

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

### Soufflé Potatoes,

### and how they found a home in New Orleans

1588 was not a good year for Catholics. In August, Philip II of Spain's *Armada Invencible* was defeated in its attempt to invade Elizabeth's England. And in December, Henri I, Duke of Guise and leader of the anti-Protestant Catholic League, was summoned by King Henri III of France to the *Château de Blois*. Of course, Guise used the League not only to defend the Catholic cause but also as a tool in his attempt to usurp the French throne. The Jesuits were also in the Catholic League.



*Le Château de Blois*

Arriving at the *Château de Blois* on December 22, Guise spent the evening with Charlotte de Sauve, a member of the Catherine de' Medici's notorious *L'escadron volant*, or "flying squadron," a group of alluring female informants and spies who seduced men of importance, thereby extracting information to pass on to Catherine, the king's mother. The following morning, the Duke of Guise, was called to meet with the king where he was at once hacked to death by the king's elite bodyguard known as "the Forty-five".

Catherine de' Medici died at the *château* less than two weeks later of natural causes. While all of this murderous intrigue and interesting history was going down at the *Château de Blois*, it is said that an

ancestor of a famous New Orleans chef “was compounding sauces in the stone kitchens” of the *château*.

According to family lore (and a 1934 newspaper article by Meigs O. Frost), that ancestor was none other than one belonging to Antoine Alciatore, renowned founder of Antoine’s Restaurant in New Orleans.



*Assassination of Henri I, Duke of Guise, while Henri III looks on*

Born in Toulon in 1813, the son of a wool merchant, Antoine Alciatore and his family moved to Marseille when he was about twelve years of age. There he was apprenticed to the owner of the Hôtel de Noailles and put to work in the kitchen, where he excelled.

The Hôtel de Noailles was located on *La Canebière*, the historic high street in Marseille’s old quarter. This thoroughfare dates back to 1666 when Louis XIV decided to expand the port city of Marseille. The name

*Canebière* is derived from the *provençal* word for the Latin *cannabis*. Yes, *that* cannabis.



*Hôtel de Noailles, Marseille*

*La Canebière* was the area around the Old Port where hemp fields originally grew, and Marseille was the world's largest trader in hemp rope and baskets from the Middle Ages up until the 1930s, when other fibers were employed. The hemp was also used to make ships' rigging, and British sailors came to refer to the street as the "can o' beer".

The glamorous center of Marseille's vibrant café society, *La Canebière* in the nineteenth century was home to many of the city's almost 200 cafés and numerous fine hotels catering to prosperous travellers passing through the port, then the largest on the Mediterranean. Mark Twain stayed there while writing *Innocents Abroad*. The Hôtel de Noailles was one of the best hotels, and it was there in 1837 that young Antoine Alciatore received from the great culinary master, Collinet, the secret of preparing *pommes de terres soufflées*, or puffed potatoes. Collinet created them by accident that very year. The following year, 1838, Antoine landed in New York, where he worked shortly before heading to the Crescent City.

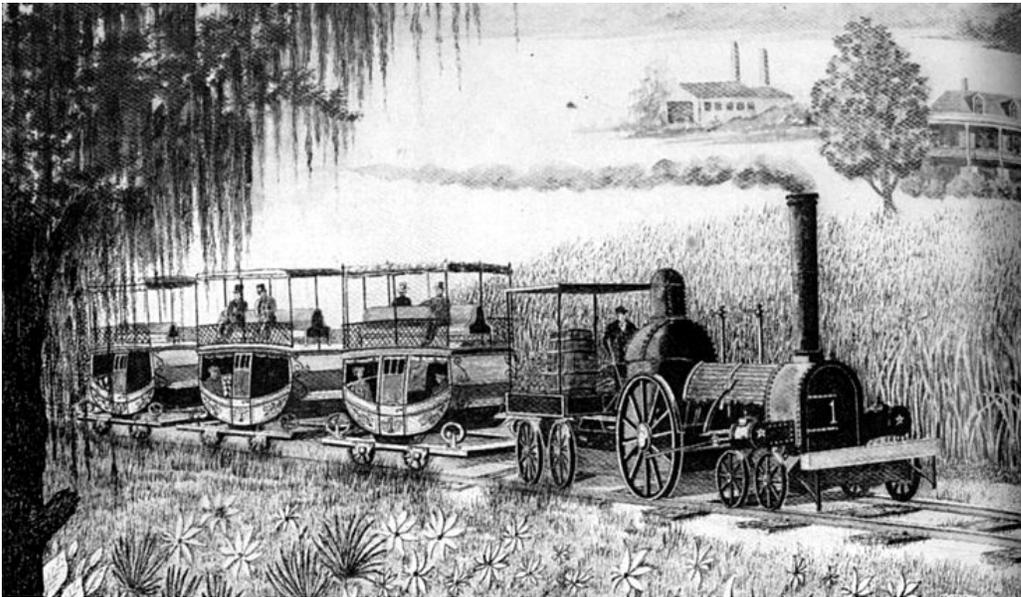
In New Orleans, Antoine first found employment in the impressive St. Charles Hotel, which was then just over a year old. But the young Alciatore was lured to the French section of the city, the *Vieux Carré*, where he came upon Mareau, chef of the St. Louis Hotel. He dined there, ordering Mareau's best, but knew he could surpass his skills. 1840 marked the founding of Antoine's historic eponymous restaurant, providing gustatory satisfaction for Presidents, movie stars and the people of New Orleans ever since.

