

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

The Devil is in the Details

*Deviled eggs, deviled ham, a printer's devil and who knows what the devil else! To determine the meaning of these and other terms and idioms, well, *The Devil is in the details.**



Deviled egg lightly sprinkled with fresh paprika

Seems when it comes to determining the origin of the expression, *The Devil is in the details*, the details are devilishly dumbfounding. The late William Safire, presidential speechwriter and author of "On Language" in the *New York Times Magazine*, investigated this topic in 1989:

"Let's turn to the man who is culling and updating the next edition of Bartlett's Familiar Quotations: Justin D. Kaplan, biographer of Mark Twain and a world-class scholar.

'We've had little success with *God (or the Devil) is in the details;*' says Mr. Kaplan. 'We know that Mies van der Rohe used it in discussing architecture; Flaubert has been suggested, but nobody can find it in his writings. I think it may come from John Ruskin, because it sounds like him on the subject of workmanship, but we need the specific citation.'

It is widely accepted that the *devil* version of the phrase is a variation on the *God* phrase, though the exact origin of both is uncertain. And the word *detail* is used in both the singular and the plural.

The Devil is in the Details means that, when mistakes are made, they usually occur in the small details of a project. The phrase is a caution to pay close attention to even the tiniest details in order to avoid a major failure.

The older, and somewhat more common, phrase *God is in the detail (or details)* means that attention paid to small things has great rewards, or that details are very important.

Printers seem to have been aware of these devilish *details* for a much longer time, for the expression *printer's devil* has been around perhaps as long as the printing press itself.

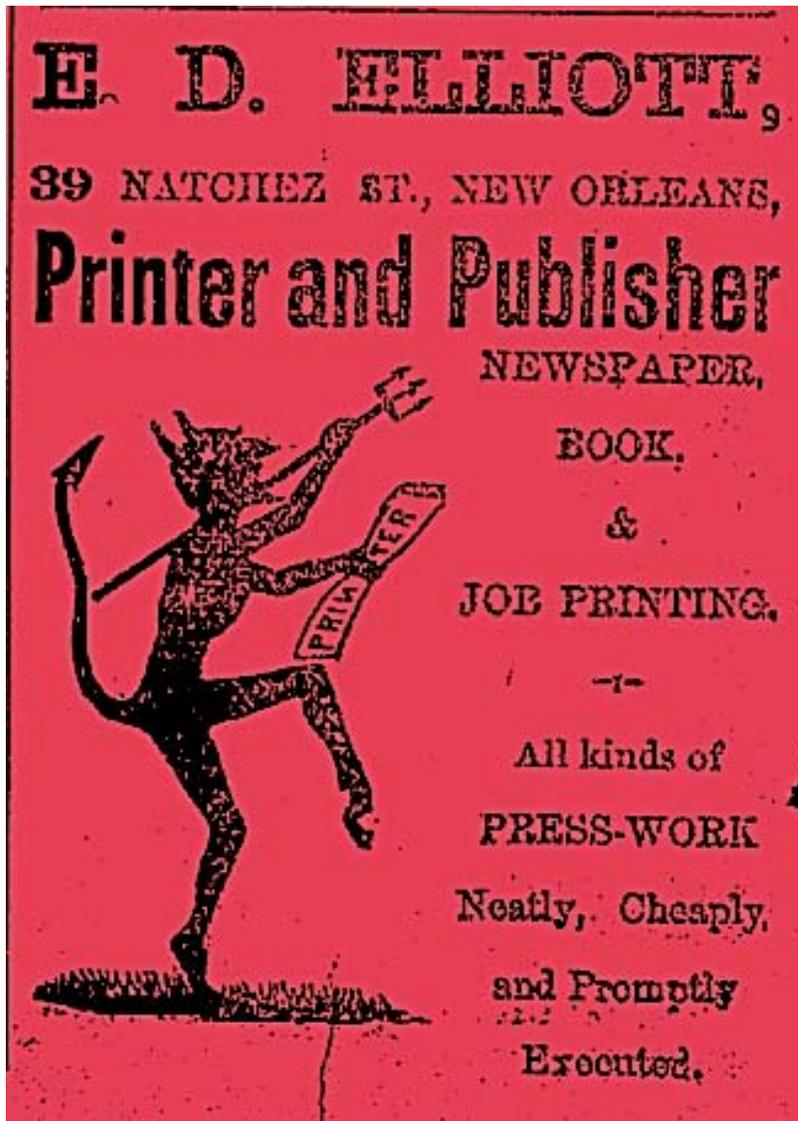
A *printer's devil* was the name of an apprentice in a printing shop whose job it was to perform numerous tasks associated with the printing trade, such as fetching type and preparing ink in mixing tubs. Many famous men worked at this job in their youth, including Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin, Walt Whitman and Mark Twain. Two other presidents were young *printer's devils*: Warren G. Harding and Lyndon B. Johnson.

