

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Romance of the Milky Way

Lafcadio Hearn's abundant writings about New Orleans include his observations on the city's Creole population, its culture, dialect and cuisine. *La Cuisine Créole* (1885) is his most comprehensive analysis of New Orleans culinary traditions up until that time.

After leaving the Creole metropolis, Hearn penned his "Romance of the Milky Way and Other Studies and Stories" (published in October, 1905). Writing about "charming festivals celebrated by Old Japan" in honor of the Milky Way and the Chinese interpretation that "the Milky Way was a luminous river, the River of Heaven, the Silver Stream", Hearn was providing a romantic tour of our mysterious galaxy.

But the year 1905 was to provide a new galaxy, a culinary one, with a stellar array of gastronomic delights. It was the year that Jean Galatoire opened the doors to his French Quarter restaurant at 209 Bourbon Street. *Galatoire* was originally spelled *Galactoire*, a name that comes from galaxy, or Milky Way. Unless one is lactose intolerant, one can discern how "lactic" is in "galactic". There was even a Saint Galactoire who was a bishop in Béarn at the beginning of the sixth century (believed to have been martyred by the Visigoths).



Béarn is a former province of France, now a part of the *Pyrénées-Atlantiques*, but once part of what is known as Gascony. D'Artagnan of the "The Three Musketeers" was from Béarn, as was King Henri IV of France and Jean Galatoire. Gascony is also famous for its *douceur de vivre* ("sweetness of life"), its fine food and medieval villages called *bastides* ("fortified towns"). Two such *bastides* are Rébénacq (Does Mac "Dr. John" Rebennack sound familiar?) and Pardies (birthplace of Jean Galatoire). Both Béarnaise towns are very near to Pau, the capital of historic Béarn Province and birthplace of Henri IV.



Henri IV, le Grand Béarnaise

Henri IV was quite a gourmet in his day and has a connection to one of the most popular appetizers at Galatoire's. *Pommes de terre soufflées* (those wonderful puffed potatoes) were created by accident by chef and restaurateur Jean-Louis-François Collinet, when preparing *pommes frites* for King Louis-Philippe of France. Due to an unexpected delay, Collinet was forced to plunge already fried potatoes into extremely hot oil to reheat them for his majesty. They were served at an 1837 banquet at *Le Pavillon Henri IV à Saint-Germain-en-Laye*, a

restaurant in the suburbs of Paris. The celebration was in connection with the inaugural run of the first railway line from Paris. The king was amazed and overjoyed with the new preparation of his beloved fries. Collinet created Béarnaise sauce to accompany this dish (since Henri IV was from Béarn and known as "*le Grand Béarnaise*"), and at Galatoire's the presentation is no different.



Le Pavillon Henri IV Restaurant, with arched gateway indicating that Louis XIV was born in Saint-Germain-en-Laye

Guests at Galatoire's are confronted with many appetizing *hors d'oeuvres*, and perhaps the best way to handle the indecision is to go with the *goûté* (or taste) or *Grand Goûté* (which includes Shrimp Rémoulade, Crabmeat Maison and Oysters en Brochette). Others prefer the fabulous Godchaux Salad (named for Canal Street Department Store head, Leon Godchaux). Prepared with lump crabmeat, lettuce, large shrimp, hard-boiled eggs, anchovies and a Creole mustard vinaigrette, it is a variation of the Dinkelspiel Salad but easier to pronounce. Both were created in the 1920s.

There are so many "out of this world" dishes at Galatoire's, it is like trying to count the stars. One is Chicken Clemenceau (there is also a shrimp version), made with potatoes, mushrooms, garlic and *petit pois* peas. Named for Georges Clemenceau, French statesman and friend of Claude Monet, the dish has long been a local favorite. Monsieur Clemenceau's grandson Pierre (1905-1994) was a distinguished resident of the Crescent City whose marriage was announced in the December 26, 1938, issue of Time Magazine: "Married. Pierre Clemenceau. 34, grandson of the Wartime Premier of France; and Jane Grunewald, 24-year-old New Orleans socialite; in New Orleans."

Galatoire's signature dish for years has been Trout *Marguery*, brought to the restaurant by chef Constant Hippolyte Prouet who "Creolized" the dish with indigenous ingredients (like gulf shrimp instead of mussels). Best sellers Trout *Meuniere* and Trout *Meuniere Amandine* (also popular with soft-shell crabs) are bedrock dishes that have an interesting origin. *Meuniere* means "in the style of the miller's wife" because the fish is dusted lightly with flour (ground by the mill) which was "by the old mill stream" where the fish were caught.

Everyone has a favorite selection at Galatoire's. Whether it is the stuffed eggplant, Chicken Bonne Femme or the Crabmeat Yvonne (named for Yvonne Galatoire Wynne), there is no end to the choices. Rockefeller Spinach is a popular accompaniment, and the Crabmeat Ravigote employs both a Béchamel and Hollandaise sauce (as does the Trout *Marguery*). A good Ravigote will do that.

L. E. Jung & Wulff Co., a New Orleans firm, once manufactured an absinthe-substitute under the label "Milky Way". Back in their day Presidents Taft and Harding were very fond of Sazerac cocktails, and Galatoire's makes one of the best around. The Old Fashioneds and *Ojen* cocktails are excellent, as are any number of adult beverages one may choose from this historic dining establishment.

Some choose a delicious dessert to finish the meal, such as the Crêpes Maison along with the beautiful presentation of a Café Brûlot. But as incredibly good is the cuisine, there is much more to the experience. It is the family, the waiters and the atmosphere. The real show is the people themselves. Each performance has a comfortable continuity (like utilizing the napkins as do-rags), but every visit provides something new, wonderful and totally impromptu.

Many different groups gather there on a regular basis to celebrate for the most obscure reason. It may be to mourn the non-passing of Momus as a parade or to take a spring break from "Pirate School". If (according to Mr. Hearn) the Japanese could celebrate the romantic "festival of Tanabata-Sama, the Weaving-Lady of the Milky Way", New Orleanians can certainly choose any reason at all to party at their favorite restaurant under the stars.

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