Antoine brought with him the secret of the soufflé potatoes, but how were they first created? It all began with the first rail line in Paris.

But before Paris ever had a railroad, New Orleans was there first.

The Pontchartrain Rail-Road was the first railroad west of the Alleghenies and the first completed railroad in the United States. "Completed" is the operative word. Others were started earlier, but the Pontchartrain was to first to "complete" its entire trackage (4.96 miles).

The railroad connecting Lake Pontchartrain with the Faubourg Marigny and the French Quarter, (along present-day Elysian Fields Avenue), affectionately called "Old Smoky Mary", commenced construction in 1830 and was opened for passengers on April 23, 1831. An announcement that day in the New Orleans *Abeille* (Bee) stated, "Horses will be made use of to draw the vehicles, until the locomotive engines are obtained." The Milneburg Port was developed at the line's terminus, and soon the locomotive engines arrived. The railway operated for over a century until its closure in the 1930s.



*Engraving of the Pontchartrain Rail-Road*

The first railway built in France did not begin operation until 1832, and the first line in Paris (the Paris-Saint Germain Line) opened between Le Pecq (near the former royal town of Saint-Germain-en-Laye) and Embarcadère des Bâtignoles (later to become Gare Saint-Lazare). It is not only the first railway from Paris, but also the first in France designed solely for passengers and operated with steam locomotives. It is still in operation today.

In 1837, "citizen King" Louis-Philippe (great-great grandson of the Duc

d'Orléans, for whom New Orleans was named), was scheduled to be a passenger on this first Parisian rail line, but the French Parliament said "*non*". They feared accidents on this unproven track. So he proceeded to Saint-Germain-en-Laye via coach.

Louis-Philippe, it may be remembered, had earlier visited New Orleans where he was entertained by the Marignys (not far from where the Pontchartrain Rail-Road would later begin).