The origin of the term *printer's devil* is not precisely known, but the competing theories are wonderful.

One theory is that there must have been an especially mischievous devil that haunted every print-shop. Only a demon could be the cause of all those misspelled words, inverted type or sometimes whole lines of missing print. Human error by the printer was ruled out, and blame was conveniently shifted to this devil. In time, the blame was shifted to the young shop apprentice who came to be called a *printer's devil* by association.

Another theory for the term originated from the fact that printer's apprentices would inevitably have parts of their skin stained black from constant contact with the ink. Since the color black was associated with the "black arts," the apprentice came to be called a *devil*.

One strange explanation involves one of Johann Gutenberg's business partners, John Fust, who passed off copies of the Bible to the French court as hand-copied manuscripts. When it was determined that the printed letters were identical, Fust was accused of being in league with the devil, the red ink text believed to have been written in blood. Fust was imprisoned until the Bibles' true origins were made known.



E. D. ELLIOTT,
39 NATCHEZ ST., NEW ORLEANS,
Printer and Publisher
NEWSPAPER,
BOOK,
&
JOB PRINTING.
-1-
All kinds of
PRESS-WORK
Neatly, Cheaply,
and Promptly
Executed.

The advertisement is a black and white print on a red background. On the left side, there is a detailed illustration of a devil. The devil is a small, horned creature with a tail, standing on its hind legs. It is holding a pitchfork in its right hand and a sign that says 'PRINTER' in its left hand. The devil is looking towards the right. The text of the advertisement is arranged in a vertical column on the right side, starting with the name 'E. D. ELLIOTT' in a large, bold, serif font. Below the name is the address '39 NATCHEZ ST., NEW ORLEANS,' followed by 'Printer and Publisher' in a slightly smaller font. The services offered are listed in a series of lines: 'NEWSPAPER,', 'BOOK,', '&', 'JOB PRINTING.', followed by a small separator '-1-'. The final part of the advertisement describes the quality and speed of the work: 'All kinds of PRESS-WORK Neatly, Cheaply, and Promptly Executed.'

The New Orleans Item ran the above ad numerous times in 1878. As for the red tint, the Devil made me do it.

There are other theories, too numerous to mention, but one links the source of the term *printer's devil* to the assistant of the first English printer and book publisher, William Caxton. Apparently his assistant was named "Deville," which became *devil* over time. And no, his first name was not "Coupe."

All of these bedeviling explanations could lead one to drink, a tall glass of *kill-devil* would be good (for that is what *rum* was called for

centuries). Instead, I would suggest an immensely popular Southern *hors d'oeuvre*, the *deviled egg*.

A staple for almost any Southern party, *deviled eggs* have gained an even more recent popularity – especially in New Orleans. The first ones, that featured the use of spices or spicy sauces, go back to the ancient Roman cookbook of Apicus. Around the 15th century, stuffed eggs were first reported.

Deviled eggs, or *devilled* in the UK, are eggs that have been hard-boiled, shelled, cut in half, and then filled with a mixture of the hard-boiled egg's yolk along with other ingredients such as mayonnaise and mustard, salt and pepper. A whole array of other seasonings are used to spice up the mix, as well, including Tabasco or Crystal hot sauces. The *deviled eggs* of my childhood were of this variety, but also those composed of the egg mixture combined with *deviled ham*. More on that in a moment.



Deviled eggs are usually served cold. Sometimes the egg mixture is exuded with a special device or gun similar to that used to apply icing to cakes. A simple pastry bag with a nozzle will do an excellent job of piping the deviled mixture into the hollowed whites and forming a beautifully executed rosette. *Deviled eggs* are often served as appetizers and are a common holiday or party food. They can be topped with paprika, bacon crumbles, dill or (in the 50s) a slice of olive with a pimento in the center. Nowadays, there is no end to the variations.



Mondo's deviled egg trio: Traditional, Pesto and Curry

And (besides mayonnaise, salt, pepper or hot sauce) the list of ideas for the filling mixture is vast: Dry mustard, horseradish, real bacon bits, relish, seasoned salt, dill, finely chopped jalapenos or dill pickles, finely diced radish, paprika, diced pickled onion and chopped green onions or olives. The Backyard on Harrison Avenue and Fleur de Lis in West Lakeview offers its unique version, muffuletta deviled eggs.

Susan Spicer's Mondo, also on Harrison Avenue in Lakeview, features three signature *deviled eggs*: the "Traditional," topped with a toasted bread crisp; the fresh basil-flavored "Pesto" with bacon; and the "Curry," garnished with thinly shaved prosciutto.

