

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Rochambeau, Robespierre and Talleyrand

Writing previously on the Marquis de Lafayette and the parks named in his honor, the author neglected to mention another French aristocrat who fought on the side of the Americans during the Revolutionary War. In 1780 Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, Comte de Rochambeau (1725 - 1807), was given the rank of Lieutenant General along with 5,000 troops to help George Washington defeat the British. Eventually his forces left Rhode Island for Connecticut to join Washington on the Hudson River. This culminated in the march of their combined forces, the siege of Yorktown, and (along with the aid of the Marquis de Lafayette) the defeat of Cornwallis. Back in France, Rochambeau was arrested during the Reign of Terror and barely escaped the guillotine.



Comte de Rochambeau

A statue of Rochambeau by sculptor Ferdinand Hamar was unveiled in Washington, D.C.'s Lafayette Square by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1902. Lafayette Square in New Orleans has neither a statue of Lafayette, nor one in Rochambeau's honor, but the city does have a way of creating monumental culinary dishes.

Antoine's Restaurant in New Orleans is famous for its *Poulet Rochambeau*, as well as *Filet de Boeuf à la Robespierre*. Robespierre (1758 - 1794), one of the best-known leaders of the French Revolution, was not as lucky as Rochambeau with the guillotine.



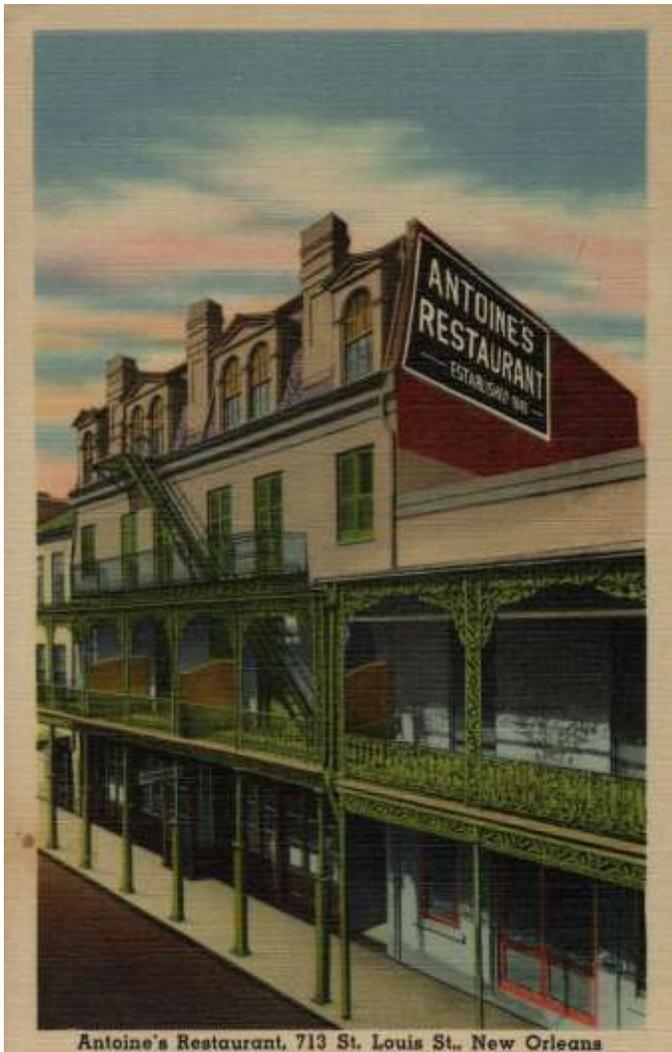
Maximilien Robespierre

Chicken Rochambeau is a wonderful layered dish consisting of a baked chicken half with most of the bones removed (but not skinned), placed on an ample slice of grilled ham topped with a delicious brown Rochambeau sauce (chicken stock and brown sugar). The chicken is then covered with a bright yellow cloak of tangy, lemony Béarnaise sauce.

The story behind *Boeuf Robespierre* is much more gruesome. In fact, not many people could be more macabre than British occultist Aleister Crowley. He, the "wickedest" of men, was obviously fond of New Orleans when he wrote: "The old French-Spanish quarter of the city is the only decent inhabited district that I discovered in America. From the architecture to the manners of the people, their clothes, their

customs and their cookery, all was delightful.”

He wrote about *Boeuf Robespierre* more than once: “This is the proper life for the pure poet who would commune evermore with Beauty, enjoy the Beatific Vision, pace the sapphire pavement of the Throne of God, and compose hymns in praise of Apis over the Filet de Boeuf Robespierre at Antoine’s ...” and “The young man who is courting is not idle, either; he serves great nature in yet other ways ... He also contributes to our Wienerschnitzel Holstein, or Filet de Boeuf à la Robespierre, our Sole au Gratin and our oeufs à la Niede.”



Antoine's Restaurant

Like other culinary masterpieces, *Filet de Boeuf à la Robespierre* has an intriguing creation story. The mystery of its origin shall forthwith be revealed. The dish was grimly named to recall the guillotining of one of the most influential figures of the Reign of Terror, Maximilien Robespierre. Antoine Alciatore's father had witnessed the actual execution on July 28, 1794, and told his son that Robespierre's neck looked like raw beef – something the young chef recollected while later slicing the deep, red exposed surface of a tenderloin of beef. At that moment, Antoine experienced a vivid flashback of his father's

description of Robespierre's neck and, from that idea, would go on to create a new dish. Incorporating a cylinder of tenderloin in a *demi-glace* with sweetbreads, he named it *Filet de Boeuf Robespierre*.



Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord

One local retelling of the story erred in casting the young Antoine Alciatore, instead of his father, as the young man in the Paris crowd who viewed Robespierre's death firsthand. The only trouble with that version of the tale is that Antoine was not born until 1813, almost twenty years after the guillotine severed the head in question. Curiously, this erroneous version of local food history made its way on to a couple of Turkish websites, translated into the Turkish language.

In Turkey, the narrative went like this: "*Maximilien de Robespierre'in idamına tanık olanlardan biri olan Antoine Alciatore yıllar sonra kendisine aşçılığı öğretenlerden biri bonfile dilimlerden onu izlemektedir.*"

Which brings us back to Turkey (the bird, not the country) and a third monumental recipe. *Dinde Talleyrand* is another famous Antoine's creation, and *dinde* is the French word for turkey. This, as well as a pineapple savarin, is one of many dishes named for the epicurean French statesman Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord (1754 - 1838). Talleyrand employed Mariè-Antoine Côté, one of the first celebrity chefs. A great gourmand and wine connoisseur, Talleyrand was also a charming conversationalist.

His wife, however, was not quite as clever. Referred to as "*la belle indolente*", Catherine Worlée Grand's child-like beauty did not totally make up for the *naïveté* of her public utterances. She tried to tell someone she was from India and (instead of "*Je suis des Indes*") replied "*Je suis d'Inde*", which sounds like "*Je suis dinde*" (I am a turkey).

Talleyrand was France's foreign minister under Napoleon who negotiated the Louisiana Purchase with Robert Livingston and James Monroe. Talleyrand took many bribes under the table during his career. Napoleon called him "*merde* in a silk stocking" but respected his diplomatic skills. Early in his career, Antoine Alciatoire had the opportunity to cook for Talleyrand and served him *Boeuf Robespierre*.

Three men, three dishes, a quirky mystery, a turkey history, such are the elements of the exquisite cuisine of the Crescent City.

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