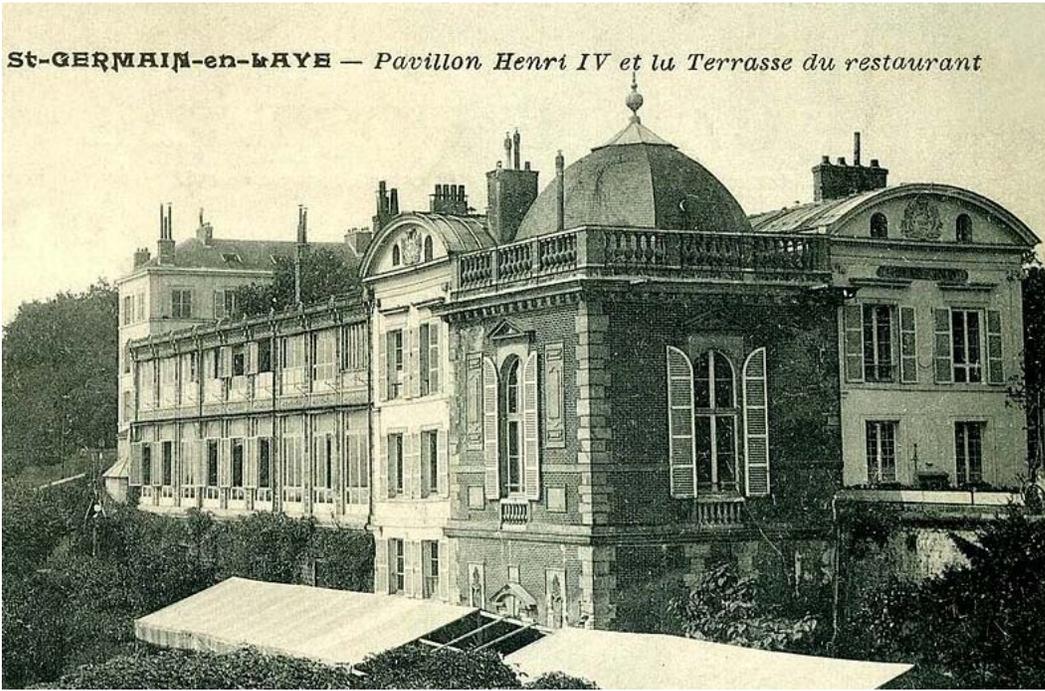


*Louis-Philippe: puffed potatoes for a king with puffed hair*

Coinciding with the rail line's initial run from Paris to Saint-Germain, the king was to preside over a grand celebratory banquet at *Le Pavillon Henri IV* in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, a fine restaurant operated by famed chef, Jean Louis François Collinet, who became famous that day, August 24, 1837, when he became the victim of a fortuitous accident.

Louis-Philippe was a great lover of *pommes frites*, which Americans call French fries, and he insisted on having them at just about every meal. Collinet knew this and made preparations to serve them to the king with great care. After receiving word from a messenger who was to warn him when the train approached, *chef cuisinier* Collinet dropped his potatoes, which he had cut for frying, into the oil.

St-GERMAIN-en-LAYE — Pavillon Henri IV et la Terrasse du restaurant



*Le Pavillon Henri IV, birthplace of soufflé potatoes and where Dumas wrote the Three Musketeers and the Count of Monte Cristo*

Either the king had arrived and the train was late, or the train had arrived and the king was late. Perhaps the king was waiting for Queen Marie-Amélie who was aboard the train, and she had not yet arrived. Whatever the reason, there was an unexpected delay which forced Collinet to remove the potatoes from the oil and set them aside.

What a problem! There were no other potatoes to cook, and Collinet feared the king would be irate. So, the worried chef waited patiently, and some time later when the king and his entourage finally arrived, Collinet's only option was to reheat the already fried potatoes. Back into the grease they were plunged, which had become extremely hot from sitting on the fire, and *Voilà* – the fries puffed up into petite balloon shapes. The king was both delighted and amazed by the *conséquence d'une erreur culinaire*, and he bestowed Collinet with numerous compliments.

Recipes for these delectable dirigibles recommend frying sliced potato rectangles one-eighth inch thick and one-quarter inch wide (after soaking in cold water to remove excess starch), just as Collinet did, once at a temperature of 275-300 °F and once again after drying and cooling, at a very hot 375-400 °F). Alciatore descendant Roy Guste suggests one "keep moving the potatoes around, dipping the basket in and out of the oil until the potatoes begin to brown and to puff." After turning a beautiful golden brown, remove from the oil, drain on a paper towel and sprinkle with salt. Serve with Béarnaise Sauce, also created by master chef and restaurateur Collinet.

Besides naming his restaurant *Le Pavillon Henri IV* after King Henri IV of France, a gourmet himself, Collinet also named a sauce for him: *Béarnaise*. Born in the Béarn region (a former province now in the department of *Pyrénées-Atlantiques*, in southwestern France), Henri IV was known as "*le Grand Béarnaise*".

Collinet created Béarnaise sauce, one of the five mother sauces of French *haute cuisine*, as a perfect complement to his *pommes de terres soufflées*. It is also a traditional and excellent sauce for steak. It is made of clarified butter emulsified in egg yolks, white wine vinegar and flavored with herbs. Derived from Hollandaise, the difference is that the smooth, creamy Béarnaise utilizes tarragon, shallot, peppercorn and chervil, while Hollandaise uses lemon juice or white wine.

Soufflé potatoes were so significant, it seems, that the erstwhile royal city of Saint-Germain-en-Laye even held a centennial celebration in 1937 (along with remembering the railroad). The potato centenary was important enough that the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported its planning four years ahead of time. "Presto!," wrote the paper. "A miracle happened. The upper crust dilated and then turned golden.

Entirely by accident Collinet became the inventor of pommes soufflées, known the world over as a culinary delicacy."

And fortunate for New Orleanians, a young Antoine Alciatore learned the secret from Collinet himself and brought this wonderful dish to the Crescent City. Countless servings of this local favorite continue to be served and savored at the historic Antoine's, as well as at other great New Orleans restaurants such as Arnaud's and Galatoire's.

And now you know when someone brings up the Jesuits and the Catholic League, it doesn't always mean the Blue Jays playing St. Aug.



*An accidental culinary masterpiece, soufflé potatoes*

**NED HÉMARD**

New Orleans Nostalgia  
"Soufflé Potatoes,  
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