Galatoire's "33" has a rich selection of *deviled eggs* for its own special *Gouté*, a culinary departure from the *Gouté* at the flagship Galatoire's. In addition to a totally different Shrimp *Rémoulade Blanc* (a Creole mustard, horseradish, cayenne and mayonnaise blend), a half dozen *deviled eggs* complete the extraordinary *Gouté*. Two are amply filled with lump Crabmeat Ravigote, two are flavored with smoked trout and the final two are traditional – but topped with ghost pepper-laced golden caviar. Galatoire's executive chef Michael Sichel does not find the current interest in *deviled eggs* to be some sort of "a trend." He finds "it to be a tradition."

Some people make a distinction between "stuffed" and "deviled" eggs, saying only *deviled eggs* have spices or "pack heat" in some way. Those with a "devil-may-care" attitude simply don't bother. It must be noted that the ghost pepper (*Bhut jolokia*) is rated at over one million Scoville heat units (or 401.5 times hotter than Tabasco Sauce). In the case of its appearance in one of Galatoire's *deviled egg* selections, the Devil would certainly approve. But don't worry. Chef Michael uses

just the right amount and the result is amazingly delectable.

Chef Isaac Toups at Toups' Meatery on Carrollton near City Park also likes things hot. He actually marinates his egg whites beforehand in Crystal Hot Sauce, as well as mixing the sauce into the mashed yolks. Creole mustard, horseradish and wasabi powder add even more devilish heat. Crowned with a thin sliver of pickled jalapeno, it is one spicy *deviled egg*.

Don't wait until November 2nd, National Deviled Egg Day, to try these great New Orleans variations on the *deviled egg*. And perhaps you might want to prepare your own, and for that there are a myriad of unique egg platters worthy of collecting.

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) lists the first appearance of the word *devil* as applied to food in 1786, when it was used to describe a dish that was "(highly seasoned) fried or boiled."

The Oxford Companion to Food states that *devil* as a culinary term first appeared in the 18th century as a noun and in the early 19th century as a verb, "meaning to cook something with fiery hot spices or condiments." The presumption was that a connection was made to "the devil and the excessive heat in hell."

A perfect example of how the addition of hot spices to a recipe (making that dish "of the devil" or "*à la diable*") happened right here in New Orleans:

The *Picayune's Creole Cookbook* (published in 1901) gives a recipe for Potatoes *à la diable* (*Pommes de terre à la diable*), along with a humorous "old Creole story" about how the dish is said to have derived its name. According to tradition, *Jean Marie*, a "no-count" Creole husband loved to play cards and drink wine with his male friends, but his wife wanted him to go to the French Market to buy some *pommes de terre* (potatoes). He didn't want to be ridiculed by his friends for doing what was in those days deemed a feminine task. But *Madame Jean Marie*, it seemed, "wore the *culottes*, or trousers," in the family and "shook her fist in his face" and thrust the market basket into his hands. He angrily flung the basket on the ground and cried out, "*Pommes de terre aux diable!*"

To teach her obstinate husband a lesson and burn his tongue, she poured mustard onto the potatoes, along with with some hot cayenne pepper. "But her revenge was neither long nor sweet." Instead of punishment, the potatoes were very flavorful and a huge success. What's more, a new dish was christened.

Another fantastic New Orleans concoction is *Café Brûlot*, or *Café Brûlot Diabolique*, or sometimes just *Café Diablo*.



Café Brûlot Diabolique

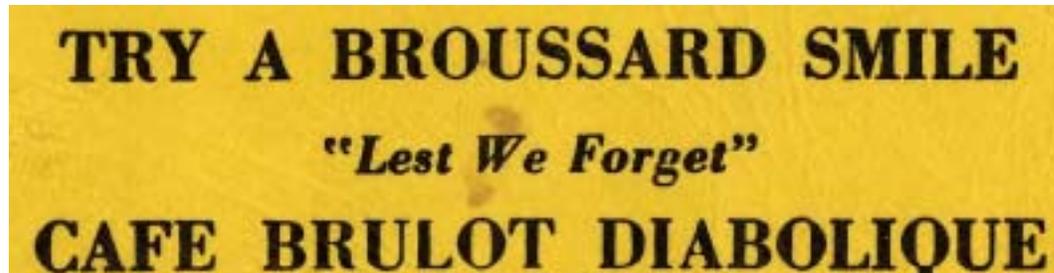
Brûlée is the French word for "burnt," as in *Crème Brûlée*, meaning "burnt cream." According to a 1913 letter to the *New York Times*, *brûlot* is the French word for "fireship" or "firebrand," and the writer "encountered it in New Orleans." There two halves of an orange were hollowed out to form a cup, "the upper half of the rind turned upward" with the lower half "turned down as a stand." He continued to explain, "Into the cup was poured Cognac, a match was touched to it, and there was the 'fireship' as an accompaniment to the 'demitasse.'" Thus he called "Cognac burned in this orange peel cup a 'brulot.'"

