propelling onion, mustard, lemon juice, parsley, egg, salt and cayenne through a blender or food processor for thirty seconds. While the motor is still whirring, he gently drizzles in vegetable oil to slightly thicken his exceptional concoction.

Galatoire's Crabmeat *Ravigote* is served warm, utilizing both Béchamel and Hollandaise sauces. What should be dubbed *ravigote* at this centenarian Bourbon Street Eden is its Crabmeat Maison (one of the featured *hors d'oeuvres* in its popular *goûte*). The Maison sauce includes egg yolks, red wine vinegar, Creole mustard, lemon juice, vegetable oil, capers, scallions and parsley over jumbo lump crabmeat. The Galatoire's cookbook suggests a garnish of tomatoes.

Ravigote was one of the words used in the 2006 Scripps National Spelling Bee finals. *Ravigote, R A V I G O T E*, could I have a definition, please? To "reinvigorate", to "add vigor", as in the case either one's torso (or crabmeat) has been lying around like a big lump.

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