To sum up, *brûlot* can mean:

- 1) A "fireship," or a wooden ship set afire and then floated toward an enemy flotilla with the purpose of setting the enemy fleet on fire,
- 2) A scathing report, or
- 3) coffee served with alcohol or certain spices.

In New Orleans, *Café Brûlot* is one of our many pyrotechnic food and drink experiences, i.e., ones in which alcohol is set on fire. They include famous desserts, such Brennan's Bananas Foster or Antoine's Baked Alaska. The creation of the devil's brew known as *Café Brûlot* has been attributed to Dominique You, Jean Lafitte's able canoneer, who fought bravely at the Battle of New Orleans. Other sources

bestow the honor to Jules Alciatore, the son of the founder of Antoine's Restaurant, who first presented his *Café Brûlot Diabolique* in the 1890s. A 1940 color travelogue film by MGM showcased the serving of *Café Brûlot Diabolique* at Broussard's Restaurant on Conti in the French Quarter. One of the waiters (presumably) was dressed as a Devil, all in bright red. One hell of a presentation!



From an old Broussard's menu that also offered "Deviled Stuffed Crabs (2) with Diablo Sauce," a devil of a meal for only \$5.25

A November 2, 1902, article in the New Orleans *Picayune* praised the "culinary creations" of Jules C. Alciatore, including his "orange brûlot," as it was then known.

In the case of *Café Brûlot Diabolique*, it is both incendiary and spicy and later became popular as a means to disguise alcohol content during Prohibition.

Incidentally, the ingredients that spice up *Café Brûlot Diabolique* are freshly brewed New Orleans style coffee with chicory with orange, lemon, brandy, cloves, Triple Sec and cinnamon sticks.

Spicing up food and drink can certainly be devilish. One Louisiana product has been spicing up dishes all over the world for quite a long time, and it has the second oldest food trademark in the United States. Tabasco Sauce, bottled on Avery Island since 1868 by the McIlhenny Company, acquired its trademark registration in 1905. It took some legal battles to secure it since "Tabasco," a Mexican state, was a geographic location. The court finally ruled that the name took on a secondary meaning to the public, as a source identifier of McIlhenny's red pepper sauce. And Tabasco Sauce, as mentioned earlier, can be quite useful in "devilish" eggs.

But another "devilish" product is by far the oldest trademarked food in the United States. The William Underwood Co. of Boston, Massachusetts, on November 29, 1870, registered a "Trade-Mark for Deviled Entremets" — "Intended for Sandwiches, Luncheons, and Traveler's Repasts" — with the newly established U.S. Patent Office. The spicy New England product known as *deviled ham* was not the very first trademarked food in the U.S., but Underwood's trademark is

the oldest one that remains in use today. An *entremet*, or *entremets*, from the French, is literally a small dish served between courses.



*Two devilishly good products with early trademarks
Not only for sandwiches and repasts, but also for deviled eggs*

Not all “devilish” foods get their names from the spiciness or heat. Some get their Satanic-sounding names in order to differentiate them from their angelic counterparts. *Angels on horseback*, oysters wrapped in bacon and grilled, is a British dish from the late-19th century. *Devils on horseback*, alternatively, are made with prunes or almond-stuffed dates substituted for oysters.

UNDERWOOD'S

ORIGINAL

DEVILED HAM

Underwood's Original Deviled Ham is a delicious, pure New England product very delightful to the palate. It is made only of sugar cured ham and fragrant spices for people who want only the best. It is nourishment concentrated, and invaluable for the anticipated or unexpected call. Its flavor makes one's mouth water for the bite. Branded with the devil but fit for the gods. See the little red devil on the can.

NEW COOK BOOK (Chafing Dish Receipts, etc.,) FREE

Wm. Underwood Co., Boston

"Branded with the devil but fit for the gods," Underwood's Deviled Ham was "a delicious, pure New England product" made of "sugar cured ham and fragrant spices."

One might think that *Devil's food cake* was named in a similar manner, with its deep, dark chocolate as a contrast to the white lightness of *Angel food cake*. But that was not the case. Back at the turn of the last century, *Devil's food cake* and *red velvet cake* were basically the same. In fact, in cookbooks of that period, the two names were often interchangeable. It was natural that the vivid red hue of this moist cake became associated with the Devil.

Today's red velvet cakes are still chocolate cakes but contain red food coloring. The red color, however, in the first *Devil's food* and *red velvet cakes* was achieved through a chemical reaction between unprocessed cocoa and the acid in buttermilk.

Hopefully I have shed some light on a number of “devilish” dishes, as well as a few diabolical expressions. Better the devil you know than the devil you don’t.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
“The Devil is in the Details”
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